

Diotima: An Improved Female Paradigm Against Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*

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Abstract

In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates praises Eros through Diotima, thus introducing a female voice into a quintessentially male institution. In doing so, I argue, he appropriates Agathon's theory of *mimesis* as found in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*. By reporting Diotima's words, not only does Socrates reply to Agathon's speech in the *Symposium*; he also puts forth an improved female paradigm against the backdrop of Aristophanes' Agathon and, more in general, *Thesmophoriazusae*. In the appendix, I will consider Christian Poggioni's solo performance of the *Symposium*, which emphasises precisely the connection between Plato and Aristophanes. Among other things, this informs his decision to use a theatrical mask only when delivering Diotima's reported words. In sum, my own reading and Poggioni's performance seem to complement and reinforce each other.

Through the character of Diotima in the *Symposium*, Plato introduces a female voice into what is a quintessentially male institution – a gathering of aristocratic men who come together to consume wine after dinner, reclining on *klinai* and conversing or singing about social, political and sexual themes (Murray 1990). Typically, the only women admitted to these meetings were *hetaerae*, dancers and flute-players. However, Plato's *Symposium* includes a different kind of woman as a key character, namely the priestess Diotima of Mantinea. While she is not among Agathon's guests, Socrates reports her words – allegedly uttered several years earlier – with the purpose of praising Eros.

Socrates' speech immediately follows the encomia delivered by the comic poet Aristophanes and the tragic poet Agathon¹ and is in turn followed by Alcibiades' spectacular entrance. As such, Socrates' commendation of Eros takes place within a palpably theatrical context. This is emphasised by the interlude between Aristophanes and Agathon, which is replete with theatrical vocabulary (Emlyn-Jones 2004). Throughout the dialogue as a whole – and, I claim, in his recounting of Diotima's words in particular (*Symp.* 201d1-212c3) – Socrates embodies the ideal poet, capable of writing both comedy and tragedy (*Symp.* 223d2-6). In fact, I argue, by repeating Diotima's words, Socrates pursues a twofold goal: not only does he respond to Agathon's speech in the *Symposium*, but he also provides a new female paradigm that sets a sharp contrast with Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*.

Before getting to the heart of the matter, it is worth taking a step back and pointing out that Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* is a major influence on the speeches of Agathon and Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*. In fact, through his actions first and, subsequently, his words, Aristophanes' Agathon conveys a peculiar theory of poetic *mimesis*, which Plato pointedly appropriates in the shaping of his own characters, namely Agathon and Socrates in the *Symposium*. According to Aristophanes' Agathon, poetic *mimesis* can take two forms, depending on whether poets imitate themselves² or depict some other character. The former case is grounded in the poets' own *physis*, so that the character ends up resembling the poets themselves (*Thesm.* 154-155; 167); in the latter, poets adapt to the character they intend to create, which affects and transforms

the poets' *physis* for the entire duration of the composition and performance (*Thesm.* 155-156). Indeed, in Aristophanes' play, Agathon appears to implement both types of *mimesis*, one consciously, the other less so (Mazzacchera 1999). In fact, Agathon declares that he alters his own *physis* to more closely resemble the characters of his *pièce* – in this case, women: τοὺς τρόπους must conform to τὰ δράματα (*Thesm.* 148-150). However, Agathon is also widely perceived as effeminate, and, therefore, in a way, he takes his cue from his own *physis* in moulding his characters.

Plato's *Symposium* is the only other relevant contemporary source to provide information on Agathon. Clearly, Agathon depicts Eros in accordance with his own *physis* (Regali 2016). Indeed, Eros is καλός, νέος, ἀπαλός (*Symp.* 195a5-196b3), just as Agathon is καλός, νέος/νεανίσκος, ἀπαλός (*Symp.* 174a9; 175e5; 198a2; *Thesm.* 192). Moreover, Eros himself is a poet (*Symp.* 196d4-e6). While the analogies between Plato's Agathon and Aristophanes' Agathon are obvious,³ a fundamental difference is nonetheless discernible: Agathon's speech in the *Symposium* exhibits purely a *mimesis* of the self, while the other type of *mimesis* is absent.

Agathon's speech in the *Symposium* is intricately connected with that of Socrates. First, Socrates' replies to Diotima's questions mirror Agathon's attempts at answering Socrates' questions. Second, Socrates' narrative of his encounter with Diotima takes place during a time when he was a young man, much like Agathon now. Nevertheless, Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* – as well as Agathon's – is linked to Agathon's excerpt in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* through the presence of poetic *mimesis*. However, while Agathon employs *mimesis* in relation to a single character (Eros), Socrates uses it in relation to two figures: Eros and Diotima.

Socrates' praise of Eros – albeit expressed through Diotima's words – is merely a *mimesis* of the self, given that Eros is portrayed as sharing several of Socrates' distinctive traits (Regali 2016). Eros is σκληρὸς καὶ ἀχμηρὸς καὶ ἀνυπόδητος καὶ ἄοικος, χαμαιπετὴς αἰετῶν καὶ ἄστρωτος, ἐπὶ θύραις καὶ ἐν ὁδοῖς ὑπαίθριος κοιμώμενος (*Symp.* 203c7-d3), but also ἐπίβουλός [...] τοῖς καλοῖς καὶ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς, ἀνδρεῖος ὦν καὶ ἴης καὶ σύντονος, θηρευτὴς δεινός, αἰετὶ πλέκων μηχανάς, καὶ φρονήσεως ἐπιθυμητὴς καὶ πόριμος, φιλοσοφῶν διὰ παντὸς τοῦ βίου, δεινὸς γόης καὶ φαρμακεύς καὶ σοφιστὴς (*Symp.* 203d4-8). As such, Eros is clearly

reminiscent of Socrates himself as depicted within the *Symposium* and elsewhere.⁴ Nonetheless, in his commendation of Eros, Socrates impersonates Diotima too, "thus resorting to a twofold poetic *mimesis* within the same speech.

Diotima's words are an odd mixture of her own and of Socrates' well-known traits and mannerisms. The question of Diotima's historicity is irrelevant here: in these lines of the *Symposium*, Diotima is a fictional character in that she is not among the participants in the gathering but is brought forth by Socrates' speech. Socrates thus becomes a poet⁵ and, as such, gives life to his character. In so doing, he closely follows the mimetic strategies of Aristophanes' Agathon, while at the same time putting forth, against the backdrop of the *Thesmophoriazusae*, a new and more edifying female paradigm.

Let us now turn to a detailed analysis of the relevant passages. In Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, Agathon's practice and theorisation of poetic *mimesis* is forerun by the appearance of a servant with a torch and branches of myrtle, who intends to celebrate a propitiatory sacrifice for his master's composition. Euripides and his relative Mnesilochos witness the scene because they are there to ask Agathon to speak in Euripides' defence – in feminine apparel – before the *Thesmophoriazusae*, who resent Euripides for his negative tragic portrayals of women in his tragedies. The sacred context soon provides a fertile ground for parody: not only does Mnesilochos make incessant sexual puns but, shortly after, Agathon appears on the *ekkyklema*, dressed as a woman and singing a ritual chant characterised by feminine and voluptuous notes. Mnesilochos is surprised to hear such a sensual song from a male poet, and thus Agathon discloses his theory of poetic *mimesis*.

By contrast, the context in which poetic *mimesis* occurs in Plato's *Symposium* is authentically sacred, in that Agathon's guests are intent on praising divine Eros. After refuting Agathon through a recognisable sample of his elenctic technique, Socrates announces his intention to report what Diotima once told him. As a preliminary move, Socrates details the approach he intends to adopt in recounting Diotima's teaching. Indeed, he plans to report her questions as well as his own answers, thus reproducing the original unfolding of the conversation (*Symp.* 201d5-8; 201e2-3). In reenacting the dialogue, Socrates is thus putting Ag-

athon's theory of poetic *mimesis* into practice.

Not unlike Agathon's women, Socrates' shaping of Diotima entails a biunivocal form of poetic *mimesis*, from character to author and vice versa. Indeed, Socrates recreates Diotima's words so that he might impart her knowledge to others (*Symp.* 206b5-6; 207a5-6; 207c5-7). At the core of Diotima's teaching is the notion that Eros is a δαίμων who occupies an ambiguous space between dichotomies (*Symp.* 201e8-203a8): he is neither ugly nor beautiful, neither wise nor ignorant, neither god nor human, neither rich nor poor. Eros is a philosopher, who loves and seeks the beauty and the good, which he does not himself possess. Human beings thus benefit from Eros because love is the desire to possess beauty and good forever, and this is what makes human beings happy. In the end, Diotima sketches the so-called *scala amoris*, the pinnacle of both her teaching and initiation of Socrates, who seeks to assimilate himself to her.

However, the character of Diotima also displays several features taken from Socrates, her creator. Indeed, the technique she employs in teaching Socrates is quintessentially Socratic, in that she dialectically and maieutically asks questions and rectifies Socrates' answers, thus stirring him towards the truth. Moreover, Socrates spends much time with Diotima, who discloses her knowledge gradually in multiple successive *rendezvous*. The verb employed to describe this educational relationship is φοιτάω⁶ (*Symp.* 206b6), which is elsewhere used in reference to Socrates and his disciples (*Phdr.* 59d2; *Euthyd.* 272c8). Moreover, Diotima is on occasion quite pungent and judgemental (*Symp.* 201e10-11; 202a2-3; 207c2-4; 211d3-8), just as Socrates is known to be. In fact, Socrates deconstructs the certainties of his interlocutors and exposes their misconceptions, leaving them in a state of shame (Adorno 1995: 54), as Alcibiades recounts later in his speech (*Symp.* 215c6-216c3). This is evident in the *Symposium* itself: first, through false modesty, Socrates criticises all the preceding speeches (*Symp.* 198d7-199b5) and then, in his exchange with Alcibiades, when visibly irritated by his disciple's behaviour, he utters οὐκ εὐφημήσεις; (*Symp.* 214d5), thus using Diotima's exact words (*Symp.* 201e10), among other cutting remarks. Furthermore, she exploits Socrates' comic attitude by using a surprising set of images to elucidate her

enigmatic wisdom – a tactic that Socrates borrows from Old Comedy (Komornicka 1964; Taillardat 1965; Newiger 2000). Indeed, to make sense of Eros' duplicity, she recounts the fascinating tale of Eros' conception by Poros and Penia (*Symp.* 203b1-204a7), two characters that ultimately point to Aristophanes' personifications (Capra 2007). Diotima also includes several examples drawn from everyday life to clarify her otherwise rather abstract and complex statements. For instance, she asserts that those who love give birth in beauty, both in body and in mind, and that pregnancy and generation are the only immortal phenomena in human beings for whom mortality is inevitable. In order to explain how the mortal takes part into the immortal, Diotima offers the example of a person who, as they mature, undergoes repeated changes and substitutes their old hair, flesh, bones and blood as well as their habits, thoughts, desires, pleasures, pains, fears and cognitions with new ones, thus providing a form of stability that rests, paradoxically on change and movement. The habit of resorting to such realistic and even comic images is wholly Socratic. It is no wonder, then, that Alcibiades compares Socrates' speeches to statuettes of Silenoi because they exhibit odd and apparently laughable images, such as pack donkeys, blacksmiths, cobblers and tanners⁷ (*Symp.* 221d7-222a6). Once opened up, however, Socrates' words, as well as the statuettes, reveal their divine nature. In addition, Socrates is astounded by Diotima's teachings (*Symp.* 208b7-9); as we hear from Alcibiades, this is exactly the reaction of people who are exposed to Socrates' words (*Symp.* 216c7; 217a1; 217a4; 219c1; 220a4; 220a7; 220b3; 220c6; 221c3; 221c6). Finally, Socrates describes Diotima as persuasive and declares that he himself is willing to convince other people of the importance of Eros in the attainment of beauty (*Symp.* 212b1-4). Similarly, Socrates is then portrayed as persuasive by Alcibiades (*Symp.* 216a4-5; 217a1-2). In sum, in many ways, Socrates moulds Diotima in accordance with his own *physis*.

As we have seen, a number of implicit references point to Aristophanes as a model for the notion of poetic *mimesis* as found in the *Symposium*. Diotima further alludes to Aristophanes' speech by saying that some believe love consists in the search for their other half (καὶ λέγεται μὲν γε τις, ἔφη, λόγος, ὡς οἱ ἂν τὸ ἥμισυ ἑαυτῶν ζητῶσιν, οὗτοι ἐρώσιν, *Symp.*

205d10-e1). Although this is a critical remark, it is noteworthy that Aristophanes' is the only speech taken into consideration by Socrates/Diotima. Clearly, Plato intends to spotlight the comic poet among all of the other guests. In my view, this can be construed as a specific nod to the *Thesmophoriazusae*, in that Socrates redeploys comic Agathon's theory of poetic *mimesis* to provide a better female paradigm. In fact, Aristophanes is recognised as the only worthy rival of Socrates/Diotima, but he is diminished in comparison to Socrates/Diotima (ὁ δ' ἐμὸς λόγος..., *Symp.* 205e1), and, through poetic *mimesis*, Aristophanes' portrayal of women is dismissed in favour of Socrates' ideal of womanhood, as embodied by Diotima. Finally, even the fact that Aristophanes is prevented from replying by Alcibiades' sparkling entrance proves Diotima's words – and, all the more so, Diotima's figure – to be indisputable (*Symp.* 212c4-8).

At this point, we may wonder what makes Diotima superior to the women of the *Thesmophoriazusae*. In Aristophanes' play, women appear on stage at the opening of the Thesmophoria, a religious festival that is exclusive to female participants. A priestess utters the inaugural prayer and curses those who have committed wrongdoings. Although the ritual is ostensibly performed in accordance with protocol, the content of the women's speeches and the presence of Mnesilochos in feminine disguise guarantee a comic effect. The priestess' curse specifically targets those who have acted in a way that affected women's personal interests. Ironically, these interests mainly concern the corporeal sphere, as the curse is directed primarily at those who have restricted women's sexual freedom and hedonistic instincts. However, the chorus itself, composed of the women, sometimes makes misogynistic comments (*Thesm.* 371; 531-532). Finally, the priestess declares the assembly open and states that the agenda requires the imposition of a sentence on Euripides, on the grounds that he has slandered women. Another woman solemnly dons the crown and, when everyone is quiet, begins to speak. Euripides has portrayed women as τὰς μοιχοτρόφους, τὰς ἀνδρραστρίας καλῶν, / τὰς οἰνοπίπας, τὰς προδότιδας, τὰς λάλους, / τὰς οὐδὲν ὑγιέας, τὰς μέγ' ἀνδράσιν κακόν (*Thesm.* 392-394) and with his words has aroused men's suspicions of all women's actions. For this reason, women are locked in their rooms. Therefore, the woman argues, Euripides deserves to be condemned

to death. This woman is concerned about the fact that she can no longer act in secret, and the solution she proposes is frighteningly violent. Another woman declares that she intends to corroborate the accusation with her own experience. Since Euripides has persuaded people that the gods do not exist, nobody buys her myrtle garlands anymore. Her interest in punishing the tragic poet is once again strictly personal. In this case, the grotesque individualisation of a universal problem results in a comic reorientation of priorities whereby impiety is marginal in relation to the woman's lack of customers (Paduano 1993: 123). Women in general are thus immediately presented as egoistic and aggressive.

Mnesilochos is third to speak. He is there under false pretences, disguised in Agathon's feminine costume, with the aim of defending Euripides (since Agathon has refused to do so). After expressing his empathy for the women and claiming that he also hates Euripides in a *captatio benevolentiae*, he attempts to expose the irrationality of their rage. He argues that they are indeed guilty of the mischiefs of which they are accused. Again, the alleged misdemeanours are largely sexual, and women are portrayed as inherently adulterous.

The woman who spoke first now intervenes again. She is outraged by these misogynistic allegations (*Thesm.* 533-539) and suggests that the accuser be penalised: Εἰ μὲν οὖν τις ἔστιν... -, εἰ δὲ μή, ἡμεῖς / αὐταί γε καὶ τὰ δουλάρια τέφραν ποθὲν λαβοῦσαι / ταύτης ἀποφιλώσομεν τὸν χοῖρον... ὁ χοῖρος is an obscene comic term for the external female genitalia. Moreover, it is not by chance that the punishment she recommends for the accuser is precisely that reserved for adulterers. Terrified both by the threat itself (although he is male) and by the consequent exposure of his trick (Paduano 1993: 131), Mnesilochos resorts to an abstract appeal to free speech, which is a cornerstone of Athenian male democracy. Not only does he not withdraw his accusations, but he asserts that there is a lack of good women worthy of praise and continues to enumerate further feminine transgressions. The woman becomes increasingly incensed until the two ultimately come to blows.⁸ Clearly, violence is not an honourable behaviour for Mnesilochos but neither is it so for the woman. The example that she is setting for her gender – whom she wishes to defend from the accusations of Euripides and his relative – is unacceptable. Not only does she employ

coarse language, but she is also inclined to resort to physical force to settle an argument. While this is coherent with the comic context, it also lends validation to the accusations made by Euripides and his relative.

At this point, another character arrives to warn the women that Euripides has sent a relative of his to spy on them during their assembly. Mnesilochos soon becomes the prime suspect. After offering several dubious answers to his examiners, he is forced to take his clothes off. The woman who spoke first is not at all embarrassed either in compelling him to undress or in loudly announcing that he has male genitalia, and in good shape as well (*Thesm.* 636; 644)! The chorus urges the women to investigate further and vows vengeance. Mnesilochos, thus, launches a counterattack and snatches a baby from the first woman who spoke, who was holding it. With the support of the chorus, she reacts fiercely (*Thesm.* 688-691; 695-698; 706; 728-729), which would be natural if the baby were her daughter and not – as is actually the case – a wineskin (*Thesm.* 733-738). Once again, the woman who offered to speak first in defence of women turns out to be not only indecent and salacious but also a drunkard and a swindler – indeed, not a palatable example of womanhood. The ensuing choral parabasis comprises an unconvincing apology for women. Ironically, its main argument is that men are worse than women themselves.

After Euripides and his relative's scheming is reported to the authorities, Mnesilochos adopts new feminine disguises. First, he assumes the role of Helen to attract Euripides/Menelaos to his aid. Later, tied to a post ἄ κροκωτοῖς καὶ μίτραις (*Thesm.* 941), he becomes Andromeda, waiting for her Euripides/Perseus to save her. After some comic scenes, the tragic poet understands that he will be able to free his relative only if he promises to refrain from slandering women in the future. However, he threatens them by saying that he will reveal to their men the kind of behaviours they engage in covertly. The chorus of women agrees, thus implicitly admitting that they have things to hide. To sum up, Mnesilochos dresses up as different women but ascribes to them his own ideas, thus putting into practice Agathon's theory of (both types of) poetic *mimesis*, albeit in a risible way. His disguise aims to expose women's flaws both by denouncing them as scoundrels and provoking their violent reactions.

By contrast, Diotima offers a far superior feminine

paradigm. First, Diotima is wise in things erotic and in many other fields (ταῦτά τε σοφῆ ἦν καὶ ἄλλα πολλά, *Symp.* 201d3). For this reason, she is Socrates' teacher (ἡ δὲ καὶ ἐμὲ τὰ ἐρωτικά ἐδίδαξεν, *Symp.* 201d5) and, thus, has shared her knowledge of Eros with Socrates, who, as Alcibiades later states through the image of Silenos (*Symp.* 215a4-222b7), is superior to all other human beings. Furthermore, she is a priestess and, as such, a δαιμόνιος creature (*Symp.* 202e7-203a8). Moreover, thanks to her instructions, Athenians managed to stave off plague for ten years. Finally, poetic *mimesis* provides her with some traits of Socrates himself. It might be objected that it is obvious that Plato describes Diotima as a positive character since she expounds Plato's idea of the Good. However, what is remarkable is that Plato specifically chooses Diotima – a woman, portrayed as a wise and venerable priestess – to deliver the truth, rather than, for example, a male priest or – as would seem more obvious – Socrates himself, without any intermediary.

As we have seen, Plato exploits Aristophanes' own device, namely poetic *mimesis*, for a higher purpose. In this reversal, three points are worth highlighting.

First, there is a clear shift from an obsessively personalistic conception to a vision that ascends to the most refined levels of abstraction. This reorientation happens in two ways. On the one hand, Mnesilochos is focused on a self-serving goal, as his *mimesis* is aimed at saving Euripides from the women's condemnation. By contrast, Socrates' *mimesis* aims to impart a lesson – the most valuable one he can teach – to both the internal and external audience of the dialogue. On the other hand, Aristophanes' women are portrayed as deeply self-centred, as shown by their speeches during the assembly. Conversely, Diotima's words guide Socrates – and, by extension, Agathon's guests and Plato's audience – along a path that leads to the ultimate truth of Plato's philosophy. Therefore, her teaching is universal and timeless.

Second, while the costumes worn by Mnesilochos are synonymous with dissimulation, Socrates' impersonation of Diotima brings the truth to light. In fact, the protagonist of the *Thesmophoriazousae* – in feminine apparel – pretends to be someone he is not, concealing both his identity and his purpose. In stark contrast, Socrates openly declares that he is transmitting Diotima's teaching and, in so doing, reveals the truth about his own disguise and with respect to

Eros' mysteries.

Finally, another pivotal difference emerges between Aristophanes' and Plato's passages. Agathon's feminine disguise in the *Thesmophoriazousae* is predominantly physical, Mnesilochos' is partly physical and partly intellectual, while Socrates' *mimesis* in the *Symposium* is primarily intellectual. In Aristophanes' play, Agathon makes his entrance in feminine clothing while singing a paean in a sensual rhythm. Thus, his appearance and his voice – rather than the ideas he expresses – are considered feminine. Mnesilochos highlights the sweetness of the song – its lasciviousness likely stemming from its phonic qualities (Paduano 1993: 85) – and the garments and accessories Agathon wears (a saffron gown, bonnet, brassiere, mirror) as external factors that lead him to question Agathon's masculinity (*Thesm.* 130-140). Thus, Mnesilochos searches for outer signs of Agathon's gender – body parts, clothing and tone of voice (*Thesm.* 141-145). In this case, *mimesis* – from character to author and vice versa – consists in ὁμοιοῦν ἑαυτὸν ἄλλω ἢ κατὰ φωνῆν ἢ κατὰ σχῆμα (*Resp.* III 393c). Agathon himself states, ἐγὼ δὲ τὴν ἐσθῆθ' ἅμα γνώμη φορῶ (*Thesm.* 148). Moreover, Euripides asks Agathon to speak in his defence before the women's assembly at the Thesmophoria precisely because his look and his voice are feminine, allowing him to easily mingle with the crowd of women (*Thesm.* 191-192). When Agathon refuses, Mnesilochos volunteers. However, his *mimesis* is mainly physical when he assimilates to his characters but intellectual when he imparts his traits to them. On the one hand, with Agathon's help, Mnesilochos is accurately shaved and dressed in a brassiere, yellow gown, bonnet and sandals (*Thesm.* 213-265). At the end of the process, Euripides states that his relative is now γυνὴ τό γ' εἶδος but that he must also speak like a woman in a manner that is convincing (*Thesm.* 266-269). Upon arriving at the Thesmophoria, Mnesilochos initially mimics women's speeches but later attributes his own misogyny to the female character he portrays. In the *Symposium*, Socrates' *mimesis* is intellectual. His imitation of Diotima focuses not on her appearance or voice but on the content of her teachings (*Symp.* 201d1-2; 207a5-6; 212b1-2). When Socrates moulds her in his own image, he attributes to her his dialectical approach, sharpness, comic imagery, and persuasive power.

Appendix – Poggioni’s Diotima on the Modern Stage

Socrates’ feminine *mimesis* – though part of a Platonic dialogue rather than a theatrical work – holds considerable potential for staging due to its intrinsic theatricality, as is the case with several Platonic dialogues. Socrates recreates a dialogical conversation with a dramatic form, while Plato’s model, namely Agathon’s theory of poetic *mimesis* in Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae*, was explicitly designed for performance. We may ask how Socrates’ *mimesis* of Diotima might be enacted without betraying its essence, which entails Socrates simultaneously portraying both his younger self (the disciple) and Diotima (the teacher). I believe that a contemporary production of Plato’s *Symposium* may provide a viable answer to this question – incidentally, it also supports the connection between Plato’s *Symposium* and Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae* with respect to poetic *mimesis*.

Christian Poggioni, a renowned contemporary Italian actor and director, brings a sharp historical awareness to his staging of ancient texts. In his performance of the *Symposium*, he portrays all seven prominent Athenians at Agathon’s house, shifting between characters by gradually removing one piece of clothing at a time.

La gente spesso mi chiede: “Ma fai il *Simposio*, ma come fai? Sono sette!”. “No, no, li faccio tutti”. “Ma come?”. Ma non c’è da stupirsi, il teatro è questo. Poi le mie maschere non sono maschere vere. Solo Diotima ha la maschera. Per il resto,



Fig. 1 | Photo by Michele Calocero (VeliaTeatro): Poggioni wearing Socrates’ robe and Diotima’s mask.



Fig. 2 | Photo by Guido Morelli (Artphotogram): Socrates’ poetic *mimesis* of Diotima in Poggioni’s performance.

cambio personaggio spogliandomi, non aggiungendo. Il percorso di Platone a cui voglio dare voce è quello che mira a giungere alla verità sull’Amore, su Eros. E la verità la si raggiunge per spoliazione, andando a trovare quella semplicità finale, che non è semplificazione, ma richiede che si passi attraverso i discorsi di tutti gli altri ospiti, uno dopo l’altro. Alla fine, Socrate è in una semplice tunica, mentre i primi personaggi hanno tutti i loro orpelli: il cappello, i guanti, eccetera.⁹

Voice and body are vital in theatre. For this reason, Poggioni uses several accessories to enact his characters. However, when it comes to Diotima, he adopts a different approach. Since she is not physically present in the symposium but must be physically present on stage, “Only Diotima has her own [white!] mask”¹⁰ [Fig. 1], a unique piece made of leather by the expert hands of mask maker Andrea Cavar-

ra. Thus, an intellectual *mimesis* in the written text of Plato's *Symposium* becomes physical on stage. As Revermann (2006: 162) claims, in ancient Greek theatre, "The crucial means of articulating this division [that between actor and onlooker] is the mask which separates the performer from the non-performer". Moreover, Ieranò (2018: 68-69) explains that ancient Greek masks – painted white for female characters and in a darker shade for male characters – allowed the actor to create a fictitious yet individual identity by giving them a new face. Indeed, the mask always portrayed someone's features, even though the lack of facial expressions projected the characters into an abstract dimension. Hence, to preserve the theatrical core of Socrates' *mimesis* of Diotima, Poggioni resorts to the most theatrical signifier one can think of with respect to ancient Greek theatre [Fig. 2]. In so doing, he aims to capture and highlight the profound theatricality of the Platonic dialogue and, more specifically, of Diotima's presence in the *Symposium*. As I hope I have shown here, this part of the *Symposium*, in theatrical terms, stands out because of its close relationship with Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*. In other words, my own reading and Poggioni's performance appear to complement and reinforce one another.

Notes

¹ Aristophanes' speech takes place after that of Agathon, owing to the comic poet's hiccups, which disrupt the original order of the guests. Thus, the speeches of the three dramatic poets – Aristophanes (the comic), Agathon (the tragic) and Socrates (the tragicomic, namely the philosopher) – are all brought together.

² "La *mimesis di sé*", as Regali (2016) calls the authors' projection of their own characteristics onto their created character, in reference to Agathon's and Socrates' praise of Eros in Plato's *Symposium* as well as to Agathon's composition process in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazuse*.

³ As Regali (2016) points out, in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazuse*, Agathon's characterisation revolves around his beauty (*Thesm.* 191) and youth (*Thesm.* 134).

⁴ *Symp.* 215b3–6; 220b6; 220d5–e1; 220e7–221c1; 216d2–3; 223a7–9. A similar portrait emerges, for instance, from Aristophanes' *Clouds* (e.g. *Ar. Nub.* 103–104; 362–363; 225) and from Xenophon's *Symposium* (*Xen. Symp.* VIII 2) and *Memorabilia* (e.g. *Xen. Mem.* I 2,1; I 6,2; IV 1,1–2).

⁵ ποιητής, from the same root of ποιέω: "make, produce, first of something material, as manufactures, works of art, etc.", "create, bring into existence" (first two meanings in LSJ).

⁶ Among other meanings, "resort to a person as a teacher" in LSJ.

⁷ This is one of the reproaches Callicles directs at Socrates in the *Gorgias* (*Grg.* 491a1–3).

⁸ The woman calls her interlocutor τὴν φθόρον τοιαῦτα (*Thesm.* 535) and ἡ πανοῦργος (*Thesm.* 551); she then tells him to shut up and to go to hell (*Thesm.* 557; 559; 562; 563); finally, she threatens to hit him (*Thesm.* 566–567) and tries to act (*Thesm.* 568).

⁹ Extract from a conversation I had with Poggioni regarding his approach to staging Plato's *Symposium*.

¹⁰ My translation of "Solo Diotima ha la maschera" (I added the adjective "white", which is fundamental to understanding Poggioni's operation, I think).

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