

Grotesque Bodies at the Symposium: Reading the Drinking Cup through a Bakhtinian Lens

The drinking cups of the Archaic and Classical Greek symposium are more than receptacles for wine; they also interact with revelers in a way that underscores the human body at the event. Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* analyzes grotesque themes in Rabelais' 16th century novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. I argue that Bakhtin's observations about the grotesque provide an insightful window on the symposiast, vessel, and their relationship with each other. This relationship ultimately demonstrates a nuanced and dynamic type of humor that strengthens social bonds throughout the symposium. Bakhtin's work has been influential with regards to literary theory and, although he himself is concerned with medieval and renaissance literature, is not foreign to the classics. Scholars have applied his theories to Homeric epics (Nagy 2002), Attic Old Comedy (Lada-Richards 1999; Edwards 2002; Platter 2007), and Latin elegy (Batstone 2002). Bakhtin's theories have even been applied to the physical object in art historical contexts—Alexandre Mitchell's (2009) analysis of humor discusses Bakhtinian theory with sympotic imagery; however, a strictly Bakhtinian read on the drinking cup is not the focus of Mitchell's work.

Bakhtin notes that the Rabelaisian carnival is a break from the *status quo* where subversions of societal norms are ubiquitous and the body, including its functions, is emphasized. While the Greek symposium reinforced social structures, it also created a release from conventions in a humorous and grounding atmosphere. There are aspects of what Bakhtin deems “folk” humor and culture that permeate these festivities in order to alleviate the pressures of a highly stratified society and to temporarily ground these norms during a predetermined respite. In this paper, I read the drinking cup, or *kylix*, its physical form as well as its use, through a Bakhtinian lens in order to demonstrate the drinking cup's ability to highlight the human body

and its functions. The grotesque emphasis on the body facilitates laughter, which in turn builds a sense of community and maintains the societal norms. This creates a balance by adding the element of degradation to an event that, on the surface, encourages high-culture and polish.

I argue that these expressions of the grotesque can be applied to this drinker-cup relationship, including the representation of the human body's physiological cycles from taking in sustenance to eliminating waste. The drinking cup, its own body filled with wine from another vessel, participates in bodily processes by feeding the symposiast. The importance of the vessel's and drinker's mouth is marked in this interaction. Interestingly, the entire cycle from the participant imbibing to expelling wine can be depicted on the vessel itself. In addition, the exaggerated forms of the vessel with its wide, open mouth and curved body (appearing larger with its squat stem) are important aspects of Bakhtin's focus on bodily orifices. The metasymptotic art of the drinking vessels often depicts the physical interactions between symposiast and cup, and images in the tondo of these cups slowly reveal themselves as the symposiast drinks the contents of the vessel.

I will demonstrate that Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque provides an insightful lens for understanding the humorous space within the symposium, where bodily awareness and interactions with the drinking cup heightened camaraderie amongst revelers. These symposia ultimately reinforced the socio-political world of Archaic and Classical Greece—grotesque elements allowed the participants to build up conviviality in a way that ultimately fostered these tight-knit communities amongst the male citizenry.

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