

Women Turned Toward Women:

Linguistic Reflections of Gender, Sex, and Agency in Plato's *Symposium* 191d-e

Plato's *Symp.* 191d-e offers one a rare glimpse into the perception and representation of female homoerotic relationships in extant Classical Greek literature. While *Symposium* has been used as a formative text for reconciling male homoeroticism, little attention has been paid to Plato's representation of the female, and in particular the implications embedded in the choice of the term *hetairistriai*, a word otherwise unaccounted for in Greek literature, to characterize female/female erotic love. Some scholars have attempted to reconcile this term, but few convincing assertions of meaning have been made. Halperin (2004) examines the use of *hetairistriai* by Lucian, but ultimately reinforces the idea that this term is fundamentally lost to us, and indeed may have also been lost to Lucian. Rabinowitz (2002), however, focalizes the linguistic associations between *hetairistriai* and *hetairai* and attempts to solidify the meaning of *hetaira*, but stops short of elaborating the relationships between the two terms. My discussion of *Symp.* 191e aims to build upon the linguistic associations established by Rabinowitz and explore the relationship between gendered attraction, erotic hierarchy, and female sexual agency in the *Symposium*.

The context of 191e is critical to unpacking the meaning of *hetairistriai*. This term occurs within the speech of Aristophanes, and thus the neologism is likely a rhetorical tool being used by Plato to emulate an Aristophanean voice. Moreover, *hetairistriai* is juxtaposed against *moikeutriai* in a parallel construction. The semantic opposition between the terms can only be derived from context, as there is little innate semantic difference between *moikeutriai* and *hetairistriai*. *Moikeutriai* is less opaque in meaning, as it derives from the masculine *moikos*

(“adulterer” carrying the connotation of sexual excess) with the *-triai* suffix, which, as Halperin notes, emphasizes a sense of activity and agency on the part of the feminine subject. Likewise, *hetairistriai* is a compound of *hetaira* with the *-triai* suffix. However, this presents an issue: while *moikos* logically does need the feminine intensifier in order to articulate its meaning within the passage, *hetaira* does not grammatically need the same treatment. The addition of the *-triai* suffix intensifies a sense of feminine agency which is already implicit in the term *hetaira*; it’s a redundant addition which serves to draw an even more distinct equivalence between the two terms. Thus, both the parallel construction and the addition of the suffixes sets up a characteristically Aristophanean joke in which *hetairistriai* is the punch line. If we understand the passage in this way, it becomes clear that understanding the joke hinges upon a particular understanding of *hetairai*.

In this paper I will argue that in the context of *Symp.* 191e we must understand *hetairai* as carrying a distinct connotation of female sexual agency, which frames the joke as a critique of the way in which female homoeroticism disrupts the hierarchical, penetrative structure of normative Greek sexuality. While this joke problematizes female agency in a way that is consistent with Aristophanes treatment of gender in comedy, it also carries more significant implications for the way in which Plato conceptualizes gendered attraction.

Bibliography

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