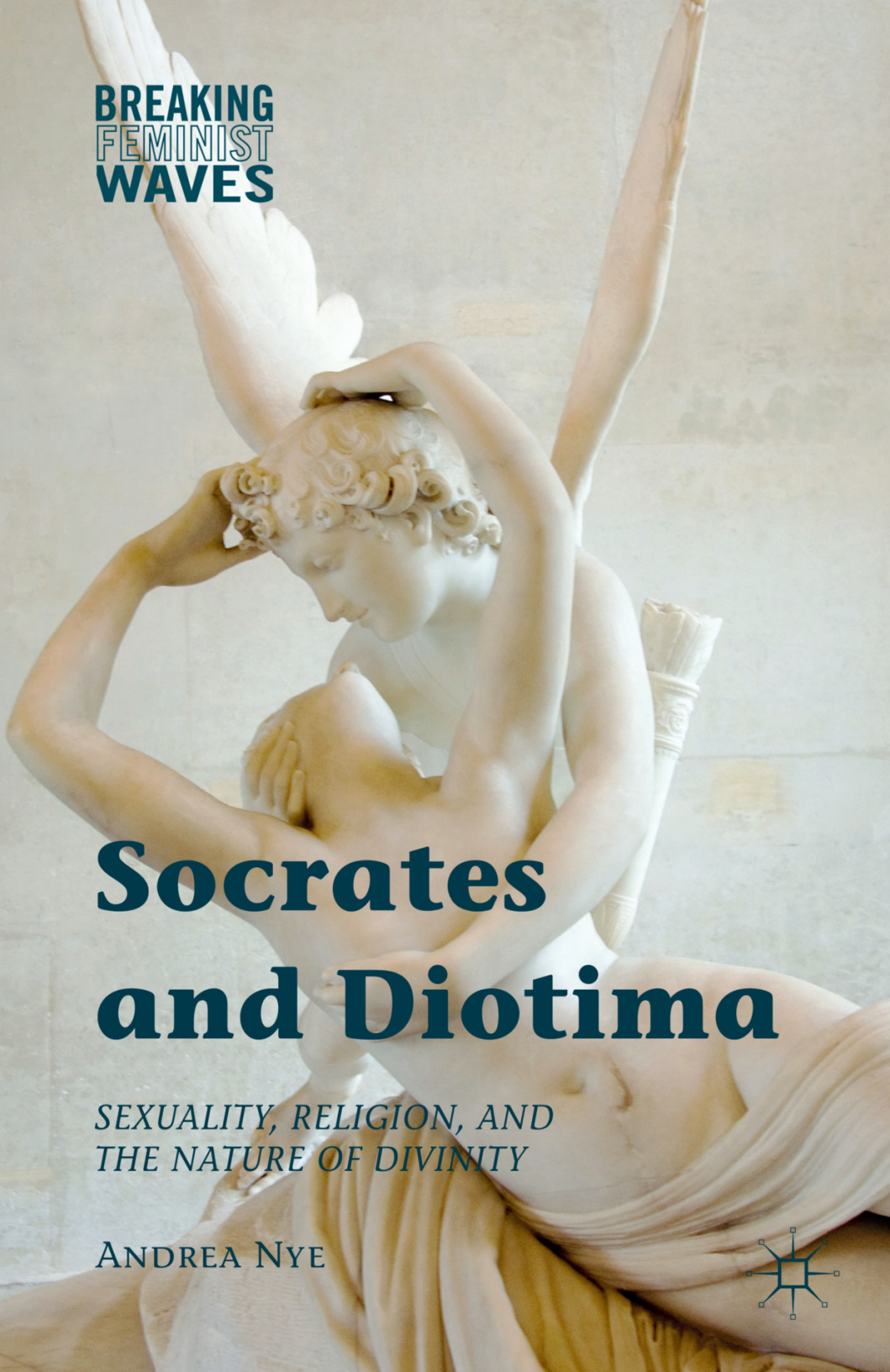
BREAKING FEMINIST WAVES



# Socrates and Diotima

## *SEXUALITY, RELIGION, AND THE NATURE OF DIVINITY*

ANDREA NYE

# Breaking Feminist Waves

**Series Editors:**



For the last twenty years, feminist theory has been presented as a series of ascending waves. This picture has had the effect of constraining the way we understand and frame new work as well as deemphasizing the diversity of past scholarship. The aim of this series is to attract original scholars who will unearth neglected contributions to feminist theory and offer unique interpretations of past scholarship. By breaking free from the constraints of the image of waves, this series will be able to provide a wider forum for dialogue and engage historical and interdisciplinary work to open up feminist theory to new audiences and markets.

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# Socrates and Diotima

## Sexuality, Religion, and the Nature of Divinity

*Andrea Nye*

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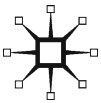



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# Contents

# Series Foreword

*Breaking Feminist Waves* is a series designed to rethink the conventional models of what feminism is today, its past and future trajectories, moving away from the metaphor of waves. For more than a quarter of a century, feminist theory has been presented as a series of ascending waves, imagery that constrains the way we understand what feminism has been and where feminist thought has appeared. This imagery simplifies the rich and nuanced political and philosophical diversity that has been characteristic of feminism throughout, and, most disturbingly, it restricts the way we understand and frame new work. The aim of this series is to rethink the history and actuality of feminist theory outside of these restricting metaphors.

This series provides a forum to reassess established constructions of feminism and of feminist theory. It provides a starting point to redefine feminism as a configuration of intersecting movements and concerns, with political commitment but, perhaps, without a singular center or primary track. The generational divisions among women do not actually correlate to common interpretive frameworks shaped by shared historical circumstances, but rather to a diverse set of arguments, problems, and interests affected by differing historical contexts and locations. Often excluded from cultural access to dominant modes of communication and dissemination, feminisms have never been uniform nor yet in a comprehensive conversation. The generational division, then, cannot represent the dominant divide within feminism, nor a division between essentially coherent moments; there are always multiple conflicts and contradictions, as well as differences about the goals, strategies, founding concepts, and starting premises. In particular, this series provides a space for exploring the sometimes surprising philosophical and theoretical resources that feminists have taken as their starting premises at different times and in varied cultural contexts.

In the contemporary world, the problems facing women, feminists, and feminisms are as acute and pressing today as ever. Featuring a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, *Breaking Feminist*

*Waves* provides a forum for comparative, historical, and interdisciplinary work, with special attention to the problems of cultural differences, language and representation, embodiment, rights, violence, sexual economies, and political action. By rethinking feminisms' history as well as their present, and by unearthing neglected contributions to feminist theory, this series intends to unlock conversations between feminists and feminisms and to open up feminist theory and practice to new audiences.

Linda Martín Alcoff
and
Alison Stone

# Prologue

*A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.*

—*Simone Weil,* The Need for Roots[1]

Few women's voices survive from classical antiquity. What we know of the nine-volume oeuvre of the Aeolian poet Sappho, universally praised as one of the greatest of Greek poets, is only a few passages quoted by classical writers and some fragments unearthed from archeological excavations. All that remains of the thought and teaching of Aspasia, companion and adviser to Pericles, are bits and pieces of wisdom reported by contemporaries, denunciations from conservative critics of democracy, and a model speech repeated by Socrates in Plato's dialogue the *Menexenus.* One or two letters purporting to be by women followers of Pythagoras and some collaborative commentaries attributed to the murdered Neoplatonist philosopher Hypatia make their way into anthologies but little else.

There is no doubt, especially in the area of religion, that women were active and influential in Greek culture. Inscriptions and records document the many spiritual and civic functions of priestesses who officiated in state and local cults with all the authority and respect given to priests. At the same time, no sustained account is available from female religious officials themselves of the meaning of these rites and rituals. Nor do we have participant views of religious festivals and celebrations attended exclusively by women such as the Thesmophoria in honor of Demeter and maenadic rites related to Dionysus, but must rely on male imaginings as to what might have gone on at these all-female gatherings. The result for women scholars looking for "treasures of the past" and "expectations for the future" can be a permanent state of opposition, a sense of being "without roots" in the life of an intellectual community.

One day, reading yet again one of the seminal texts of the Western tradition, I found myself paying closer attention. In his dialogue the *Symposium*, Plato tells the story of a drinking party at which Socrates and some of his friends entertain each other with speeches in praise of love. Various speakers stand up and take the floor and speak eloquently. Love makes a man courageous in battle, said one, as he tries to impress his lover. Yes, said another, but there must be advantages for both in the relationship. Another guest, a medical doctor, reminded the company of considerations of hygiene. The comic playwright Aristophanes told an amusing folktale. But with Socrates comes a change in tone. When it is his turn, he does not speak in his own voice. Instead he recounts word for word lessons in love he once had from a woman, as he puts it, "wise in matters of love and in much else." It was she, he said, who taught him everything he knows and still believes about love and divinity.

As I read the famous passages that follow, disputes about sexuality, love, and religion were everywhere. Evangelical Christians tried to block sex education in the schools and stop the distribution of condoms. Gay rights advocates proclaimed a right to marry. Feminists insisted that the double standard in sexual morality be abandoned and defended the right to abortion. Conservatives deplored a breakdown in traditional family values. Sexuality was a battlefield with casualities on both sides, as women lined up against men, atheists against Christians, liberals against conservatives. All were armed with voices from the past proclaiming, on the one hand, the weakness of the flesh and the evils of fornication and, on the other, the truth of science and the sanctity of individual rights. This time, however, as I followed Socrates's recreation of his lessons in love from a woman "honored by the gods," checking the Greek text along with several of the many English translations, I was hearing another voice, not the provocatively ironical Socrates or the visionary Plato, not a pretentious priest like Euthyphro or a self-important Sophist like Hippias, but a woman's voice speaking with some authority.

I was on precarious ground. The standard view is that Socrates's mentor in love is a fiction created by either Socrates or Plato for reasons no one is able to explain with much certainty. But I was hearing ideas expressed that were neither Socratic nor Platonic, and I was remembering related ideas from other texts, from philosophical poems by Parmenides and Empedocles, from remnants of Sappho's lyrics and choral odes from tragic dramas, ideas not highlighted or noted in standard commentaries. The notice Diotima had received from feminists was mostly negative. Liberal philosophers like Martha Nussbaum

dismissed her as no more than a stand-in for Plato. Postmodern theorist Luce Irigaray approved her positive account of eros, but immediately chastised her for failing "in method" the minute she began talking about immortality.

But what if, I asked myself, Socrates's lessons in love were not pure invention and not poorly articulated Platonism; what if, like other points of view expressed in the dialogues, they represent an important strand or undercurrent in the rich mix of ideas and theories debated and discussed in fifth-century Athens? What if Diotima's references to Aphrodite, Moira, and Eileithyia were not rhetorical flourish but references to sacred teaching associated with those divinities? In short, what if Diotima's lessons in love were exactly what they purport to be: religious teaching that places eros at the very heart of spiritual life as a privileged access to virtue and immortality?

What follows is an attempt to answer these questions. What I explore is not only what might have been the original religious meaning of Diotima's teaching, but also the story of how that meaning was lost. In Part I, I return to the source and read Socrates's account of his sessions with Diotima in the context of what we know of the historical Socrates and of Greek religious practice. In Part II, I show how the message of Diotima's lessons in love was progressively obscured and misappropriated in Plato's later writings, at the Academy he founded in Athens and in the writing of third-century "neoplatonists" like Plotinus. I go on to trace the influence of Platonist doctrine in Christian thought and the demonization of the daemonic eros that in Diotima's teaching is a pathway to divinity. Part III returns to find undercurrents of an older suppressed tradition of thought in Platonic and Christian texts as well as in contemporary liberation and feminist theologies. What results, I hope, is a view of divinity and spirituality consistent with the findings of modern science, effective in inspiring virtuous action, welcoming to both women and men, and a surer, more realistic source of consolation in the face of mortality and death than any Platonic heaven of winged souls.

If there is any truth in my interpretation of Diotima's lessons in love, it must be taken for what it is, a fresh reading of an old text by a feminist philosopher looking for answers to some pressing contemporary questions. Have there been, are there still, forms of religious devotion that do not undermine women's power and spiritual authority? Is there a noncredulous form of religious belief consistent with the aims and values of empirical science? Most important, is it possible for women and men to find common ground on the contested battlefields of sexuality and religion? Although there can be no final

proof that a Mantinean priestess named Diotima visited Athens, was sought out by Socrates, met with him on several sessions, and mentored him in "matters of love," nor is there any certain proof that she or the views she expresses are fictions. What is more important than the existence of any particular named individual is an understanding of eros and spirituality distinctively different both from what later emerges as Platonism and from the biblical traditions that along with Platonism are taken as the bedrock of Western thought. Writing in the aftermath of World War II, Simone Weil wrote of the "uprootedness" that results from violent conflict. Perhaps an analogy might be made with our postmodern, poststructuralist age of disbelief. If culture wars do not tear up the physical earth, they tear away common threads of memory and heritage that create a human community. But Weil also wrote of the process of recovering and regrowing intellectual roots that can support a place to stand and a vision for the future.

# Introduction

There has been much debate about how to read and interpret the many ideas and opinions expressed in Plato's dialogues. One approach, currently popular, is to treat the conversations recreated in the dialogues as literary fiction. On this view, characters and settings in the dialogues were invented or contrived by Plato to showcase or try out positions of his own, either programmatically or at different stages in his thinking.[1] Another approach is to categorize "early dialogues" as "Socratic"—more or less accurately depicting the historical Socrates in conversation with his contemporaries—but to read "middle" and "late" dialogues as "Platonic," with Socrates increasingly a mouthpiece for Plato's own evolving theory of Forms. Neither approach is without difficulty. Given the diversity of views expressed in the dialogues and the many accurate and specific references to historical persons and historical events, the fictional thesis is hard to sustain. Not only are many of the characters public figures, but some of them were Plato's own relatives, including his mother's uncle Critias, his mother's brother Charmides, and his brothers Adeimantus and Glaucon who figure prominently in the *Republic*. Nor has it been easy to find any clear dividing line between so-called early Socratic dialogues and dialogues in which Plato supposedly expresses his own ideas. Adding to the difficulty is the lack of reliable evidence as to when each dialogue was written, the evolution of Plato's thinking, or events in his life.[2]

In making a division between "Socratic" and "Platonic" dialogues, the *Symposium* presents particular difficulties. In that dialogue, Socrates proclaims that he learned everything he knows about love from Diotima and that he remains convinced by her teaching. At the same time, Diotima's teaching is not consistent with approaches traditionally classed as "Socratic." Instead of engaging in Socratic dialectic, submitting all claims to knowledge to critique, Diotima propounds a doctrine. In place of the Socratic "know yourself," she urges Socrates to look around and observe the facts of natural life. But nor is Diotima's teaching consistent with what is traditionally

classed as "Platonic." There is no escape from bodily existence, no rejection of animal appetite, no immortal souls winging their way to heaven to view eternal Forms of Goodness and Justice.

Nevertheless, although there has been willingness to grant the historicity of many if not most of the persons and ideas in the dialogues, in the case of Diotima the supposition of authenticity has been particularly hard to accept. Yes, one might imagine Socrates taking on the venerable and celebrated philosopher Parmenides, or exposing the shallowness of a Sophist like Hippias, or ridiculing the self-righteousness of do-gooders like Euthyphro, but taking lessons from a woman and insisting that he learned everything he knows and still believes about love from her has strained scholarly credulity. What is the great Socrates doing repeating the teaching of a woman? And why would Plato make a point of recounting such a teaching? Is this only a playful move in a game of seduction with Socrates cleverly hoping to soften his "elenchus" of the coveted Agathon with a confession that he too was once in need of instruction? Is Plato artfully clothing a new vision of masculine virtue in feminine dress? Is Plato on the way to his theory of Forms, but not yet there? Or is this no more than a clever way for Plato to talk about Socrates's initiation into mysteries of eroticism without the implication that there had been pedophilic sexual contact between Socrates and a male mentor? Many and endlessly creative have been efforts to explain away Diotima's teaching as an invention on the part of either Socrates or Plato. Scholars struggle, identifying Diotima's teaching as Platonism not yet fully developed" or "tailored for a particular audience" or, in the end, as simply bizarre, absurd, an unfortunate lapse on Plato's part.[3]

Much of the debate passes over what Plato's dialogues purport to recreate: conversations between Socrates and his contemporaries taken from oral memories and written memoranda that were passed around among Socrates's followers in the difficult years before and after his trial and execution. The cast of characters is small. Almost all are historical figures, identifiable as from a few Athenian hereditary demes and related by blood or marriage. All were people that Plato knew or would have known about. With a few minor exceptions, historical references to events and dates are accurate and consistent. As Debra Nails puts it in her detailed "prosography" or collective biography of the "people of Plato":

> Plato did not invent Athenians with names, demes, and kin; he wrote about real people—some of them still alive and active and living in

> Athens—people with reputations, families, neighbors, and political affiliations, people who show up elsewhere. (*People of Plato*, xxxvii)[4]

Not only are the people in the dialogues known personages, but the religious, ethical, metaphysical views they express are regularly taken as indicative of existing schools of thought such as Pythagoreanism, Sophism, Ionian natural philosophy, and Orphism.

The telling and retelling of stories about the elusive and charismatic Socrates conversing with figures of his time provides the explicit narrative frame for most of the dialogues. Plato himself was too young to have been present at the conversations he recreates, but he was close enough to Socrates in the philosopher's last years for his absence at Socrates's deathbed to be noted and attributed to illness.[5] At Socrates's trial, he was present and could have taken notes from which he reconstructed Socrates's defense speech in the *Apology*. For dialogues in which Socrates is narrator, Plato could have heard an account of the conversation from Socrates himself. In other cases, he might have appealed directly or indirectly to participants to confirm what was said. The *Symposium* is a typical example.

As the dialogue opens, an unnamed person, perhaps Plato himself, is asking Apollodorus about a drinking party or "symposium" at which Socrates made a memorable speech in praise of love. Apollodorus responds that he has had many such requests: "Oh, if that's what you want to know about, it hasn't been very long since I had occasion to refresh my memory." Only a few days before, he goes on to explain, he had been asked to tell the story to Glaucon, who heard an incomplete version and wanted clarification. In fact, says Apollodorus, by now he has had to retell the story so many times that he has it down "pretty much by heart." Furthermore, he took time to seek out Socrates and confirm the details. After further urging on the part of his companion and some talk about the importance or lack of importance of philosophy, Apollodorus settles down to relate what was said at a drinking party at which Socrates recalled his lessons in love from a woman "honored by the gods."

In a hyper-literate age, descriptions of hearing, remembering, making notes of, and retelling stories might seem no more than literary conceit, but fifth-century Greece was still a largely oral culture. Skill in memorizing and recalling myths, poetry, speeches, and histories, sometimes with the help of written notes, is noted many times in the dialogues. In the *Theaetetus*, Euclides recalls a story that he remembered just after parting from the wounded warrior Theaetetus, a story told to him by Socrates about a conversation Socrates had

with Theaetetus when Theaetetus was only a youth, Terpsion, eager to hear such a story, asks whether Euclides might be able to repeat it. Euclides responds:

> Of course not just from memory, but I made some notes at the time as soon as I got home. And later on I wrote out what I could recall at my leisure. Then whenever I was in Athens, I would question Socrates upon any detail where my memory failed, and I made corrections when I returned. In this way I have pretty much the whole conversation down in writing. (143a)

Terpsion says he has heard about such notes, and Euclides calls for a servant to bring out the manuscript. Giving it to Terpsion to read, he calls the young man's attention to the style of the writing.

> You see how I wrote the conversation—not in narrative form, as I heard it from Socrates, but as a dialogue between him and the other persons he told me took part…I wanted to avoid in the written account the tiresome effect of bits of narrative interrupting the dialogue, such as "and I said" or "and I remarked" whenever Socrates was speaking of himself, so I left out everything of that sort and wrote it as a direct conversation between the actual speakers. (143b–c)

In fifth-century Athens, there was nothing unusual about such feats of memory. Storytellers recited long sections of the *Iliad* from memory. Noteworthy orations were memorized and repeated verbatim.[6] At the heart of a young man's education was rhetoric, a prominent part of which was the art of remembering long passages from speeches and poems.

Another example occurs in the *Timaeus* with Critias's story of ancient Athenians. The day before Socrates had entertained the group with his elaborate description of a fictional ideal "republic." Now, he and his friends gather for a second day of "philosophical" amusement, and it is someone else's turn to "perform." Socrates calls for a different kind of story, not of a fictional republic, but an actual state in action, a state that once existed. Critias takes the floor prepared, he says, to tell a true story, a story that originated with Solon, a story he first heard from his grandfather and that he spent the night before recalling. He explains the process. He first heard the story when he was ten years old at his grandfather's knee, and even then he took pains to remember it exactly. "I listened with childlike interest to the old man's narrative; he was very ready to teach me, and I asked him again and again to repeat his words, so that, like an indelible picture

they were branded into my mind" (26b–c). The day after he rehearsed the story several times with young friends to be sure he remembered all the details. In the same way, as represented by Plato in the dialogues, stories about Socrates, repeated and passed around in the anxious years before and after Socrates's death, were "branded into the memories" of the young men who gathered around him.

There is no doubt that Plato had his own interests in working memories of these conversations into a unique literary form. According to Aristotle, he took an early interest in philosophy.[7] He was familiar with Heraclitus's vision of a natural world in constant change. He was personally acquainted in Athens with Heraclitus's disciple Cratylus. He wondered how knowledge could be possible of a natural world that is constantly in motion and took note of the uncertain results of Socrates's search for universal definitions of moral qualities like justice or goodness. At some point in his thinking, said Aristotle, Plato gave up the possibility of any true knowledge of goodness in the natural world and turned to contemplation of a supersensual world of ideas, thus distinguishing himself from Socrates. That most of the conversations Plato chose to depict in the dialogues involve debates surrounding these issues is not surprising, but it does not show that persons involved in these debates or the points of view they express were Plato's inventions.

If there can be no hard truth in memoranda of long past conversations—no certainty that the young Theaetetus was really as precocious in his answers to Socrates's questions as Socrates remembered, or that Critias repeated accurately his grandfather's tale of ancient Athenians, or that a visiting priestess named Diotima instructed the young Socrates in exactly the terms recalled by Socrates and passed on by Apollodorus—there is something better. What Plato's dialogues preserve is not doctrine or theory, dead words that cannot answer back, but ideas sown in fertile minds where thoughts, as Socrates puts it in the *Phaedrus*, "contain seeds from which other ideas can grow up" (277a1–2).

* * *

Along with Aspasia, the advisor and lover of Pericles, and Sappho whose poetry was praised by Socrates, Diotima is one of the few women whose ideas are represented in the dialogues. Aspasia and Sappho are historical figures, well documented from other sources; the lack of such sources in the case of Diotima makes her existence less certain. According to Socrates, she was from Mantinea, an

Arcadian city known for its many temples, oracular sites, and religious traditions. Remote and rugged, the region resisted the Dorian invasions and kept many of its ancient traditions. Its population spoke an Arcado-Cypriot dialect closer to Mycenaean Linear B than to classical Greek, and its windswept shrines were popular with those in spiritual or medical trouble. At the time of his lessons, according to Socrates, Diotima was an official guest in Athens, invited by the democratic leader Pericles to give spiritual guidance in the face of a deadly plague that was spreading north toward the city.[8]

There was nothing unusual about such a summons. Relying on religious authority in times of trouble had many precedents. In Homer's *Iliad*, with Troy under siege by the Achaeans, the Trojan queen Hecuba calls on the priestess Theano to make offerings and prayers to save the city (*Iliad V* 297–311). Herodotus relates how in the face of Persian attack a priestess was the only one able to persuade the frightened citizens of Athens to evacuate the city and survive to defeat the invaders. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates praised the role of Greek priestesses in conciliation and peace making: "When they were divinely inspired the Prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona achieved much for which both states and individuals in Greece are grateful" (244b). In the *Meno*, he acknowledged "wisdom" he had acquired from "priests and priestesses of the sort who are able to give an account of the functions they perform" (81a). Women kept the keys to many temples and sanctuaries. They officiated at festivals. They supervised young girls who served for periods of time in sanctuaries dedicated to Aphrodite, Artemis, and Athena. Sometimes but not always pledged to celibacy, priestesses might be widows or in some cases married. Hardly cloistered, they were charged with managing orchards, vineyards, and estates associated with temples. A place was reserved for them in festival processions. Ceremonial seats were kept for them in the front rows of theaters. Priestesses from wealthy families spent large sums of money to build, maintain, and repair sanctuaries. In these and many other ways, priestesses transmitted beliefs, values, laws, and rituals that maintained, enhanced, and perpetuated the sacred "harmonia" that allowed communities to flourish.[9] We do not know what were the sacrifices, prayers, hygienic measures recommended by Diotima. Whatever they were, for ten years after her visit the city escaped contagion and was able to fend off attack from Sparta.

What might have prompted a young man of 29 to seek spiritual advice from a woman "honored by the gods?" In the *Phaedo*, waiting death by execution, Socrates recalled some of his youthful worries and concerns. When he was young, he told the friends gathered

around him, he had been troubled by the prospect of mortality. He searched for an explanation of the generation and destruction that seemed so irrevocably woven into the fabric of natural existence. At first he looked to theories in natural science, searching for answers to questions like "With what part of the body do we think? Where does knowledge come from? What makes a human grow? What happens when we die?" A variety of answers were available. The philosopher Thales taught that water was the primal stuff of the universe. Anaximenes argued that air was the cosmic arche out of which all matter evolves. Anaximader made the primal material of the universe an indeterminate stuff that separates into various physical elements. Yet another approach was taken by atomists like Democritus and Leucippes. Matter, they said, was made up of tiny irreducible particles that interact, attach, and separate to each other to make physical elements and objects.

For a time, Socrates told his friends, he studied theories of the workings of the physical body, intricate movements of blood and air, mechanisms of the brain and heart. So deeply immersed was he that he all but lost touch with everyday sense experience. At the same time, the less he was satisfied with any of the answers on offer. In the end, he could no longer understand change at all—how it could be possible that one thing could divide into two or that hot could become cold. Either the world was one homogeneous static mass or a seething confusion of phenomena. In a fog of disappointed skepticism, he had one last hope. Someone mentioned a book by a philosopher who took a different tack, arguing that the cause of all things was a cosmic Nous or mind. Perhaps here, he thought, was an answer, a ruling intelligence that could make sense of the elements and mechanisms of human passion and human mortality and that could order love and death for the best. But again came disappointment. Like other natural philosophers, Anaxagoras went on to give the usual physical explanations of eclipses, meteors, sunlight, rainbows, and human physiology in terms of the air, water, and elemental particles (*Phaedo* 96–100).

In addition to ultimate questions of meaning and origin, might more personal worries have prompted Socrates to visit a religious authority wise in matters of love? Given the segregation of sexes in upper-class Athens, he would have had little opportunity to mix with females of his own age. At the time of the lessons, he was close to the age when he would be expected to marry. A wife would soon be found for him, and he would eventually sire three sons, but both before and after marriage he associated with a coterie of young aristocrats

whose erotic impulses focused not on wives or female lovers but on adolescent boys. For a youth reaching puberty in Socrates's circle, pursuit by a well-connected older man and eventual acceptance of that man's favor constituted initiation into a segment of masculine society that looked to the military ruling caste of Sparta for many of its customs and values. Between the age of the onset of puberty at about 12 and the beginnings of a true beard, attractive boys were coveted "beauties" courted by older men who were potential lovers. They were "love objects" who, after suitable gifts and wooing, might be persuaded to accept a suitor out of "friendship" or φιλια. Short, squat, and pug-nosed, with a build better suited to military service than sexual dalliance, it is doubtful whether Socrates had been much pursued for his physical beauty, but by the time of his meetings with Diotima, he was proving to have an intellectual charm as or more seductive than a well-formed body.

Boy-love presented problems in love for both lovers and loved ones, some of which are touched on by various speakers in the *Symposium*. Does a boy who "gives in" and allows himself to be sodomized by an older man jeopardize his manhood and his reputation? Should all such liaisons be broken off once a youth grows a true beard? Should pederastic relations be limited to a few embraces and words of advice? If, on the other hand, a man preferred to spend time with and take advice from a woman as Pericles did with his companion and lover Aspasia, would that man be condemned for uxorious weakness? They were questions not unrelated to the more metaphysical worries recalled by Socrates in the *Phaedo*. What is this natural force that drives lovers together and perpetuates generation in the natural world? Is there no more to erotic attraction than crude physiological mechanisms? Is there any meaning to the endless generation, evolution, and destruction of living things? Is the attraction that draws us to another person only animal desire for pleasurable relief of tension in the genitals? Perhaps it is not so improbable that an Athenian man, hovering between youthful pedophilia and marriage, might feel the need for lessons in love, no surprise that he might consult religious authority or that two decades later, when called upon to stand up and give a speech in praise of Eros at a drinking party, he was able to relate what he learned from her almost verbatim.

PART I

# Lessons in Love

CHAPTER 1

# Daemonic Eros

*Daemonic spirits are multiple and take many forms, and one of them is Eros.*

—Symposium *202e7–203a9*

In fifth-century Athens, a symposium—a "συμ-πόσιον" or "drinking together"—was not the sedate affair it is today with professors sitting around a table discussing matters of scholarly interest. It was a festive even rowdy gathering not unlike a present-day fraternity party. Music played to spur on the drinking. Depending on the taste of the guests, handsome adolescent boys or female prostitutes and courtesans were brought in for entertainment. Poetry readings, speeches, and jokes went on long into the night. On the night in question festivities were somewhat subdued. Agathon was host and center of attention due to his win at the festival of Dionysius the night before, but both he and his guests were under the weather from a previous night's celebration. This was to be a smaller gathering of old friends and lovers. Pausanias, Agathon's long-time lover, was there. Eryximachus, a medical doctor, came with his young companion Phaedrus. Aristophanes, the comic playwright, attended, forgiven it would seem for his lampoon of Socrates and his followers in the *Clouds*. Socrates brought Aristodemos in from the street. Short, barefoot, and ill-bred, he was one of Socrates's "principle lovers at the time" according to Apollodorus, although what that meant in the case of Socrates was never quite clear. Another of Socrates's admirers, the rash young general Alcibiades, came at the end of the evening, stumbling drunk. All the men were in their thirties except for Socrates, who at fifty-some was by far the oldest.

According to custom, first came dinner, almost missed by Socrates who fell into one of his trances on a neighbor's porch and could not be persuaded to come in until midway through the meal. When everyone

had finished eating, the dining tables were removed, and the first of the wine was brought out to be mixed with water in the great krater or wine bowl on the center table. A libation was poured, a prayer chanted to the gods, and the guests settled down to drink, tell stories, flirt, and, perhaps, fondle. Pausanias acted as "Symposiarque" or "King" of the party responsible for mixing the wine. He posed the question: What should be the manner of the night's drinking? In view of the previous night's excesses, should the strength and amount of wine be reduced? Eryximachus gave his expert medical opinion. Excessive drinking disturbs the humors and is bad for health. Given that they were all suffering from the night before, a change in program was in order. Send away the flute girl, said Eryximachus. Mix only enough wine to keep talk flowing. As to the subject of discussion, how about taking up a provocative challenge once laid down by young Phaedrus? Why had so many hymns of praise been written to other gods and so few to the great god Eros? Why not each of them stand up and make a speech in praise of love? Phaedrus as "father of the event" could go first. There was general agreement. They would drink moderately, and what could be more appropriate to celebrate the victory of Agathon—the "beautiful" "kalos" hero of the hour with his soft poetic way with words, slim figure, and short-cut beard—than a competition in praise of Eros? Agathon dismissed the flute girl. She could go pipe for herself, he told her, or, if she preferred, play for the women in the back of the house.

Phaedrus went first, taking a high moral tone. Erotic love of a man for a boy, he said, is to be encouraged because it promotes virtue. Always a man will want to look good before his youthful love object, and in the same way the courted youth will want to look good before his lover. This mutual admiration is especially useful in war as lovers try to impress each other with brave deeds and are even willing to die for their favored companion as the legendary Patrocles did for his intimate friend Achilles. Next came Pausanias, Agathon's older lover, introducing a note of moral caution. Not all Eros is good. In fact, said Pausanias, there are two Eros's just as there are two Aphrodites. A vulgar heterosexual Aphrodite "of the people" is opportunistic and of the body. Another heavenly Aphrodite Urania presides over erotic relations between virtuous men.

> Every one understands that there is no Eros without Aphrodite, and if that Being is not one how is Eros not two? There is the older Aphrodite born of no mother, but rather of Uranus, her we call Heavenly, and the younger Aphrodite born heterogenically of Zeus and Dione, her we

> call "of the people." It is therefore necessary that one Eros be called "of the people" as co-worker with one of these Aphrodites, and the other "Heavenly." (180d4–e1)[1]

As long as a man is inspired by the heavenly Eros, Pausanias went on, it is permissible for him to "have his way" with the boy he favors, since he does so not just for his own gratification but also to instruct the boy in manly virtue. On his part, a boy is virtuous in giving in to such a lover, as long as the age difference is not too great and the boy does it for self-improvement rather than for money or status.

The evening wore on. Eryimachus gave a long speech amplifying the distinction between healthy and unhealthy sex. Aristophanes livened things up with a humorous folktale in which eight-limbed hermaphrodites cut apart by the gods are made to run around forever looking for their "other half." After some jesting as to whether men might be cut in half yet again to produce a second race of male lovers, Agathon took center stage and spoke at length with poetic eloquence. Love is delicate, soft, and flowery; it brings peace and tranquility. Eros is the best of the gods and everything good and beautiful.

Socrates responded to the enthusiastic applause at the end of Agathon's speech with characteristic irony. Could the company think that he could have much to say in the face of such a "flood of eloquence?" Of course, he had the naïve idea that in explaining the nature of love one would state facts, not "run though standard attributes of power and virtue when the whole thing might be a pack of lies for all anybody cares" (198e). Nevertheless, he said, he was willing to take his turn, that is, as long as it could be on his own terms. First, he would have to determine what they were talking about, and to do this he would have to ask Agathon some questions to be sure they meant the same thing.

At this, knowing glances must have passed around the couches. Here he was, the Socrates they all knew and loved, not beautiful or eloquent like Agathon, not young or handsome like Pausanias, but with a wit so seductive that even at 50 young men still followed him around and hung on his every word. "Is the nature of Love to be of someone or of no one?" "Does not Love long for whatever it is love is of?" "And isn't the object of love what is beautiful and good, meaning that Love longs for what it doesn't have?" "But then how can love be either beautiful or good?" Stung by the paralyzing but thrilling stingray effect of the Socratic elenchus, Agathon good-naturedly succumbed. Confessing that he must not have known what he was talking about, he proclaimed himself defeated.