The quarrel between philosophy and poetry in symposium

Profession, Poet

In a close reading of Symposium, we as readers get to browse through an eclectic mix of brilliant and unique minds belonging to poets, philosophers, lovers, play writes, comedians and even war heroes. Each character takes their turn in describing their own ideal of love in this casual setting and the speeches with which we are presented are clearly melded by the life, profession and personality of these speakers. Plato's success in giving each speech its own character and personality is quite remarkable, and has a considerable effect on how we as readers paint our own mental pictures of each member of the party.

While it may seem as though these differing speeches have been placed next to one another in an arbitrary manner, one might find in a closer reading that Plato has a reason for doing this. Plato purposefully has Agathon's speech prelude Socrates' speech in order to juxtapose the sturdiness of logical argument with the unreliability and capriciousness of demagoguery. Symposium was used by Plato to give his students a sense of the different structures and techniques that speeches can exhibit.

WWWWWWWWdfdhile each character is trying to adhere to the constitution of a eulogy (except for Socrates, who abandons this method when it is his turn to give a speech) we find that with every narrative, we are presented with a new speech-giving technique; Phaedrus begins his speech with a discussion of Love's origins and ends it with a retelling of Love's presence in the lives of historical figures, while Pausanias puts use to categorization—he splits love into two groups: Common Love and Celestial Love—to give his listeners a sort of clear-cut definition of love's duality.

In Eryximachus' speech, we see for the first time a speaker who relates the nature of Love to some aspects of his own profession, which occurs again in Agathon's speech. However, when it is Agathon's turn to speak, he begins by stating that " all the previous speakers weren't really praising the god; they were congratulating the human race on how much they thrive on goods the god contrives..." (194e-195b) which acts as an indicator of the type of florid, overly praise-giving narration that he is about to give.

When reading Agathon's speech from a logical perspective—that is, keeping an eye out for the way that he supports his arguments and seeing whether there is substance to the strong statements he is making about Love—we find that much of his speech consists of beautifully polished phrases with little or no genuine reason or logic behind them. He makes little effort to build off of the image of Love that the previous speakers have created. In fact he turns Phaedrus' image of Love as an " ancient and venerated god..." (180b-180c) upon its head and creates a new icon of the God as young and attractive.

This disregard for the concluded statements of previous speakers show us that Agathon's concept of " proof" in an argument is one that doesn't need to be reached by working off of a foundation of axioms and the words of others. Furthermore, in explaining the characteristics of Love, Agathon seems to make arguments that do not hold up beyond the exterior aesthetic of his rhetoric. His " proof" of Love's ability to inspire creativity is based on a generalized statement rather than a solid, and universally accepted truth: "[Love] has only to touch a person and, ' however coarse he was before' he

becomes a poet. (195b-195c). By referring to his own art-form, somewhat like Eryximachus does in his speech, Agathon is attempting to add substance to his argument. Ironically, however, the fact that his “ proof” is based on so abstract a concept as poetry rebounds and emphasizes the demagoguery he is using to create his speech. In a sense, Agathon is building his ideas off of his first-hand experiences as a poet and as a creative human being. This is one of the many moments in which Agathon’s career as a dramatist obviously influences the way he creates his argument.

However, Agathon’s conclusion seems to be the most exemplary of his poetic and demagogic style. He begins his finale with the overdramatic line “ I am moved to express myself in verse” (197c-197d). The exaggerated emotional nuance to the sentence seems almost mocking—as though Plato is poking fun at the tendencies of poets—thus also serving to underline the ridiculousness of Agathon’s closing statement (and his previous arguments). Moreover, the reader is then forced to approach Agathon’s speech with added skepticism through a more Socratic perspective.

Agathon ends his speech with such fervor and praise-giving that it seems as if he is the host of a religious ceremony: “…[Love] is matchless and peerless as governor and guide. Everyone should follow in his train, glorifying him with sweet-sounding hymns, sharing the song he sings to charm the minds of gods and men” (197d-198a). While this beautiful, poetic and sensational conclusion Agathon uses is greeted with passionate “ cries of admiration” (198a-198b) from his fellow speakers, Socrates is not as easily convinced by its aesthetic face value.

Plato is thus demonstrating the power of rhetoric to disregard reason––he makes all the lesser characters be fooled by the splendor of the speech while making his most admired (and most intellectual) character question its validity. Agathon's use of colorful, sensory imagery in statements such as " Everyone should follow in his train, glorifying him with sweet-sounding hymns," (197e-198a) and " there is no better captain, shipmate or deity," (197d-197e) works to captivate his audience.

Yet to Socrates, a man Diotima claims to have long passed the first stage in his " ascent"—the first stage being the appreciation for physical and superficial beauty—seems to be unaffected by the surface beauty of Agathon's speech. He is, instead, after giving his due praise to the speaker, prepared to discredit Agathon's argument entirely through the use of logic. Plato then juxtaposes the vapid aesthetic of Agathon's poetic eulogy with the logical persuasion of Socrates' questioning and discussion. After Agathon has spoken, it is Socrates' turn to give his speech.

Before he begins, he makes sure to state that he will not be giving a eulogy: " But it now looks as though this isn't the way to deliver a proper eulogy after all. What you do is you do is describe your subject in the most generous and glowing terms, whether or not there is any truth to them. It needn't bother you if you're making it up. " (198d-198e). Socrates says this because he claims that this formality would involve the sacrifice of " truth" and would force him to veil certain aspects of Love and emphasize others. Instead he chooses to describe Love without the restraint of having to give constant praise to it.

Plato thereby uses Socrates' open sarcasm to further the implicit mockery of demagoguery within his speech. Plato additionally disparages rhetoric by contrasting Socrates' introduction with Agathon's method of approaching the topic. In beginning his speech, we already see Socrates taking an essential step in speech-giving that Agathon essentially failed to take in his own: he chooses to take what Agathon had said and utilize it to formulate his own argument. Socrates asks Agathon "' And haven't we already concluded that love is for things one needs and lacks? ' Yes,' he said" (201b-201c)[...]" If this is how things stand, then, do you still maintain that Love is attractive? ' ' It rather looks as though I didn't know what I was talking about before, Socrates' confessed Agathon. " Plato is perhaps referencing the real Socrates here, since he in fact used this method of questioning with his students. This technique would give his students an opportunity to see the fallibility of the logic in their arguments through the guidance of their own intuition. This test served as a way to prove whether an argument was truly constructed from reason.

The questions lead the questioned through a step-by-step yes or no answer process, which denies them the opportunity to use rhetoric to defend their points. In the same way, the fictional Socrates has brandished the fallacies within Agathon's argument, and Plato has thus unveiled the poet's speech. Plato then concludes his facetious criticism of demagoguery by highlighting Socrates' elegant and efficient formulation of his argument. He makes Socrates' conversation with Agathon and his ensuing speech reach their

conclusions through an inductive thinking process; each one of his claims is built off of a previous, smaller conclusion.

Socrates then continues to recount his speech from the perspective of Diotima, which enables him to separate his arguments from his own experiences and opinions, thus increasing its validity by removing subjectivity. In the resulting objectivity the reader is shown that Socrates is the first speaker to truly put use to Aristotle’s notion of logos, or the rational principle of logic. He then concludes his speech by reiterating all his previous points in a logical manner (rather than the praise-filled and muddled ending of Agathon’s eulogy) by truly flourishing his philosophical—rather than poetical—skills.

Plato distinguishes Socrates’ speech from Agathon’s therefore not only to mock the illogical basis of rhetoric, but also to reinforce the powerful effect of reasoning in arguments. Socrates uses Agathon’s extravagant eulogy as a tool to prove his own argument (antithetical to that of Agathon’s), and thus we as readers are also forced to see fallacy in the logic of Agathon’s speech that was forfeited for the poetic and demagogical techniques that he had used.

As it has been said about Plato; “ like all reflective people, philosophers dislike rhetoric as it is commonly practiced, bemoan the decline of public speech into mere persuasion and demagoguery, and generally think of themselves as avoiding rhetoric in favor of careful analysis and argument”

(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Clearly, Plato has used Symposium to prove and emphasize exactly this point.