



JOURNAL OF LATE ANTIQUE  
RELIGION AND CULTURE

E-ISSN: 1754-517X; Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/issn.1754-517X>

Journal website: <https://jlarc.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

Volume 11, 2017, 59-64; Volume DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/n.2017.10449>

### **PLOTINUS' SEMINAR ON THE *SYMPOSIUM***

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Article DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2018.10452>

Date Accepted: 12 December 2017

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## PLOTINUS' SEMINAR ON THE *SYMPOSIUM* \*

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**Abstract:** The evidence of the *Vita Plotini* is that Plotinus held a seminar on Plato's dialogue the *Symposium* in Rome in the third century. Although he was not himself a speaker at the seminar he owed much to the dialogue in his *Enneads*, most notably to the speech of Diotima. *Ennead* 3.5 is his exegesis of Diotima's myth of the union of Poverty and the drunken Plenty, and it displays his typical inconsistency and brilliance. Elsewhere in the *Enneads* he treats Diotima's final mysteries, largely agreeing with her except for his insistence that the final vision is not of the Form Beauty but of the dwellingplace of the Forms that is the Nous.

**Keywords:** *Erōs*, late antiquity, Neoplatonism, Plato, Plotinus

With only a slight alteration of the facts<sup>1</sup> we can imagine a seminar in Rome on three May days in the 260s,<sup>2</sup> possibly in the house of the lady Gemina.<sup>3</sup> The seminar is devoted to Plato's dialogue on love, the *Symposium*, and is designed by the philosopher Plotinus. The first address, delivered by his pupil Porphyry, is called "The Sacred Marriage" and concerns the union of Plenty and Poverty,<sup>4</sup> the parents of Eros. It abounds in "mystical and veiled words of ecstasy" and is a speech of almost theosophical extravagance which leads one of the participants to exclaim that Porphyry has gone mad. Plotinus senses the immaturity of the work but sees great promise in it and defends the author as a poet, priest, and philosopher, no small praise.

There are less exuberant speeches the following day, but one stands out by virtue of its ability to shock: "A Defense of Alcibiades" by the orator Diophanes. In this skewed interpretation of the *Symposium* the pupil is urged to advance toward virtue by agreeing to submit even to sexual intercourse with his teacher. This so offends Plotinus' sense of propriety, and his own interpretation of the *Symposium*, that he gets up many times to

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\* I would like to thank Mark Edwards and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin for their help with this article.

<sup>1</sup> *Vit. Plot.* 15.

<sup>2</sup> Socrates' and Plato's feast days, which Plotinus observed, were around May 6-7. See Mark Edwards, trans., *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students* (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>3</sup> John Dillon and Andrew Smith in Plotinus, *Ennead V.5*, trans. Lloyd P. Gerson (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2013), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Πόρος and Πενία.

leave the room but controls himself.<sup>5</sup> After the speech he approaches Porphyry and asks him to deliver a rebuttal of Diophanes' defense two days later, thereby extending the seminar. The next day Porphyry asks Diophanes for his speech in order to write his rebuttal, but Diophanes refuses and Porphyry is forced to base his refutation on his own memory of Diophanes' offering. The refutation is called "A Defense of Plato," and Plotinus is so impressed with it that during the reading he repeatedly quotes Homer's words, "Strike thus so that you may be a light to men."<sup>6</sup>

During the seminar Plotinus may have sat on a raised throne in the back of the room with his students seated in two rows on either side of him, thus creating a horseshoe pattern. Porphyry, Diophanes, and the other speakers would, like the readers who opened Plotinus' lectures with readings from Numenius or Alexander of Aphrodisias,<sup>7</sup> have stood at a lectern in the front of the room. That is at least the evidence we have from the recent excavations of Alexandrian classrooms in late antiquity,<sup>8</sup> although I see no reason why Plotinus would not take the stand after the philosophical readings that preceded his lectures. This might explain his stage fright and nervousness<sup>9</sup> better than his remaining in the teacher's throne. An added benefit of the *Symposium* seminar, as with all the addresses on Socrates' and Plato's feast days,<sup>10</sup> was that he could have remained seated throughout.

Plotinus expected all of his students who had the ability to deliver addresses on these two days. This sounds very similar to Phaedrus who expects the drinkers at Plato's symposium, itself a kind of seminar, to contribute a speech.<sup>11</sup> The chairs in Plotinus' seminar, as we have just noted, were arranged in a horseshoe pattern, the likely arrangement of the couches in Plato's symposium.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps both seminars progressed

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<sup>5</sup> In all honesty Diophanes' speech was more in line with Plato's homoeroticism than Plotinus would have liked to admit. Plutarch had veered the Greek philosophers away from homosexuality which was certainly a prudent act in Roman society. We further glimpse Plotinus' aversion to homosexuality in his criticism of the love of certain Gnostics for boys in *Enn.* 2.9.17. Derrida soberingly reminds us that Plato was a pederast. See "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 153; cf. Luc Brisson, "Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato's *Symposium: Paidierastia and Philosophia*," in *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, ed. J. H. Leshner, Debra Nails, and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 229-251. Yet the elderly Plato makes short shrift of homosexuality and lesbianism in *Laws* 1.636b-d, 8.835e-836e.

<sup>6</sup> *Il.* 8.282.

<sup>7</sup> *Vit. Plot.* 14.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Sorabji, "The Alexandrian Classrooms Excavated and Sixth-Century Philosophy Teaching," in *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism*, ed. Pauliina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin (London: Routledge, 2014), 30-39.

<sup>9</sup> Plotinus' forehead sweated when he spoke, and he abruptly brought his discourse to an end when a former fellow student unexpectedly turned up. See *Vit. Plot.* 13-14; cf. William Ralph Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus: The Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews, 1917-1918* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1929), 1:121. Socrates experiences stage fright in *Symp.* 194a-b, 198a-c; cf. *Phaedr.* 237a. He also claims to be discomfited by large crowds in *Symp.* 174a.

<sup>10</sup> *Vit. Plot.* 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Symp.* 194d, 199b. He takes over this role from Eryximachus, just as Alcibiades will take over Eryximachus' role of symposiarch, vindicating the Athenian Stranger's remarks about the imperiousness of the drunkard in *Laws* 2.671b. See *Symp.* 177d, 213e.

<sup>12</sup> Robin Waterfield in Plato, *Symposium* (Oxford University Press, 1994), xiv; cf. Leshner, Nails, and Sheffield, *Plato's Symposium*, 185.

from left to right,<sup>13</sup> with Plotinus exempted from speaking just as Socrates is essentially exempted from speaking, pawning off his discourse on Diotima, a priestess of Mantinea.

Plato's *Symposium* was set during the politically calm year<sup>14</sup> before the statues of Hermes were desecrated in Athens. Phaedrus, the first speaker, posits that loving someone imparts virtue and especially courage,<sup>15</sup> even the courage to die for the beloved.<sup>16</sup> Pausanias contrasts common and heavenly love in ways that will later be expanded on by Socrates; he explicitly refers to the vulgar and heavenly Aphrodites of Homer and Hesiod.<sup>17</sup> Common love is physical while heavenly love goes beyond the physical and encompasses the rational and the ethical. For Eryximachus love harmonizes discordant elements into a coherent whole, and he quotes Heraclitus' proverb about the attunement of a bow and a lyre to illustrate his point.<sup>18</sup> Aristophanes then claims that androgyny, or at least duality, was man's original state before his bifurcation by Zeus<sup>19</sup> and that lovers seek to return to this state;<sup>20</sup> they desire, almost biblically, to be one flesh.<sup>21</sup> Agathon, a harder and more gemlike Phaedrus, sees love not as the lover but as the beloved and his beauty.

Socrates' is the sixth and last speech before the abrasive encomium of Alcibiades. He first analyzes the offerings of his predecessors, covering up his criticisms with fatuous<sup>22</sup> irony,<sup>23</sup> and then commences his elenchus of Agathon.<sup>24</sup> Most of his own speech is indebted to the instruction he received from Diotima whom he suggestively claims taught him the ways of love.<sup>25</sup> For Diotima love is the path by which men come to the Forms. It is not good and beautiful because if it were good and beautiful it would have no desire for the possession of the good and the beautiful. It is somewhere between good and evil,

<sup>13</sup> *Symp.* 175c, 177d, 214c. The cup goes from left to right at the end of the dialogue too. See 223c-d.

<sup>14</sup> 416 BC. Strauss explores the political ramifications of the dialogue in *On Plato's Symposium*, ed. Seth Benardete (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> 178e-179b.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. John 15.13.

<sup>17</sup> 180d-e; cf. *Enn.* 3.5.2; 6.9.9. Eryximachus will call these loves violent and orderly at 188a.

<sup>18</sup> 187a; Heraclitus, Fr. 51, DK. Heraclitus seems to be on Socrates' mind later in his talk of the constantly changing human entity. See 207d-208b.

<sup>19</sup> 189e-190e.

<sup>20</sup> The pagan fascination with the sacred androgyny is reflected in Gnosticism, Maximus the Confessor, and Jewish and Islamic mysticism. See *Gos. Thom.* 114; *Acts Thom.* 129; Maximus, *Ambig.* 41; *Ad Thalas.* 48; Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 373; Rousas John Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Fairfax: Thoburn Press, 1978), 70.

<sup>21</sup> 192d-193a; cf. Gen 2.24; Mark 10.7-8.

<sup>22</sup> Socrates may be fatuous, but he is never discourteous. Cf. Marco Zingano, "How Rude Can Socrates Be? A Note on *Phaedrus* 228a5-b6," in *Symposion: Festschrift zu Ehren des 60. Geburtstages von Raúl Gutiérrez*, ed. Bernhard Uhde and Miguel Giusti (Freiburg: Gutenbergdruckerei Benedikt Oberkirch, 2015), 171-184. But see *Symp.* 175d-e, beginning with Socrates' enthusiastic and seemingly innocuous words to Agathon, "Wouldn't it be neat . . . if wisdom flowed from the fuller to the emptier man by touch?"

<sup>23</sup> Plato's Socrates is more ironic than Xenophon's. See John Dillon, *Salt and Olives: Morality and Custom in Ancient Greece* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 78-79.

<sup>24</sup> 198d-e, 199c-201c.

<sup>25</sup> 201d.

beautiful and ugly and is therefore not a god but a daemon.<sup>26</sup> Eros' father is Plenty, his mother Poverty, and he has elements of both his parents: he goes about shoeless and homeless and sleeps under the stars on the open road, but he is also courageous, impetuous, and desirous of wisdom.<sup>27</sup>

It is only through Eros that mankind is led to the Forms. The lover begins by loving the beauty of an individual person. He proceeds to become a lover of beautiful bodies, then a lover of souls as over against bodies, and finally he is led to contemplate the beauty of laws, institutions, intellectual pursuits, and finally the Form Beauty (κάλλος).<sup>28</sup> In ranking the various kinds of loves, therefore, Diotima places the civic love of a king or ruler over the physical passion of a lover and over the civic love of a king the passionate asexual adoration of Beauty in one of its devotees.

Plotinus would probably not have given an address at his seminar on the *Symposium*; but Porphyry expressly states that his mystical ascent was that of this dialogue,<sup>29</sup> and we find him building on it in his treatises.<sup>30</sup> As we would expect he is indebted mostly to Diotima's speech.<sup>31</sup> *Ennead* 3.5 is his exegesis of the myth of the union of Poverty and the drunken Plenty<sup>32</sup> and hence the birth of Eros.<sup>33</sup> This is the selfsame topic as Porphyry's speech if our reconstruction of the seminar is correct, though written long afterwards<sup>34</sup> and unrelated to it. Plotinus is inconsistent with his exegesis of the myth<sup>35</sup> just as he sometimes seems to be in his own metaphysics, for instance in his conflation of the Nous with the higher Soul.<sup>36</sup> As with the more traditional myth of Eros and Psyche the male entity in Plato's myth is of a higher class than his female counterpart.

For the Greeks Eros was Aphrodite's child, and so he is in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>37</sup> But in the *Symposium* Plato makes him conceived at a feast on Aphrodite's birthday, which Plotinus emphasizes by saying that he was born with her.<sup>38</sup> Plotinus distinguishes, like Pausanias,<sup>39</sup> between two Aphrodites, the heavenly and the vulgar. These two Aphrodites foreshadow the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and sensual loves that have dominated Western thought. The father of the heavenly Aphrodite is either Kronos or Ouranos, a reference to

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<sup>26</sup> 202d-e. This passage was to be a defining moment in the history of daemonology. See John Dillon, "The Ubiquity of Divinity According to Iamblichus and Syrianus," *International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 7, no. 2 (2013): 147; review of *La démonologie platonicienne* by Andrei Timotin, 234.

<sup>27</sup> 203b-d.

<sup>28</sup> 210a-d. All this should be compared to *Phaedr.* 252b-256e.

<sup>29</sup> *Vit. Plot.* 23.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., *Enn.* 1.6; 3.5; 3.6.14; 6.9.9.

<sup>31</sup> Strauss similarly allots Diotima's speech three chapters while Agathon does not get a complete lecture, and yet he likes Agathon's speech. See *On Plato's Symposium*, viii, 151, 285.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Gen 19.31-36.

<sup>33</sup> On Plotinus' use of myth see Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, "Argumentum ex Silentio: Religion in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*," in *Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: The Role of Religion in Shaping Narrative Forms*, ed. Ilaria Ramelli and Judith Perkins (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 310-311.

<sup>34</sup> *Vit. Plot.* 6.

<sup>35</sup> This should not surprise us. He even quotes from the *Iliad* when describing the *Odyssey* in *Enn.* 1.6.8.

<sup>36</sup> A. H. Armstrong in Plotinus, *Ennead III with an English Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 197.

<sup>37</sup> 242d.

<sup>38</sup> *Enn.* 3.5.2.

<sup>39</sup> *Symp.* 180d-e.

Kronos' mutilation of Ouranos and Aphrodite's subsequent birth from the sea foam.<sup>40</sup> This heavenly Aphrodite is the World Soul and is the archetype of those who love for Beauty's sake.<sup>41</sup> It is in fact the archetype of all souls: the soul, Plotinus unambiguously states elsewhere,<sup>42</sup> is always an Aphrodite. He finds proof of the fact that Aphrodite is the Soul from her name's ostensible derivation from ἄβρα, meaning beautiful, graceful, and delicate.<sup>43</sup> These adjectives, then, give us a key to how he views the World Soul.

Zeus is the father of the vulgar Aphrodite who is responsible for marriages and carnal desire.<sup>44</sup> She is usually whom we have in mind when we speak of Aphrodite, at least if we are not Platonists. Confusingly, not only the vulgar Aphrodite but the heavenly Aphrodite can be regarded as the daughter of Zeus in that she is the World Soul and he is the Nous.<sup>45</sup> Plotinus thus toys with giving the heavenly Aphrodite three fathers: Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus. Regarding the union of Plenty and Poverty, Plenty is the reason principle in the Nous, and Poverty is intelligible matter, "the indefiniteness which the Soul had before it attained the Good,"<sup>46</sup> as he somewhat deviously puts it. Poverty's desire for Plenty, which results in the birth of Eros, is a reflection of all things' desire for the One. This is even more apparent in the following *Ennead*<sup>47</sup> where Poverty is sensible matter, an entity that for all its striving never attains the reality of the intelligible realm. It is like the burning glass lens of the ancients, the water on the inside seemingly impervious to the light concentrated on it from the outside.<sup>48</sup>

As for the *Symposium*'s final mysteries, Diotima alleged that the lover advances to love souls and finally laws, institutions, and Forms.<sup>49</sup> Plotinus agrees. What we admire in others is not their physical attributes but qualities like loftiness, righteousness, and purity.<sup>50</sup> The beauty of the evening and the dawn is not more beautiful than the Forms of Justice and Self-control.<sup>51</sup> But he disagrees with Diotima on the final vision; for her it was the Form Beauty,<sup>52</sup> but for him it was the Nous, the dwellingplace of the Forms.<sup>53</sup> This was because, unlike Plato, he did not have a Form of Beauty.<sup>54</sup> The Nous was the Beautiful, and the One was sometimes Beauty, sometimes beyond Beauty.<sup>55</sup> And it was

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<sup>40</sup> Hesiod, *Theog.* 188-195.

<sup>41</sup> *Enn.* 3.5.1.

<sup>42</sup> *Enn.* 6.9.9.

<sup>43</sup> *Enn.* 3.5. 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Enn.* 3.5.2.

<sup>45</sup> *Enn.* 3.5.8; cf. *Phil.* 30d.

<sup>46</sup> *Enn.* 3.5.7 (Armstrong).

<sup>47</sup> *Enn.* 3.6.14.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Kalligas, *The Enneads of Plotinus: A Commentary*, trans. Elizabeth Key Fowden and Nicolas Pilavachi (Princeton University Press, 2014), 1:570.

<sup>49</sup> Though she does not use this last word.

<sup>50</sup> *Enn.* 1.6.5.

<sup>51</sup> *Enn.* 1.6.4, quoting Euripides' now lost *Melanippe*.

<sup>52</sup> 210a-d.

<sup>53</sup> *Enn.* 1.6.9; Lloyd P. Gerson, "A Platonic Reading of Plato's *Symposium*," in *Plato's Symposium*, ed. Leshner, Nails, and Sheffield, 62.

<sup>54</sup> Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005), 217.

<sup>55</sup> *Enn.* 1.6.6; Kalligas, *Enneads of Plotinus*, 1:206.

the One, more than the Nous, that was the ultimate goal of human experience, a goal that was worth the abandonment of kingdoms and authority which often waylaid the politically-minded Plato.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Enn.* 1.6.7.