

## Rhetoric, Drama and Truth in Plato's *Symposium*\*

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### Abstract

This paper draws attention to the *Symposium*'s concern with epideictic rhetoric. It argues that in the *Symposium*, as in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, a contrast is drawn between true and false rhetoric. The paper also discusses the dialogue's relationship to drama. Whereas both epideictic rhetoric and drama were directed to a mass audience, the speeches in the *Symposium* are delivered to a small, select group. The discussion focuses on the style of the speeches delivered by Aristophanes, Agathon, Socrates and Alcibiades. Aristophanes speaks in the simple style of comedy, fable and folktale, also used by Protagoras in Plato's *Protagoras*. Agathon speaks in the high-flown style of Gorgias. Socrates' speech is a miniature Platonic dialogue, and both Alcibiades' speech and Socrates' speech may be compared to satyr play. The paper concludes with a suggestion that the claim at 223D, that the same person should be able to write both comedy and tragedy, refers to style as well as subject-matter.

### Keywords

Plato, *Symposium*, rhetoric, Aristophanes, Alcibiades

Plato's *Symposium* is most commonly regarded as a dialogue about love, or rather about *erôs*, since it contains six speeches in praise of *erôs*. The last of

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these, the speech of Socrates, offers the famous exposition of the idea that true *erôs* is *erôs* not of an individual person but of the Form of Beauty and describes in lyrical terms the ascent from *erôs* of an individual to the final revelation of the Form. It is less often recognised that the *Symposium* is also concerned with rhetoric, especially epideictic rhetoric, and that we should pay attention not only to the content of the speeches in praise of love but also to their form as speeches of praise, *encomia*.<sup>1</sup>

Plato's views on rhetoric are usually sought in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*. In the *Gorgias* rhetoric is attacked as spurious and incapable of teaching the truth although the possibility of a good and skilled (*τεχνικός*) rhetor is mentioned at 504D. In the *Phaedrus* Plato mounts a similar attack and has Socrates criticise severely an epideictic speech alleged to be by Lysias. However in the last part of the *Phaedrus* the suggestion made at *Gorgias* 504D is taken up and it is suggested that a true rhetoric *is* possible for one who really understands the different kinds of soul and the different kinds of speech; only such a rhetoric based on knowledge would be truly convincing. The *Phaedrus* provides an important parallel for the *Symposium* since the *Phaedrus* too is concerned with *erôs* as well as rhetoric although the balance between the two themes is somewhat different.

I shall argue in this paper that in the *Symposium* too there is a contrast between true and false rhetoric: false rhetoric is attacked and there is a sketch of what a true, philosophical rhetoric would be like. My concern is not with rhetoric alone, however. Two of the speakers in the *Symposium*, Aristophanes and Agathon, are dramatic poets and the scene is set at a party commemorating Agathon's first victory in the tragic competition at the Lenaea of 416. The *Symposium* is, among other things, a drinking party—but the god of wine, Dionysus, is also the god of drama. Plato is concerned here not with rhetoric on its own but with the use of rhetoric by dramatic poets and others engaged on similar enterprises. I propose therefore to consider both the *Symposium's* criticisms of rhetoric and its relationship to drama. The two aspects are intertwined, as we shall see.

My discussion will concentrate not on the content of the speeches delivered but on their style. There is, of course, a certain artificiality in giving so much prominence to questions of style. In any skilful writer, style and

<sup>1</sup> See however R.A. Lanham (1976) 36–48, W.N. Thompson (1979) 325–338, E. Belfiore (1984) 137–149, R.B. Rutherford (1995) 182–183 and especially A.W. Nightingale (1995) 93–132.

content go together and in the encomia delivered by the speakers in the *Symposium* style reflects content particularly effectively. Perhaps that is why most scholarship on the *Symposium*, even if it includes discussion of rhetoric and drama in the dialogue, deals with what is being said by the speakers rather than with how they say it. In emphasising matters of style in this paper, I am attempting to redress the balance and to focus on some aspects of Plato's literary artistry which have tended to escape attention precisely because they work so well in their context in the dialogue.

I begin with Plato's criticisms of rhetoric. The *Symposium* contains a number of theoretical remarks about encomium and what it should and should not be like. When Phaedrus proposes at 177A-C that the company should amuse themselves by delivering encomia of *Erôs* he claims that the subject has not been treated before. Socrates welcomes the suggestion and declares that τὰ ἐρωτικά ('the subject of love') is the only subject he understands (177D-E). The speeches of Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes and Agathon follow in turn. Then it is Socrates' turn to speak and at this point he is a good deal less confident. He says it was ridiculous (καταγέλαστος) of him to agree to deliver an encomium and to claim expertise in τὰ ἐρωτικά when in fact he was completely ignorant of how to produce an encomium. He had thought that the encomiast should tell the truth when what was actually required was to attribute the greatest and finest qualities to one's subject without regard for truth and only to appear to praise *Erôs* (198C-E). He says what he will do is tell the truth in his own way, using ὀνόμασι δὲ καὶ θέσει ῥημάτων τοιαύτη ὅποια δ᾽ ἂν τις τύχη ἐπελθοῦσα, 'whatever words and phrases happen to occur to me as I go along' (199B4-5).<sup>2</sup> These remarks are evidently highly ironical. Implicitly Socrates is criticising what all the other speakers have been doing: they have not told the truth and their speeches are a lot of fine words which do not mean anything.

Socrates' speech is not the last one. After it Alcibiades breaks in, drunk. He joins the party and insists on delivering an encomium not of *Erôs* but of Socrates. Alcibiades before his speech says things not unlike what Socrates says before his. At 214E Socrates declares he is afraid that Alcibiades is going to make fun of him. Alcibiades in reply says that he is going to

<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout I normally use Christopher Gill's Penguin translation of the *Symposium* (1999).

speak the truth and picks up this point at the beginning of his speech where he compares Socrates to a figure of Silenus, τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἕνεκα οὐ τοῦ γελοίου, ‘to bring out the truth not to make fun’.

So much for theory. However Plato does not just tell us in the abstract what false and true rhetoric are like; he shows us, by a dramatic presentation. I have already mentioned that the *Symposium* is set at a party to celebrate Agathon’s victory in the tragic competition and that two of the speakers are Agathon and Aristophanes. Drama is also part of the *Symposium* in a much more fundamental way: the dialogue itself, like many Platonic dialogues, is dramatic. In fact it has a complex structure since it takes the form of a narrative told by Aristodemus to Apollodorus and repeated by him to a third person. Those who read the dialogue in Greek are never allowed to forget this since indirect speech is used throughout. Yet it is not simply a narrative for it contains some lively dialogue, the different characters speak in distinct and characteristic ways and there is at least one moment of vigorous action, the irruption of Alcibiades. Generically and stylistically the *Symposium* is highly complex: it is a drama within a narrative, and within the drama come the encomia, themselves examples of a standard genre of epideictic rhetoric. The persons of the drama are characterised partly by the way they speak; each speaks in a different style of Greek as well as expressing different ideas.<sup>3</sup>

There is an important difference between the encomia in the *Symposium* and epideictic rhetoric as usually practised in classical Greece. The encomia in the *Symposium* are not orations to a mass audience but speeches at a private party, delivered to a small, select group. Nor is the dialogue drama of the usual Greek kind. Although it is ‘dramatic’ in a broad sense of the term, it does not fit any of the conventional forms of Greek drama: it is written in prose, there is no chorus, and has neither a tragic plot nor the looser, episodic structure of Old Comedy. We shall see later that Socrates describes Alcibiades’ speech as a satyr-play, but the *Symposium* overall does not have the form of a satyr-play either. Drama, like epideictic rhetoric, was normally a production for a mass audience while this is a story passed on by word of mouth between a few friends.

The contrast between the mass audience and the select few is not mine but Plato’s and it is drawn several times in the course of the *Symposium*. At

<sup>3</sup> On the *Symposium* as drama see, for example, H.H. Bacon (1959), D. Clay (1975), M. Warner (1992).

175E Socrates compliments Agathon on his superior wisdom which has been exhibited in all its brilliance *πρόην ἐν μάρτυσι τῶν Ἑλλήνων πλέον ἢ τρισμύριοις*, ‘the other day, with more than thirty thousand Greeks there to see it’. The *μάρτυρες* ‘there to see it’, literally ‘witnesses’, are the audience in the theatre, present at the tragic contest.<sup>4</sup> Socrates’ ironical comments are picked up later when Socrates and Agathon converse before Agathon’s speech. At 194A6 Agathon calls his audience a *θέατρον* and Socrates responds by reiterating the contrast between the audience in the theatre and the assembly of party guests:

I saw the courage and self-confidence you showed when you went out on to the platform with the actors, facing such a huge audience without any embarrassment, before presenting your own work. So I shouldn’t expect you to become nervous in front of our small group.

Agathon’s reply explains the point of the contrast:

I hope you don’t think I’m so obsessed with the theatre that I don’t realize that, for anyone with any sense, a small number of intelligent people are more alarming than a crowd of unintelligent ones.

These words of Agathon at 194B make explicit that we are dealing here with a familiar Platonic theme, that what matters is not the views of the ignorant majority but the opinions of the few wise people; in Socratic dialectic securing the agreement of individuals is more important than impressing the crowd.<sup>5</sup> This exchange between Agathon and Socrates is full of irony but the implication is clear: drama like Agathon’s and encomia like the one Agathon delivers are fitted to sway the mass audience; for effective discussion with just one or a very few people, a different technique is required.

Plato uses this unusual kind of drama to show us the failings of rhetoric. Each of the five encomia that precedes the speech of Socrates is a parody. The speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias use sophistic rhetoric to deck out confused and limited content and Eryximachus’ speech parodies the use of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the note in Gill’s translation (1999), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., e.g., *Crito* 47B, *Laches* 184E, *Gorgias* 472C, 474A, *Protagoras* 329A-B.

epideictic rhetoric to present medical and scientific thought.<sup>6</sup> Parody need not imply the absence of seriousness. By implication Plato is criticising the sophistic and scientific ways of writing encomia. The use of parody as a method of criticism is particularly clear in the speeches of Aristophanes and Agathon, the two dramatic poets.

Aristophanes' speech is in many ways a refreshing change after the excesses of sophistic rhetoric and high-flown speculation which have gone before. The comic poet tells a delightful fable of the original whole-natured humans who were split by Zeus and concludes that *erôs* is a matter of looking for our lost halves. At the same time he is, as one might expect, frank and down-to-earth in his description of the physical manifestations of *erôs*. As has often been noted, the whole speech cleverly captures the spirit of Aristophanes as we know it from his plays, combining fantasy and earthy humour. Less attention has been paid to the simple style in which the speech is written. The sentences are short and colloquial with a simple structure:

ἡ γὰρ πάλαι ἡμῶν φύσις οὐκ αὐτὴ ἦν ἥπερ νῦν ἀλλ' ἀλλοία ('Long ago our nature was not the same as it is now but quite different.' 189D6-7)

ὁ δὲν Ζεὺς καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι θεοὶ ἐβουλεύοντο ὅτι χρὴ αὐτοὺς ποιῆσαι, καὶ ἠποροῦν ('Zeus and the other gods discussed what to do to them and couldn't decide.' 190C1-2)

μόγις δὲ ὁ Ζεὺς ἐννοήσας λέγει ὅτι... ('After much hard thought, Zeus had an idea...' 190C6-7)

In the last example we would expect indirect speech after ὅτι but instead Aristophanes continues with direct speech and an inserted ἔφη ('he said'), a colloquial-sounding change of construction. The speech contains very little in the way of grand rhetorical devices or unusual words and Plato makes Aristophanes draw our attention at both the beginning and the end to the difference between his speech and those of the earlier speakers.<sup>7</sup>

I suggest that Aristophanes' speech uses this simple style to point a contrast between the stylistic level of comedy and that of tragedy. The style of

<sup>6</sup> On the styles of these three speeches, see R.G. Bury (1932) xxiv-xxix. On Eryximachus' speech in particular, see R.L. Hunter (2004) 53-59.

<sup>7</sup> See 189C2-3 and 193D6-7.

Aristophanic comedy is in fact complex and varied, containing not only simple, colloquial passages but also grandiose paratragedy and poetic lyrics. It is however arguable that the basic comic style is a simple one, the style which deflates the high-flown and brings the lofty flights of tragic rhetoric back down to earth. Plato seems to have borrowed an available prose style which he judged suitable for a comic poet speaking in prose, for the style of Aristophanes' speech recalls the style used in the myth of the *Protagoras*. Passages such as *Protagoras* 320C8-D1, ἦν γὰρ ποτε χρόνος ὅτε θεοὶ μὲν ἦσαν, θνητὰ δὲ γένη οὐκ ἦν ('A long, long time ago there were only gods; there weren't yet any mortal kinds')<sup>8</sup> or 321C1-3, λοιπὸν δὲ ἀκόσμητον ἔτι αὐτῷ ἦν τὸ ἀνθρώπων γένος, καὶ ἠπόρει ὅτι χρῆσαιτο ('That meant he still had human beings on his hands, with no embellishments at all. And he simply didn't know what to do with them') use the same type of simple, paratactic sentence structure as we find in Aristophanes' speech. Perhaps this style was in current use for some sophistic myths. In any case, in Platonic terms it is highly suitable for Protagoras who claims success in teaching the masses, but is not a rhetorician. It is equally suitable for Aristophanes, the comic poet whose work succeeds with the mass audience in the theatre.<sup>9</sup>

Aristophanes' speech contrasts sharply with the following speech of Agathon, the tragic poet. Agathon's speech is a parody of Gorgianic rhetoric, as many commentators have noted, following Socrates' own comment at 198C1-2 that the speech reminded him of Gorgias. Socrates claims to have been particularly impressed by the end of the speech, and it is the peroration, at 197C-E, which is most obviously a parody of Gorgias, full of balanced antitheses and pleonasm. The whole speech is very carefully structured, with clearly marked transitions from one section to another and a deliberately exaggerated programmatic opening: Ἐγὼ δὲ δὴ βούλομαι πρῶτον μὲν εἰπεῖν ὡς χρὴ με εἰπεῖν, ἔπειτα εἰπεῖν ('I want first of all to say how I should speak, then give my speech' 194E4-5). Agathon is a poet, not just a Gorgianic orator. At 197C he quotes two lines of verse and Dover has pointed out that in 197D-E nearly all the cola can be scanned as metrical

<sup>8</sup> For the two quotations from the *Protagoras* I use Adam Beresford's Penguin translation (2005).

<sup>9</sup> For connections in both style and content between Aristophanes' speech, fable and folk-tale, cf. K.J. Dover (1966) 43 and (1980) 113.

units from Greek lyric poetry, a feature not found in the surviving fragments of Gorgias.<sup>10</sup>

The connection between Agathon's poetry and Gorgias' rhetoric may have a basis in reality. The fragments of Agathon do offer some limited support for it and Philostratus claims that Agathon often follows Gorgias in his iambs.<sup>11</sup> In any case Plato has gone to some trouble to put Agathon's speech not just into the style of Gorgias but into the style of Gorgias as it would be employed by a tragic poet. If Agathon did indeed follow Gorgias, this would make him the perfect example for Plato of a high-flown tragic style. In other dialogues too Plato associates tragedy with a lofty style. At *Meno* 76C-E Socrates proposes a definition of colour which is κατὰ Γοργίαν ('in the manner of Gorgias') and which he says pleases Meno, who is a pupil of Gorgias, because it is τραγική ('tragic'). Bluck has argued, rightly in my view, that τραγική here alludes to the high-flown language of the definition as well as to the apparent profundity of its subject-matter. He drew attention to two passages in the *Republic*, 413A-B and 545E, where τραγικῶς similarly refers to loftiness of style.<sup>12</sup> At *Gorgias* 502B-D Socrates explicitly classifies tragedy as a type of rhetoric because, like rhetoric, it aims at giving pleasure to a mass audience. Within that passage, at 502C5-7, he claims that verse is simply speech with the addition of melody, rhythm and metre, suggesting that there too Plato sees tragedy as similar to rhetoric in its style as well as its aims and audience.<sup>13</sup>

The contrast between the speeches of Aristophanes and Agathon is a contrast between two styles which both aim to gratify the masses, the style of comedy and the style of tragedy, the style of Protagoras and the style of Gorgias. Both speeches are criticised in what follows. Socrates' praise of Agathon's speech is too fulsome to be true. He follows it up with the remarks about encomium at 198-9 which I discussed earlier and then proceeds to subject Agathon to an elenchus. The main idea in Aristophanes' speech, that in *erôs* we are searching for our lost halves, is explicitly dismissed

<sup>10</sup> K.J. Dover (1980) 124.

<sup>11</sup> Agathon fragments 6, 11 and 12 Nauck are arguably Gorgianic in style. Philostratus' claim is made at *Lives of the Sophists* 9 but it is not clear to me how much of Agathon's work Philostratus knew; he might simply be drawing on *Symposium* 198C1-2.

<sup>12</sup> R.S. Bluck (1964) 252-253 and (1961) 289-295.

<sup>13</sup> E.R. Dodds (1959) 325 draws the parallel with Gorgias' own statement in his *Encomium of Helen* 9, τὴν ποίησιν ἅπασαν καὶ νομίζω καὶ ὀνομάζω λόγον ἔχοντα μέτρον.



in Socrates' speech, in what he reports Diotima as saying at 205D-E, and at 212C, after the end of Socrates' speech, Aristophanes draws attention to the fact that his own speech was referred to. Both the simple style and attractive fantasy of the comic poet and the high-flown bombast of the tragic poet are found wanting; both are false dramatic rhetoric.

What then is true rhetoric like? How do encomia which tell the truth proceed? Once again the point is made through dramatic presentation rather than through extended theoretical statements. I wish to argue that Socrates' speech is presented as a model of true rhetoric, as that is employed in the drama of Platonic dialogue. For all Socrates' claims of simplicity and stylistic innocence, true rhetoric turns out to be a complex blend of different elements. Indeed Socrates' speech is not a speech by Socrates in his own person at all, for he reports a *dialogue* between himself and the wise woman, Diotima.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere Plato regularly makes Socrates stress the importance of discussion between individuals, of dialectic as opposed to rhetoric, and contrasts Socrates' method of question and answer with the long speeches of the sophists.<sup>15</sup> Dialectic plays little part in the *Symposium*, apart from Socrates' elenchus of Agathon at 199B-201C, immediately before he embarks on his own speech; at 194D-E Phaedrus and Agathon politely push dialectic aside in favour of rhetoric but at the end of the dialogue when only Socrates, Agathon and Aristophanes are still able to talk, Socrates is once again engaged in dialectic as the use of *διαλέγεσθαι* at 223C6 indicates.

In Socrates' reported discussion with Diotima dialogue gives way after a time to extended speech. This has already started to happen at 207C-208B and after a brief response by Socrates at 208B Diotima launches again into continuous speech which goes on until 212A. It is here that we find the famous description of the ascent to the Form of Beauty couched in poetic language and lofty style. The description is famous precisely because the style succeeds in conveying the thought in a memorable way. This is Platonic rhetoric, using carefully chosen words to convey something abstract which Plato believed to be true. The style Plato uses here is comparable to the style he uses for some of his own myths such as the account of the *ὑπερουράνιος τόπος*, ('the region beyond the heavens'), and the fall of souls

<sup>14</sup> Cf. W.N. Thompson (1979) 335-337.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. above p.32 and n.5.

at *Phaedrus* 247Cff. We might call this Plato's 'grand style'. Earlier parts of Socrates' speech, however, are written in a much plainer style. The story of the birth of *Erôs* which Diotima tells at 203Bff. is written in a style much more like that of Aristophanes' fable in his speech.<sup>16</sup> Here the sentences are simply constructed and the use of brief parentheses such as οἶνος γὰρ οὐπω ἦν ('this was before wine was discovered') at 203B6 and ἔστι γάρ ('because they already are') at 204A2 gives a colloquial impression. Socrates' speech is a mixture, starting with dialogue and a simply told fable but going on to make grand unargued claims in a much loftier style. It combines a style like that of Aristophanes and Protagoras with a style like that of Agathon and Gorgias but both styles are used to convey important Platonic ideas, not sophistic fantasies. The result is something which resembles a miniature Platonic dialogue of the middle period, starting with close argument and finishing up with a mythical presentation.

Alcibiades also said that he would tell the truth. Is his speech also an example of true rhetoric? Alcibiades' speech is pitched at a very different level from the reported conversation between Socrates and Diotima but it shows us what the pursuit of wisdom by the true philosopher, the true lover, Socrates is like. Like Socrates' speech it contains some dialogue, at 218Cff.; this time the dialogue is not philosophical dialectic but the conversation in a bizarre love scene between Socrates and Alcibiades. There are no myths or fables in this speech, only the comparison of Socrates to a figure of Silenus and to the satyr, Marsyas at 215Aff. Although Alcibiades was not present when Aristophanes and Agathon delivered their speeches, Plato makes him allude to both the comic and the tragic poet: Aristophanes is quoted at 221B3–4 and Alcibiades' final words, addressed to Agathon, contain the tragic formula παθόντα γνῶναι ('learning by suffering').<sup>17</sup>

When Alcibiades has finished speaking Socrates picks up the comparison of himself to a Silenus and a satyr and calls Alcibiades' speech τὸ σατυρικόν σου δράμα τοῦτο καὶ σιληνικόν ('this satyr-play—and Silenus-play—of yours' 222D3–4). This suggests that Alcibiades' speech is neither comedy nor tragedy but satyr-play.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps Socrates' speech is also a

<sup>16</sup> Cf. H.H. Bacon (1959) 421, 427.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., with Bury and Rowe, Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 177, *Choephoroe* 313. The idea is also found in epic, a genre closely related to tragedy in Plato's eyes: see Homer, *Iliad* 17.32, 20.198 and Hesiod, *Works and Days* 218. Cf. also Herodotus 1.207.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. F.C.C. Sheffield (2001), M.D. Usher (2002), F.C.C. Sheffield (2006) 185–201.

satyr-play. Alcibiades himself had extended his comparison of Socrates to a Silenus by saying that it is his *words* which are most like the manufactured figures of Silenus that open up. These words seem initially ridiculous, wearing a kind of insolent satyr's skin on the outside, but when they are opened up they turn out to be the only sensible ones and indeed to be 'the most divine' (221D7-222A6). Why should the style that blends comic and tragic be the style of satyr-play? Satyr-play combined elements of both tragedy and comedy, although it was perhaps closer to the former than to the latter.<sup>19</sup> If we consider content as well as style, the overall impression of Socrates' speech is of a mixture in which the serious tone of tragedy predominates while in Alcibiades' speech, despite the serious elements beneath the satyric skin, the ridiculous, comic surface is more in evidence. Satyrs were also associated with mystery-rites<sup>20</sup> and Plato makes Diotima speak in terms of initiating Socrates into mysteries at 209E5ff. Socrates and Diotima give us the serious, inner side of the mystery while Alcibiades shows us the satyrs who take part in the publicly visible ritual. Socrates and Alcibiades both display different versions of true rhetoric, a rhetoric which combines and transforms the styles of tragedy and comedy.

At the very end of the dialogue Aristodemus, the narrator, describes how long after all the others had fallen asleep or gone home, towards dawn, he woke up and saw Agathon, Aristophanes and Socrates still drinking and talking. Socrates was 'forcing' his companions to agree, presumably by the compulsion of dialectical argument, that the man who knew how to write comedy could write tragedy too, that τὸν τέχνη τραγωδοποιόν ('the skilled tragic poet') was also a comic poet (223D). This famous and puzzling passage is inconsistent both with Plato's remark at *Republic* 3.395A that the same poets cannot compose both tragedy and comedy and with what we know of Greek dramatic practice. Some commentators have fastened on Plato's use of the word ἐπίστασθαι ('to know') here and argued that Plato thought a poet who had true knowledge in a Platonic sense, knowledge of the Forms, would be master of a universal art of poetry.<sup>21</sup> This interpretation seems to me untenable. One of the consistent elements in Plato's various discussions of poetry is that poets do not and cannot have knowledge;

<sup>19</sup> See R. Seaford (1984) 10-33, 44-48, P.E. Easterling (1997) 36-53.

<sup>20</sup> R. Seaford (1984) 8-9, citing Plato, *Laws* 815C.

<sup>21</sup> See especially R.G. Bury (1932) 171.

Plato regularly makes a sharp distinction between poetic activity and knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

An alternative, related interpretation is that the *Symposium* itself is meant to be both a tragedy and a comedy, that the poet who can do both is Plato himself.<sup>23</sup> Those who have argued for this interpretation have made their case largely in terms of the subject-matter of the dialogue and have often employed rather loose, modern definitions of ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’. Expressed like this, the interpretation is attractive but never entirely convincing. I suggest that 223D is not just about subject-matter or character-drawing but also about style. Socrates was arguing that the man who really knows how to write in the style of the comic poet also knows how to write in the style of the tragic poet; a right rhetoric can use both styles for the dramatic presentation of the truth. The *Symposium* is neither a tragedy nor a comedy nor, indeed, a satyr-play. It is a prose dialogue in which Plato uses the techniques of rhetoric in a highly dramatic way. Plato is implicitly criticising comic drama, tragic drama and epideictic rhetoric and trying to show how the techniques of rhetoric can be used and combined with Socratic dialectic in both the grand style of tragedy and the simpler style of comedy to convey what he believes to be the truth.

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<sup>22</sup> See *Ion*, *Republic* 10.598Dff., *Phaedrus* 245A, *Laws* 3.682A.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., R. Patterson (1982) 76-93, H.H. Bacon (1959), D. Clay (1975), C.J. Rowe (1998) 214-215.

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