What's in a Name?

Although Plato's *Symposium* is an outstanding work of literature, studies on it traditionally focus on philosophy far more than its artistic merits. Plato's dramatic approach, however, ties directly into any philosophical interpretation. This is true in all his dialogues, but particularly applies to the *Symposium*. This paper interprets the literary technique of word play, in this case when directly applied to the names of the dialogue's participants. Even though Plato utilizes genuine recognizable Athenians, his choices and their roles are emphasized and further explained by means of their names. As readers consider the etymology behind each name, they become more conscious of why the character appears in the dialogue.

For four of the characters, attention is drawn to their name and its meaning to flag for the audience that such word play is within the playful rules of the dialogue, thus giving permission to draw significance from any such connections drawn. At the start of the dialogue (172a3-4), there is a joking reference to Apollodorus' deme of Phaleron. Although modern scholars are unsure of the joke's meaning, it clearly has something to do with Glaucon's word choice. Later the audience is invited to examine the significance in the name of Eryixmachus ("belch-fighter") as he takes on the dramatic role as the medical provider of advice for Aristophanes' unfortunate case of hiccups. Shortly before that infamous interruption, however, another unusual break in the text further illuminates the name game. The narrator (at this point, Apollodorus) re-emerges in the first person to pun off Pausanias' name just as he finishes his speech (185c6-7). In a joke that, for a fortunate change, translates in both languages, he says: "Once Pausanias paused (for the wise men teach me to do balanced word play this way)," indicating for the audience that wise men see significance in names, setting us up for Eryximachus. Agathon is the final and most important character whose name is played upon. Socrates first draws attention to his name (174b3-5) in a

groaningly punning way as he alters an *Iliad* citation to invite Aristodemus along with him to Agathon's house. From that point forward, the audience can consider Agathon's name through its etymological connections both within his own speech (see for example 196e4 and 197d7) and as he teased by Socrates in response (201a5). Agathon then is considered as the physical manifestation of "the good". As later characters compete to lay close to Agathon, it reads as metaphorical struggle to achieve proximity to "the good". Socrates wins, but in a more troublesome analysis, he is also the barrier that comes between Alcibiades and Agathon.

Once we notice examples where the text draws obvious attention to such name play, we may speculate about what the remaining names might signify. Apollodorus ("gift of Apollo") is the dialogue's mouthpiece, who, like a Pythia, transfers the story of Socrates that will ultimately serve to support Socrates against charges leveled against him in the *Apology*, acting as an agent of the god's description as per the *Apology* (21a-c). Aristodemus ("best of the people") is out of place at this party of those larger in size and stature. He does not give his own speech, but is fortunate, as a representative of the average citizen, to be present for us all. Phaedrus ("bright, beaming") works for idealistic romantic who starts off the *agon* of love speeches, while Aristophanes ("revealing the best") gives a speech that is, like Socrates', closest to Agathon ("the good"). His theory of *eros* contains elements that demonstrates that he, like his mythical people, has a sense of some higher concept of *eros*, akin to Socrates', which he dimly grasps but cannot articulate (192c6-d2). Diotima's name ("Honor to/of Zeus") not only allows for a divine stamp to her theories (delivered through Socrates' mouth as if he were a priest to an oracle), it connects her to "the Olympian" Pericles. Finally, Alcibiades' name ("defender/strength by violence") is a perfect summary for the person whose shield reputedly contained the device of Eros with a thunderbolt. He violently burst through Athenian politics like he bursts into both Agathon's symposium and Plato's narrative.

At the same time his speech defends Socrates of the charge of *hubris* that awaits in the future. So, not only is he a "defender by violence," he is a "defender against violence" as he shows just how little Socrates corrupted the youths as later accusations would have it. Finally, Socrates' name, unlike every other character at Agathon's house, has no clear etymology. As Alcibiades says (221c1-d7), Socrates is unlike any other figure in history. According to Plato's name game as well, Socrates is indeed truly unique.