

CRITICAL

**MARCH—  
JUNE 2022**

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March  
23/24

## Erotic Androgyny and the Priority of the Feminine in Plato's *Symposium*

Anthony Hooper (University of Wollongong)  
Wed, March 23: 19–20:30 (New York)  
Thurs, March 24: 10–11:30 (Sydney)

Recent insights regarding the continuing (omni)presence of institutional sexism, and the forceful response of the MeToo movement demand that Classical scholars bring a fresh eye to the pressing issue of the representation and valuation of women in ancient sources. On first blush, Plato's *Symposium* appears unpromising grounds for exploring, let alone celebrating women and the feminine. Symposia are traditionally male-dominated spaces, and in Plato's drinking part women are dismissed from performing even the minor functions for which they were typically employed — as entertainers and courtesans. Furthermore, each of the early speakers of the dialogue offer phallogocentric accounts of *erôs*, banishing women from the world of respectable erotics. However, Socrates crashes this 'sausage party', granting the feminine a starring fore by offering his own *encomium* of love in the voice of a woman, Diotima. The conspicuous inclusion of the feminine comes to a head at 206b1-e5, in her (in)famous gambit regarding possession at 206b1-e5. This passage is striking for prominent inclusion of a panoply of distinctly *feminine* sexual imagery, including *tiktein* ('giving birth'), *kuein* ('pregnancy'), *gennan* ('bearing'), and *'ôdis* ('birth pangs').

In interpreting this passage, the standard scholarly move has been to read 'Plato' here to be appealing to a technical Asclepian doctrine regarding embryology that relegates women merely to receptacles of male seed, systematically minimising their contribution to reproductive processes to nearly nothing. On this reading, this passage represents the apogee of the dismissal of the feminine from erotic discourse in the *Symposium*. Against this reading, I seek to re-establish the value, prominence, and *presence* of the feminine in this passage. Furthermore, I argue that the treatment of possession here represents one of the few places in the dialogues in which the feminine is given priority over the masculine. Through appealing to female sexual imagery, I establish that Diotima seeks to re-orient her audience's conception of possession away from a male mode — concerned with domination, instrumentality, and interchangeability

— with a feminine mode of possession — concerned with nurturing, and allowing the objects of desire to change most basically who one is. The dramatic suggestion that i) all people are androgynous (in a way) and ii) that *ta erotika* demands the priority of our feminine part represent significant contributions to discourse regarding the valuation of women in Plato's dialogues, and the Greek world more generally.

April  
19/20

## Autobiography of a Daimon

Victoria Wohl (University of Toronto)  
Tues, April 19: 20–21:30 (New York)  
Wed, April 20: 10–11:30 (Sydney)

Empedocles' *Purifications* begins with an exceptional statement. Greeting his fellow citizens of Acragas he proclaims "I come to you, an immortal god, no longer mortal" (B112.4 KA). He goes on to tell of his thirty-thousand year exile as a "daimon," a narrative likewise recounted in the first person. This extraordinary first-person narrative invites us to read the poem as an autobiography in the root sense of the word, the written account (*graphê*) of the life (*bios*) of a self (*autos*). Empedocles' philosophy explodes each component of the word and scrambles the relation among them. Empedocles' cosmos is composed of four "roots" (earth, water, fire, and air) that combine and separate continually under the alternating force of Love and Strife. This system of elemental transformation destabilizes the *autos* and reconfigures the metaphysical syntax of autobiography: in place of a masterful self that rises above life to write it, in Empedocles self, life, and writing coexist in a dynamic assemblage in which each is equally material and equally alive. Taking his poem as an example of what Deleuze and Guattari call a "rhizomatic" text, my paper examines Empedocles' "radical" experiment in materialist poetics and the paradoxes it produces. His wildly innovative poetic style, I propose, enacts the vibrant ontology of the roots as they live out their "unstable life" (*ou ...empedos aiôn*, B17.11) but also indicates the limits of his materialist project, as Empedocles himself — the author as stabilizing point of origin — is figured as the one exception to Empedoclean ontology.

May  
3/4**Forget sexuality! Sensuality  
in ancient erotic cultures.**

Giulia Sissa (UCLA)

Tues, May 3: 20–21:30 (New York)

Wed, May 4: 10–11:30 (Sydney)

In all societies, a love life is complicated. It is shaped by ideas, norms, mores, emotions, sensations and manners of living the body. All this is a matter of concern, inquiry, regulations and representations across a variety of discourses (most of them normative, some of them performative), of domains of knowledge, of social practices and of inexhaustible aesthetic creativity.

Ancient societies are no less complex. The erotic is a matter of desire, pleasure, bodies, institutions. By focusing on these aspects of the erotic experience as, precisely, an experience, we resolutely go beyond a pragmatic of the sexual acts; beyond the controversial notion of “sexuality”; beyond sex as power and, above all, beyond the dogma of a premodern “before” — before an interpretive approach to what is felt, before the emergence of an erotic lifestyle, before the notion of erotic inclinations. This is not the quest for an “already”. Quite the opposite, we should bring to the fore what was truly relevant in the erotic cultures of the ancient world: sensuality.

In ancient societies, sensuality is far more important than sex. To be sensual, or sensuous, means to pursue the pleasure of the senses. Now, among the senses, there is touch, and touch is the essence of sex, as the congress of bodies. Think of Aristotle! Sensuality includes contact of the skin and the flesh, of course, but also the pleasures of all the other sense organs. A capacious attitude that encompasses all kinds of perceptions, sensuality is the overarching erotic experience. While it may well include coition, which is merely a kind of haptic interaction among others, it cannot be reduced to the execution of one particular sexual act. Sensuality involves caresses, embraces, kisses, gazes and any other wishful, mnemonic or imaginary, aesthetic approach to another person. It is about actual sensations, and about their possibilities. It vastly exceeds, therefore, the mechanics of penetration, an act that, although over-interpreted and overrated in contemporary scholarship, is seldom mentioned in ancient literary sources, and for a very good reason. Except in medical contexts, in comedy and in otherwise chastising genres of discourse, genital or anal penetration was irrelevant. Sensuality, on the contrary, captures the actual concerns of ancient thinkers and writers about *eros* and *amor*. Far from opposing love and sex, Homeric characters, Sappho and her Greek and Roman successors, Plato and Ovid understand the erotic/ amorous life inseparably from a quest for the pleasure of all the senses. They offer either a sorrowful, hyper-realistic phenomenology of its failure, or a confident art of taking pleasure, or multihued — comic, ironic, brutal, nuanced — manners of praise and blame.

June  
7/8**The Not-So-Hidden Problem  
of “Private Wives”:  
What Gender Has to Do  
with Stasis in Aristotle**

Demetra Kasimis (University of Chicago)

Tues, June 7: 20–21:30 (New York)

Wed, June 8: 10–11:30 (Sydney)

Aristotle is the foremost ancient theorist of stasis and conventionally read to argue that the cause of stasis are the tensions between mass and elite (men) or democrats and oligarchs. But in the *Politics*, Aristotle also treats the *oikos* (and, with it, practices of bridal exchange and dowries) as a dynamic political institution, rather than a pre-political or natural space, that can slow or quicken stasis. My talk will look at how, in his account, relations of the *oikos* and specifically the exchange of women in marriage induce regime erosion and stasis. The household re-emerges on this view as a site of class struggle and breakdown in and of itself. To appreciate that Aristotle affords the gender relations that sustain the *oikos* a central role in matters of political economy and, for this reason, regime erosion is not to recover a critique of patriarchy in the *Politics* itself but rather to shift our critical attention from questions of women’s membership exclusion — where studies of gender in classical Greek thought have often focused — to the strategic role that the conjugal family form plays in managing democratic equality and stability. This different perspective throws light on the full reach of women’s subordination in sustaining and imperilling democracy as a regime.