

Head Over Heels for Philosophy? Acrobatic Performance in Xenophon's *Symposium*

In Xenophon's *Symposium*, a trio of performers sing and dance for the evening's entertainment, one even exhibiting acrobatic stunts. The spectacles the troupe provide have become integral to modern interpretations of the work (e.g. Huss 1999, Wiles 2000, Garelli-Francois 2002, Wohl 2004, Baragwanath 2012); Wohl, for example, argues that the performances become "philosophy in motion" (344) and promote carnal *eros* in rivalry with the Socratic discourse's championing of spiritual *eros* (cf. Wiles, 112). While Wohl focuses on the troupe's finale, however, I argue that the earlier acts in the dialogue already exemplify the contesting 'somatic philosophy'. The extreme corporeal manipulations of the acrobat in particular make a seductive presentation of a beautiful body, which is an irresistible diversion from the Socratic promotion of spiritual *philia*. Xenophon capitalizes on the extreme physicality of acrobatics to showcase the body and thereby emphasize the 'somatic philosophy' in the rivalry as vividly and engrossingly as possible.

This recognition of the central relevance of the acrobat to the *Symposium* helps explain an apparent contradiction in the work. Although the night's entertainment initially elicits positive responses from the symposiasts, including Socrates himself (2.9, 2.12, 2.15, 2.22, 3.2), he later forbids the act of spinning on a potter's wheel with the claim that this acrobatic deed, as well as the earlier tumbling in and out of a hoop studded with swords, 'furnishes no pleasure' and is 'in no way befitting a symposium' (7.3). Scholars have posited brief rationalizations for the inconsistency with his earlier praise (e.g. Wiles 2000, Andrisano 2003, Gilhuly 2009, Hobden 2004), but often accept the condemnation at face value. External evidence, however, indicates that spinning on a wheel and tumbling among swords were both quite popular at symposia (textual: Ath. 4.129d, 137c; vases: Naples 3232, Naples 2854, Berlin F 3489, Hague 201, Sydney

95.15, St. Petersburg B 4234; cf. Scholz 2003 and Schäfer 1997). Such popularity suggests that acrobatic acts were indeed pleasurable for many party-goers, and ‘fit for a symposium’. I argue that they are only inappropriate for Socrates’ ideal symposium and force him to remove the distraction of physical desire in order to re-establish the authority of his own teachings. Despite his initial efforts to use the performers’ feats to introduce philosophic discourse, every successive display halts the progress of the conversation (cf. 6.3). The entertainers command constant attention and bring spectator intensity to its apex with the acrobat’s sword-diving, which the spectators view with fearful anticipation (2.11). Socrates urges his fellows to ignore the distractions and make their own pleasure in discourse (3.2), but when the acrobat prepares to perform *thaumata* on a potter’s wheel, the philosopher is compelled to restrict the bodily motion of his rival. As he does so he proposes contemplation of different *thaumata*, all of which, I argue, anticipate his long speech on love by simultaneously rejecting somatic philosophy and privileging spiritual *eros*.

The physicality of the acrobatic entertainment, long before the final mime of Ariadne and Dionysus, thus represents the epitome of the troupe’s philosophy of the body and the utmost challenge to Socrates’ own philosophic ideal for the *kalokagathos*. This recognition of the reason behind the proscription of acrobatic exhibition not only explains Socrates’ earlier contradictory praise, but also advances our understanding of the competing ideologies in the work as a whole.

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