

## Reading the Mystical Visions of Love in Plato's Erotic Dialogues with Plotinus and Rumi

In this paper, I wish to try to reconstruct the mystical scenes of intimacy in Plato's erotic dialogues, taking cues from other mystical literature, including the *Divan* of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet, Rūmi, and the *Enneads* of Plotinus. I especially draw on Plotinus' mystical interpretations of the *Symposium*'s erotic imagery, especially as we find them in *Enneads* I.6, III.5, VI.7, and VI.9. A question demanded of every reader of Plato's erotic dialogues is: what purpose is accomplished in the staging of intimacy? On first blush (pun intended) it looks like Plato frames the encounter between lover and beloved on the verge of sexual contact as an ascetic code of honor. It's as if Plato warns us: you may look but not touch [the Beloved], an anticipation (much explored in the literature) of the conventions of courtly love. Some of the language Plato uses in the two most sexually charged scenes in all of Plato, e.g. *Symposium* 219c and *Phaedrus* 255, puts the reader in mind of struggle between the demands of the body or of sexual appetite versus the requirements of philosophy. To despise physical love and even to denigrate it, and further to castigate or even violently subjugate the appetites, these are apparently the recommended lessons of what seems to be intimacy on trial. To read these scenes through the lens of sexual morality answers the question as to why they are included by pointing to the work they do in defining philosophical propriety. This moralistic and literal approach makes of the intimacy merely a vehicle to portray the *sophrosune* possessed by two human lovers or individuals navigating love and friendship as embodied beings who nevertheless repudiate (at least some) bodily desires. Yet such a literal approach leaves us hardly edified or led along the path of love that Plato calls attention to in his erotic dialogues.

Erotic mysticism, spiritual union of the soul and the divine, is obviously also a feature of these same dialogues. Diotima initiates Socrates in the lesser and higher mysteries of love, explaining the journey as a staircase to beauty, while Socrates' recantation in the *Phaedrus* suggests that this moralistic strategizing leaves the most important matters pertaining to love unspoken. The regrowing of the soul's wings, its coming to rest in its original home, its traversing a path to unity, in short, its erotic mania rather than its *sophrosune* recommends the path of eros. *Phaedrus* 255 in particular, with its description of *the* stream of erotic gazing, cross-infecting lover and beloved, and watering the wings of the soul to allow its return to authentic being, is another such mystical moment. Here it seems possible that the lineaments of what might be understood in the later tradition as a theurgic rite are being laid out. Thus we are led to the suggestion that Plato's erotic vignette points to a mystical truth. This paper is grounded in a traditional Platonist reading according to which the portrayal of physical intimacy in Plato's erotic dialogues has in e.g. *Enneads* III.5, VI.9, as well as Proclus' *Alcibiades' Comm.* Etc., been understood as alluding to the most sacred mysteries of divine love, not as embarrassing episodes that merely leave us with the banal inference that Socrates was not that interested in sex.

## Bibliography

Primary texts

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*Phaedrus*

*I Alcibiades*

Plotinus. (3rd century) *Enneads* I.6 (1) On Beauty

III.5 On Love

## VI.9 On the One

5th century

Proclus. *Commentary on I Alcibiades*

Hermias. *Scholia on the Phaedrus*

13th century

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