

Why Mantinea Matters in the *Symposium*

This paper argues that Plato's *Symposium* illustrates *militia amoris*, the conceptualization of love in military terms. The work recounts a banquet hosted by the tragic poet Agathon in celebration of his first victory at the Lenaian Festival in 416 BCE. By this time, Athens had been waging the Peloponnesian War for about fifteen years. It is under these political conditions that Agathon's guests engage in an intellectual debate about the nature of love. Several references to the war appear in their conversation, but none are so significant as Socrates' mention of Mantinea, the site of several key battles. Plato must have deliberately weaved this detail into his work, as both Alcibiades and Diotima have strong associations with the *polis*. Scholars, though, have curiously declined to comment upon these connections (Ruprecht 1992). I will demonstrate that reading the *Symposium* against Mantineian history portrays Alcibiades and Diotima as agonistic rivals for Socrates' affection and highlights in the work the implicit competitive dimension of love that modern scholarship has failed to address.

Mantinea's complex role in the Peloponnesian War is well-known (cf. Plutarch, Thucydides, Xenophon). During the so-called Archidamian War from 431-421 BCE, the *polis* remained neutral. Soon after the commencement of Nicias' Peace in 421 BCE, however, it came to fear Spartan aggression. As a result, Mantinea sought the protection of neighboring Argos. The historical Alcibiades saw this political maneuvering as an opportunity for personal gain. The general had envied Nicias' diplomatic achievement and, in an attempt to destroy it, he manipulated Mantinea, as well as Argos and Elis, to ally with the Athenians in opposition to the Lacedaemonians. A political tug-of-war ensued between Athens and Sparta over these Peloponnesian *poleis*, and in 418 BCE it culminated in a pivotal battle at Mantinea in which the Athenians were soundly defeated. It was here that the Deceleian War officially broke

out, making Mantinea the source of the resumption of hostilities between Athens and Sparta. Alcibiades' meddling, then, had significant military consequences.

In contrast to this image of Mantinea as a theater of war, archaeological evidence and Pausanias' testimony suggest that the *polis* was a center of love. The city itself and its surrounding area had a strong and longstanding devotion to Aphrodite, housing at least ten temples of the goddess dating from as early as the Trojan War up to the reign of Emperor Hadrian (Paus. 8). Mantinea seems to have had a particular devotion to female deities, as it also had significant shrines to goddesses such as Athena Alea, Artemis Hymnia, Demeter, Hera, Leto, and Persephone. Because religion in the *polis* especially embraced and celebrated womanhood, it is symbolically appropriate that Plato lists Mantinea as the homeland of the empowered priestess and love-expert Diotima. If she did in fact exist, she may have presided over the sanctuary of Artemis Hymnia. Pausanias mentions a priestess only at this Mantineian temple and emphasizes her fame and matured sexuality (8.5). If this figure is the historical Diotima, she would have been able to meet Socrates and to give him the knowledge of love.

The traditional reading of the *Symposium* associates Alcibiades with warfare and Diotima with love. However, Mantinea serves as a forum that facilitates overlap between the two figures. The *polis* was a land of both love and war. Monuments dedicated to Aphrodite stood near the areas of fighting, bringing to mind the metaphor, "love is a battlefield." As examples of this concept, Alcibiades and Diotima compete for Socrates' affection and involve him in a love triangle, albeit with differing strategies. The priestess represents spiritual love that Socrates idealizes, while the general offers a physical variant that Socrates ultimately rejects. Plato, then, portrays Alcibiades and Diotima as both lovers and warriors to illustrate *militia amoris*. The reference to Mantinea intensifies the competition between them for Socrates' affection. Plato

was not the first to conceive the emotion in this way. Sappho, Homer, Aeschylus, and others also describe romantic affairs in military terms (Murgatroyd 1975). Plato's reference to Mantinea binds the *Symposium* to this tradition of describing love as an act of conquering and being conquered.

Bibliography

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