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**PRELUDE TO AN ENIGMA: ARISTOPHANES' ACCOUNT OF EROS IN
PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM**

Abstract

This paper focuses on Aristophanes' myth from Plato's Symposium and starts from a critical evaluation of two different interpretations of this text. The first hermeneutic attempt I address belongs to Leo Strauss and emphasizes the political entailments of the Aristophanic account by linking, on the one hand, Eros with mutiny and identifying, on the other, the pederasts with the best fit individuals for the government of body politic. The second interpretation, proposed by Arlene Saxonhouse, is part and parcel of a feminist exegesis and starts from a literal reading of the Aristophanic speech in order to argue that the inevitable bodily separation of the post-split condition of humans can be overcome only through a trans-corporeal union of souls. Whereas Strauss draws the political implications of Eros, Saxonhouse views erotic love as both going beyond the boundaries of polis and simultaneously undermining politics understood as the realm of masculine power. My contention is twofold: firstly, that by explicitly linking eros with an essential fragmentariness and stating that love always implies an ineffable non-corporeal aspect, Aristophanes may be taken as a prelude to Socrates' speech from the same Platonic work; secondly, I hold that the Aristophanic quasi-hierarchical political tenets are limited to a certain paradigm of political theory without exhausting the entire meaning of politics. In my exegetic effort, I also suggest that Aristophanic love is a protean figure with multiple and sometimes obscure potentialities; at the same time, I hold that by starting from a mythological standpoint, through which the present human condition is tied with an unattainable origin that is perpetually sought, Aristophanes' speech is mainly concerned with the human relation to the divine.

Key words: Eros, Ancient Greece, Pederasty, Politics, Human-Divine Relationship, Aristophanes, Leo Strauss, Arlene Saxonhouse.

When it comes to the works of ancients, the variety of interpretations can be overwhelming and sometimes confusing. This paper will concentrate on a peculiar myth which had a long career in the Western history of love and deeply penetrated the common understanding of erotic behavior: Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*. A controversial figure, a cynical comedian whose indictment contributed to Socrates' death, if we are to believe his *Apology*, Aristophanes appears as a colorful, almost enigmatic, and

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certainly living character in Plato's portrayal. In this paper, I shall analyze two different interpretations of Aristophanes' speech: the Straussian approach which emphasizes the political dimensions of the myth, and Saxonhouse's feminist account which puts forth a view that supposedly transcends politics, but still remains fundamentally tied to it, due to the basic orientation of her gender analysis. After the indication of their inner contradictions and problematic aspects, I shall sketch a different perspective based on ignored, or too easily dismissed elements in the aforementioned analyses. My interpretation will concentrate more on the "dark" spots of the speech, suggesting that the Aristophanic mythical erotology can be understood in two ways which are complementary rather than mutually exclusive: both as an interesting propedeutic to Socrates' own speech and/or as an indication of a trace of the "sacred" in Aristophanes' ideas. Therefore, my hermeneutic attempt will gradually and asymptotically ascend toward the mythological and traditionally religious elements, which seem to play an equivocal role in the entire economy of the Aristophanic speech. The fact that Aristophanes was a comedian and quite a burlesque personality makes it difficult to detect in his encomium some decisive meanings of human love. Paradoxically enough, he draws, in my view, a painting in perspective, filled with symbols and innuendoes, depicting eros in its fundamental nature: a genuine mystery that saves and condemns, pointing to our inner side under which there might lurk an abyss...

I. Aristophanes & the Straussian Political Eros

Concerning Leo Strauss's portrait of the Aristophanic eros, one might say that it is fairly ambiguous. The fundamental assumption is that in Aristophanes' speech the erotic is essentially inscrutable and contradictory. "The nature of eros", Strauss writes, "will remain obscure in spite of everything Aristophanes

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says"¹, and even if erotic desire might point to a deeper unutterable truth, its constitutive self-contradiction will always persist.² However, in spite of this inherent unintelligibility, Strauss holds some bold, explicit tenets which are at least questionable. In the following I shall try to briefly address them and simultaneously point out their problematic aspects.

How did eros come into being according to the Straussian reading of Aristophanes? Being faithful to his religious revolutionary character,³ Aristophanes conceives of eros as simultaneously an outcome of a transgression and a divine gift. Due to their need of human worship and to the intention to prevent any mutinous behavior which would threaten their ontological position, the Olympic gods split the original men – who resembled the cosmic gods through their roundness – into two, yet giving them the momentary possibility to re-attain this primordial condition through the consummation of erotic desire in a more or less immediate union. As a matter of fact, from the speech itself it is not at all clear how the first humans themselves came into being and why were they similar to both cosmic and Olympian gods (with these latter sharing the attribute of sexuality).

However odd it may seem, the actual condition of mankind is due to a punishment for the lofty thought of assaulting the heavens

¹ Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium*, Seth Benardete (ed.), The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001, p.123. Henceforth mentioned as LS followed by page numbers.

² The self-contradictory character of desire consists in a longing for something that cannot ever be explained or thematized, even though this yearning is the most essential to human nature; LS,138.

³ LS, pp.122, 128-129. Stanley Rosen also thinks that Aristophanes employs "mythos to effect a religious revolution"; cf. Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, Yale Univ. Press, 1968, p.135.

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by virtue of the incredible power possessed by the originary human beings.⁴ “Civilization”, Strauss comments, “is the acquisition of justice and orderliness, accompanied by the loss of lofty thoughts.” (LS, p.126) In other words, the complete human nature was radically changed by *nomos*,⁵ and therefore “as desire for the restitution of the cosmic, globular shape, eros...is a movement of nature, of impaired nature, against law.” (LS, p.131) One can say together with Strauss that humanity became similar to *kosmos* itself through the civilizing effect of the Olympian gods. (LS, p.144)⁶

Even if they resembled the Olympians as sexed, the original humans had seditious inclinations. This can be considered the first cause of a destructive attempt, which necessitated the punitive intervention of higher beings.⁷ The ineluctable effect was that, through *nomos*, men acquired the shape of Olympian gods. At the same time, the possibility of union – entailed by eros and

⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 190c-d: “I [Zeus] have a device whereby human beings would continue to exist and at the same time, having become weaker, would stop their licentiousness. I shall now cut each of them in two...and they will be both weaker and more useful to us through the increase in their numbers.” Throughout this paper I used Bernadete’s translation: *Plato’s Symposium*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1993. Henceforth mentioned as “Symp.”

⁵ Strauss even uses “castration” as an appropriate term for the destructive nature of the law; LS, pp.129, 131. Alan Bloom acknowledges too that Olympians are the givers of unnatural *nomoi*; see Bloom’s introduction to *Plato’s Symposium*, tr. Seth Bernadete, ed.cit., pp.106-107.

⁶ So, logically speaking, Strauss assumes that the cosmic gods – planetary beings – are chaotic.

⁷ “Men became human through the action of Zeus, for man becomes human through law, *nomos*”; LS, p.144.

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ultimately delusive – continually gives humans the opportunity to oppose their civilized side. After the split or after humanization, Strauss holds, human nature became dual, fundamentally caught and torn apart between law and sexual desire, between apparent rebellion and the task of piety.⁸ Precisely this constitutes the latent tragedy of eros.⁹

The interesting connection that Strauss wants to make explicit has undeniable political and ethical connotations.¹⁰ “Since it is of man’s essence”, he writes, “to be limited by divine law, eros cannot be understood except in relation to the gods, or law.” (LS, pp.133-134) Differently put, because the single possibility to counteract insurgence is the introduction of *nomos* by means of erotic life – which is a compromise between the loss of originary self-sufficiency and the sheer eradication of human race - love will indirectly refer to the legitimate punishing attitude of Zeus. Hence the duty of piety.¹¹

However, for Strauss, eros points to the introduction of law in a negative fashion. He argues that “the direction of eros is inverse to the direction of the action of the Olympian gods....eros [being] radically impious.” (LS, p.131)¹² Moreover, the erotic love has a great power not properly acknowledged by humans¹³ and therefore, it cannot be reduced to mere lust because of its incentive towards perennial

⁸ “...it is man’s essence to be constituted by both – limitless sexual desire and law”; LS, p.145.

⁹ LS, pp. 140, 141.

¹⁰ Throughout his analysis Rosen agrees with Strauss on this peculiar point; see Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium*, op.cit., pp.121, 137, 141, 143, 156.

¹¹ See LS, pp.127,140,141,147.

¹² Strauss speaks even of the “incestuous” character of eros, despite the specifically human interdiction of incest; LS, pp. 145, 133.

¹³ Symp., 189c-d.

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unity.¹⁴ Free from any external influences,¹⁵ eros represents an unintelligible yearning for what's been lost forever and can be obtained only fleetingly and deceitfully.

Strauss mentions other features of eros, namely its non-contingency, its tautological character, and its affinity with the ineffable. Commenting on *Symposium* 193c8-d5, he holds that Aristophanic love is *always of one's own* because the split humans will always look for their alter-ego, so to speak. At this peculiar point, Strauss is very keen on revealing the political implications of such a viewpoint,¹⁶ even if he explicitly stated that Aristophanes' interest in political issues is nonexistent.¹⁷ A strange corollary of this mythical depiction of eros would be its apparent necessity, the lover being impelled to search *only* for his or her unique half and refuse any other adventitious partner – which is, Strauss says, sheer illusion.¹⁸ Eros is thus the great originator of contradictory desires that stay for an ineffable, more profound reality. Strauss writes that “the self-contradiction [of erotic drives] points to a deeper truth which the soul divines without

¹⁴ “Eros is infinitely more than the desire of lust, it is the desire for oneness, wholeness, and integrity in the literal sense, everlasting integrity, a desire which cannot be fulfilled”; LS, p.140.

¹⁵ cf. LS, p.137.

¹⁶ “The practically important form of the love of one's own is patriotism, the love of your fellow citizens and, therefore, of your polis”; LS, p.147.

¹⁷ Although there is no explicit legitimating reference to politics in the speech itself (LS, p.137), Strauss holds that Aristophanes' implicit concern with the political cannot be totally denied (LS, p.148).

¹⁸ cf. LS, p.149. Strauss ascribes this delusive aspect to Apollo the blunderer. See also Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986, pp.174, 176.

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being able to state it clearly.” (LS, p.138) Eros cannot be reduced to mere lust and represents something that transcends the actual “impaired” (even if civilized) nature of man.¹⁹

Besides the delusions it gives rise to, this type of eros ultimately fails by proposing unattainable goals. The primordial unity cannot *ever* be re-achieved, and procreation, despite its alleviating function, remains fundamentally unsatisfactory.²⁰ Piety, for Strauss, does not solve the essential problem – the inaccessibility of origins – and that is why eros appears more or less as striving for the impossible.²¹ As a matter of fact, Strauss writes that “Eros, as Aristophanes understands it, is longing for a fantastic oneness, for an unnatural oneness” (LS, p.148), which is the main source of unhappiness.²²

In contradistinction to Eryximachus' speech from Plato's *Symposium*, which did not put forward a hierarchical structure of eros, Aristophanes, according to Strauss, reinstates a kind of natural human hierarchy that plays a decisive role in his version of the erotic. This is the ground of conceiving the different lovers in harmony with the given natural order of human

¹⁹ In the same vein, Bloom writes: “Itching, scratching, rubbing, and so forth can describe sex, but the feeling that the other is part of oneself and that one wants to be together always is not contained in these merely bodily affects.” (Bloom, id., p.107) It is interesting to emphasize at this point, that in most ancient cultures, cosmogonies were conceived as results of copulation between gods. Therefore, sexuality cannot be reduced to mere “itching, scratching, rubbing” as long as it has, at least from a mythological standpoint, such immense powers.

²⁰ Cf. LS, p.134. See also note 14 of present paper.

²¹ LS, pp.141, 145.

²² “Men will, therefore, never find the other half. All love is unhappy, visibly or invisibly – comically unhappy or tragically unhappy”; LS, p.135.

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beings.²³ Consequently, given his explicit defense of pederasty,²⁴ Aristophanes posits, in Strauss's hermeneutic attempt, a sexually oriented order with heterosexual love at the bottom, the lesbian one in between, followed by the pederasts who enjoy the highest position.²⁵

It seems that for Strauss, the Platonic Aristophanes succeeds in proving the supremacy of pederasty due to its link with shamelessness. In the myth, impudicity is symbolized by the sun itself, to which the primordial males were "ontologically" related as direct descendants. On the other hand, Strauss detects a certain inconsistency in Aristophanes' tenet that "on becoming complete [perfect] only men of this sort [pederasts] go into politics."²⁶ This happens because the erotic hierarchy must be naturally conceived, and not formulated in political terms, which are somewhat extraneous to eros.

²³ cf. LS, pp.119-120.

²⁴ LS, pp. 120, 136,146.

²⁵ LS, p.132. It is at least bizarre that Plato puts into Aristophanes' mouth such an appraisal, when it is well known that in his plays the latter rather ridiculed homosexuality. (See in this sense Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, op.cit., pp. 125ff.) There are, I think, two possibilities: a) Plato is ironic with Aristophanes, given the latter's relation to Socrates; b) Aristophanes offers a comical account of pederasty. I deliberately leave aside this second possibility, even though I am fully aware that it casts a different light on the entire discourse. Almost all scholars quoted or mentioned in this paper seem to oscillate between the comic and the tragic elements of eros in Aristophanes, even though there is a strong tendency to emphasize more the tragedy of erotic aporias. Strauss and Bloom are quite ambiguous, Saxonhouse and Rosen are more inclined toward the tragic side, and Martha Nussbaum goes for the comic (see note 92 of this essay).

²⁶ Symp., 192a2-7; quoted by LS, p.136.

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As a principle, Strauss finds that "only those who are by nature males can be full devotees of eros, the fulfillment of eros, the regained unity." (LS, p.136) And given that Aristophanes interprets the polis in terms of belligerent courage – the manly virtue *par excellence* – politics becomes the privileged realm of those who are, according to the reinstated natural hierarchy, the most apt and superior individuals of human race.²⁷ Pederastic relations seem so highly ranked that even when speaking about heterosexuality Aristophanes still uses terms appropriate for a male/male relationship.²⁸

In a rather cursory fashion, Strauss makes the following odd comment concerning Aristophanes' admonition of pious behavior in erotic relations. On the one hand, polis is conceived only in purely patriarchal fashion. On the other hand, Aristophanes seems to allude to the impious character of Pausanias' relation with Agathon, about whom Strauss writes that "perhaps, they are by nature males... [but] by *convention* they appear to be *females*" (LS, p.146; emphasis added). Being already famous for their soft and "womanish" behavior (id.), the two consequently introduce us to an unsurpassable problem: if the actual Pausanias and Agathon have a "quasi-lesbian" relation, then the abstract sharp distinction male/female becomes radically blurred. The

²⁷ LS, p.136. Also Bloom, id., p.108.

²⁸ Strauss mentions in this sense the word *paidika* (male favorites) and deducts from this a remnant of pederastic thought. His interesting explanation is that, due to the natural link between eros and procreation, and to the dominating inclination of sun-descendants toward politics (the realm of *nomos*, and implicitly of polis), pederasty is just an unnatural satisfaction, because it uses the artificiality of the civilized city for its hedonistic purposes. Consequently, Strauss writes, "pederastic, unnatural love reflects satisfaction with the unnatural unity of the *nomos*"; LS, p.148.

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contradictory consequence of Strauss's reading is that pederasts cannot claim exclusivity in political matters as long as it is possible (for a few of them at least) to behave in a non-agonistic manner. Furthermore, if sexual orientations belong to the realm of nature,²⁹ *nomos* – which is, we remember, the way Olympian gods civilized and punished at the same time a rebellious race – becomes unnatural, almost like convention, about which Strauss speaks in feminine terms. Of course, one might argue that politics is different from convention, but we have just been told that after the split, the individual human being is the locus of a recalcitrant duality,³⁰ and this is the very aspect which accounts for the tragedy of eros.

Shortly put, my critique runs as follows: if sexual differences are naturally given, if politics came into being as unnatural, and if pederasts are the most fitful for the government of the polis (and some of them are not even entirely male in erotic relations), then homosexuality stands for a weirdly unnatural and ambiguous reality. Moreover, the natural hierarchy itself gets distorted, because one cannot see any reason why Aristophanes places lesbians as superior to those embracing

²⁹ “In opposition to Pausanias, however, Aristophanes abolishes the distinction between noble and base pederasty. There is only a hierarchy of eros, none of which is base, for each is according to nature”; LS, p.136.

³⁰ Moreover, “as desire for the restitution of the cosmic, globular shape, eros belongs to the cosmic gods. Eros, we can say already now, is a movement of nature, of impaired nature, against law”; LS, p.131. Bloom, id., p.108: “what Aristophanes means by the cut is man's necessary subjection to the *nomoi* of the family and the city, which wounds his bodily and intellectual freedom.” Martha Nussbaum thinks that essentially this duality is not there; cf. *The Fragility of Goodness*, op.cit, p. 175.

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heterosexuality.³¹ What is it in a female being that makes it higher than the heterosexual inclinations? On this matter, Strauss is totally silent.³² As we shall see, this aspect will be frontally approached by Saxonhouse's feminist interpretation.

It is obvious now that Strauss has a close interest in the political entailments of Aristophanes speech. Firstly, by the internal link between eros and any disobedient or rioting attitude, and secondly, through the explicit defense of pederasty with its (unnatural) corollary that only pure males can fulfill political functions. On the fundamentally antinomian character of the erotic Strauss states:

“Eros is a desire for the ancient nature, for the state in which man had the loftiest thoughts, in which he thought of conquering heaven, or rather Olympus. Eros is rebellion against *nomos*. Through eros men cease to be cowed and acquire again the loftiest thoughts. If this is the essence of eros, the community of those which are most manly by nature is most highly erotic to the deepest degree in regard to what eros is ultimately after – the state of completeness in which men could challenge the gods.” (LS, p.137)³³

³¹ Bloom notes that “it is among homosexual women that Aristophanes finds prostitutes, for they do not love men and are able to take money for what they are not serious about.” Here Bloom refers to the Greek word *hetairistriaí*, which Bernadete translates as “lesbians”, not “prostitutes;” cf. Bloom, id., p.109.

³² He mentions only that “the name Pausanias ends in *as*, and according to Aristophanes' *Clouds* names ending in *as* bespeak of a female nature”; LS, p.146. Consequently, the question of female comes up only in connection with the literary convention that saw in Pausanias and Agathon barely hidden womanish drives.

³³ Also: “The question for Aristophanes is what is the power of eros. And the crucial point he

Pederasty is explicitly linked with mutiny. Moreover, eros represents “the leader of an army of males which strives for original unity, for the recovery of lofty thoughts, which implies the thought of rebellion against the gods.” (LS, p.142) We can conclude then that Aristophanes seems, in the Straussian portrayal, impervious to any feminist arguments: “only those who are by nature males can be full devotees of eros, the fulfillment of eros, the regained unity; this goes together with lofty thoughts, which as such are directed toward dethroning the gods, and this is particularly a male affair.” (LS, p.146)

Even though it is explicitly eulogized³⁴ and consists in a means of contemplating the original unity,³⁵ piety is for Strauss rather an illusory device motivated by fear of gods but fundamentally unsatisfactory.³⁶ Skipping few other unclear aspects of the Straussian take,³⁷ I intend to turn

makes is this: You cannot understand eros if you do not see in it the element of rebellion”; LS, p.127.

³⁴ LS, p.127.

³⁵ Piety consists “not in restoring the original unity but in looking at the cosmic gods, sun, moon, and earth”; LS, p.140.

³⁶ LS, p.147: “Piety is needed because of the unsatisfactory character of eros and because of the tacit exclusion of contemplation.”; also p.141.

³⁷ Firstly, eros is pictured on the one hand as denying the *nous*: “Aristophanes therefore presents eros as incompatible with the mind. Eros is the desire for becoming merely cosmic again” (LS, p.150); “Aristophanes is silent about nous altogether. In abandoning the orientation by the mind, Eryximachus and Aristophanes are compelled to conceive of eros as mutual” (LS, p.143). But on the other hand, it still conditions all lofty thoughts. Secondly, despite its self-contradictory nature, eros is able to ground a hierarchy – wherein males only are the most significant. At the same

now to a quite different hermeneutic attempt, that of a moderate feminist.

II. *A Trans-political (Feminine) Eros?*

Despite the irreconcilable differences between a gender approach and the Straussian analysis, they both share an explicit or implicit concern with the political nuances or outcomes of Aristophanes’ speech. However, with their (sometimes charming) hermeneutics of suspicion, feminists will try in different manners and with various results to bring forth the negative male attitude of repression and silencing of women within the specific life of the polis. And that is due, of course, to the simple and banal fact that females are usually assigned only domestic roles within the life of the community.

In the gender scholarship, Plato is sometimes considered a true liberating pioneer who tried (and failed, according to some scholars³⁸) to undermine the traditional patriarchal view by making an explicit appeal to female values equated with wisdom or genuine philosophy and deemed as essentially heterogeneous in relation to (the intrinsically male) politics. However, we cannot ignore that feminists start *on principle* from a bellicose picture of male/female interactions, detecting almost everywhere – beginning with daily existence and ending with philosophical

time, eros is the seed of anomy, whereas any hierarchy presupposes an internal *nomos/logos*. Thirdly, if Aristophanic eros is essentially linked to baseness (cf. LS, pp.119, 123), then how can it make possible spiritually contemptuous attitudes which underlie its rebellious nature? After all, loftiness is a sign of power and superiority and one does not assault the skies with an army of debauchees...

³⁸ cf. Wendy Brown, “<<Supposing Truth Were a Woman...>>: Plato’s Subversion of Masculine Discourse”, in *Political Theory*, vol.16, issue 4 (Nov., 1988), pp.594-616.

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arguments – more or less hidden ways of suppressing the female voice or importance from a *social* perspective. Only rarely will they admit of harmonious reconciliation of the two sexes, and even in these cases it is carefully added that the conciliatory attitude explicitly or implicitly distorts the genuine and full meaning of the feminine in general.³⁹

As a leading feminist scholar in Platonic exegesis – within the framework of political philosophy – Arlene Saxonhouse starts her interpretation of the *Symposium* from the fact that women in Greek political thought cannot be conceived without understanding the essential role of eros taken as a drive for the creative unity of opposites.⁴⁰ Through a blunt and deliberate dismissal of the hermaphroditic side of all humans, most of the speakers in the aforementioned dialogue fail to realize that “the female fills out the human form...introduces music and, through eros, the desire for what we lack...[and] offers to the sterile male pregnancy and creativity.” (AS, p.23) The female principle that Saxonhouse refers to is tightly related to a symbolism of abundance and procreation.⁴¹ Plato himself

³⁹ In this sense, see Arlene W. Saxonhouse, “The Philosopher and the Female in the Political Thought of Plato”, in *Political Theory*, vol.4, issue 2 (May, 1976), pp.195-212.

⁴⁰ Arlene W. Saxonhouse, “Eros and the Female in Greek Political Thought: An Interpretation of Plato’s Symposium”, in *Political Theory*, vol.12, issue 1 (Feb., 1984), pp.5-27. Henceforth mentioned as AS followed by page numbers.

⁴¹ In undermining the self-destructive character of male-male relationships, the feminine is pictured as fundamentally “erotic, desirous of giving birth, pregnant with life, and [loving] what she has created.” (AS, p.24) We sense the possible oversimplification of human females to their biological functions – as bearers of offspring. However, as we shall see, Saxonhouse will come to affirm trans-

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uses the feminine to allow for that creativity which pure males lack, and that is why Socrates can be considered a hermaphroditic figure.⁴²

Notwithstanding the obvious misogynous aspects of Greek culture,⁴³ women were sometimes related to vitality.⁴⁴ In describing Socrates as an androgynous figure, Saxonhouse writes that “it is precisely the mother Poverty who makes Socrates the man we admire.” (AS, p.21)⁴⁵ In the same vein, Diotima’s bodily particularity is considered paradigmatic: “it is her body with its capacity for reproduction that we must simulate in our progress up the ladder of love.” (AS, p.21) Even if one gets the feeling that this is a very literal (not necessarily misconstrued) reading of the text, the puzzlement grows when from another point of view the natural is radically inverted: the female Diotima is the one that impregnates the sterile males with a perpetual search of the beautiful: “she presents the male as transformed into the female – as capable of becoming pregnant.” (id.)

After these principal assertions let us turn to Saxonhouse’s interpretation of Aristophanes’ speech and see what peculiar role the feminine plays in the pursuit of creative reconciliation between opposite sexes. Aristophanes is seen as continuing the teleology of universal harmony initiated by

corporeal detachment as eros’ main meaning. Somewhere else, Saxonhouse equates the female with the privacy of human existence and opposes it to the male, public and political dimension. See her “The Philosopher and the Female”, art.cit., pp.206ff.

⁴² AS, p.25.

⁴³ For example, the exclusion of women from the Greek “intelligentsia”; cf. AS, p.11.

⁴⁴ AS, p.9.

⁴⁵ It is obvious that here the reference is to Socrates’ material poverty, and not at all to his continuously (ironic or not) claim that he knows nothing, and therefore is in a perpetual search for wisdom.

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Eryximachus' speech, yet in a totally different manner: not from an ethical or *noetic* standpoint, but in terms of corporeal immediacy. "Aristophanes", Saxonhouse writes, "talks of male bodies, of female bodies, of navels and privy parts, of holes and the filling of holes." (AS, p.16) If with a few lines before she admitted that the new aspect of this speech consisted in the "fantastical imagery" of the primordial humans, her genuine intention was actually to address the most organic aspects of erotic relations. In other words, the mythology behind the story is just a veil concealing the more concrete dimensions, which Aristophanes – who was very famous for belittling important matters and political or intellectual figures – wants to introduce as necessary for any faithful account of the erotic. Saxonhouse also notices that, although initially Aristophanes does not make any explicit distinction between sexes, later he equates homosexuality with the warlike courage implying thus a politics that excludes alterity.⁴⁶

It is also remarked that the primordial split introduced the principle of death into the new form of interpersonal relations, and this is why Zeus offered the possibility of reproduction through eros. Fundamentally the latter is a momentary satisfaction of one's "libidinal" desires and drives. The truest characteristic of erotic life remains the fulfillment of bodily impulses, procreation being just a "by-product" that grounds the survival of the city.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ AS, p.17: "Aristophanes' view of political life cannot encompass what is other. The males entering the world of political life seek out those who are most similar and who seek unity in their similarity rather than in complementarity of differences." Strauss called this tendency of eros the "loving of one's own".

⁴⁷ AS, p.17: "...heterosexuality allows for momentary satiety, that is, it allows those who have found a beloved to be satisfied and to turn to other endeavors – such as the city. And with

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In Saxonhouse's view, Socrates and Aristophanes are similar through their notion that eros or erotic satisfaction leads to self-sufficiency, but differ concerning the outcome. For the former, love implies an immortal dimension, whereas the latter, by bringing in the infernal figure of Hephaestus, links eros with death.⁴⁸ Paradoxically enough, it is also held that both of them share the view according to which "love is not a god who leads us to happy complacency; he is a god who drives us on in an endless pursuit of what we lack." (AS, p.18)⁴⁹

As we have seen, Saxonhouse's Aristophanes is granted mundane, concrete and corporeal intentions.⁵⁰ Now, because of the essential link between eros and death, Saxonhouse considers that we deal with a genuine detachment from the body:

"Since the gods have destroyed the true unity of our bodies, we must escape our bodies; we must escape that which affirms our separation from others and become bodiless souls capable of enjoying a final and complete unity." (AS, p.18)

We can clearly see how, by reading the mythological part of Aristophanes' speech

the rise of the city, the heterosexual relationships that had saved the species are now engaged in only under the compulsion of the laws." Shortly put, procreation is not the natural goal of sexuality.

⁴⁸ Symp., 192e; AS, p.18. Bloom holds the contrary thesis, according to which "one of the defects of Aristophanes' presentation is a certain downplaying or even forgetting of death and its meaning for erotic attachments"; Bloom, id., p.110.

⁴⁹ I used the word paradox, because it is not at all clear to me how can one make any connection between exclusive mortality and an endless pursuit.

⁵⁰ Rosen advocates the same idea; cf. *Plato's Symposium*, op.cit., pp.140, 143, 145.

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in an exclusively *literal* fashion,⁵¹ Saxonhouse arrives at a point where a duality must be introduced, a duality by means of which one eventually achieves what's been lost through the primordial division. The bodily separation will be cured⁵² through a union of souls which, of course, presupposes the necessary eradication of the corporeal.

Restating the essential relation between male values and ethical virtues (like bravery), Saxonhouse concludes that in Aristophanes "the political realm...subdues what is different" (AS, p.17) and this resistant alterity is embodied precisely and exclusively by the female. However, at this point it becomes unclear how Aristophanes can both continue the reconciliation project initiated by Eryximachus and posit politics as intrinsically discriminating and repressive.⁵³

Surprisingly enough, despite all these contradictory assertions, eros is depicted as essentially apolitical:

"The completion that both Aristophanes and Socrates envision takes their lovers away from the city, as ones who cannot be brought back down or up to it. Both Aristophanes and Socrates teach that completion makes the city irrelevant. The city arises to satisfy our incompleteness, our failure to

⁵¹ According to the literal interpretation, the gods have separated the bodies only. The question is in this case, how can we account for the ineffable character of the lovers' desires? Saxonhouse would reply that it is the communion of souls which represents the main agenda. But then the starting point cannot be exclusively corporeal. Something trans- or non-corporeal must have been lost so that love supposedly and ultimately envision a trans-bodily, unutterable aim.

⁵² Saxonhouse began her commentary by equating Aristophanes' eros with a cure; cf. AS, p.16.

⁵³ For Saxonhouse, male politics deliberately excludes the heterogeneous female element from the highest ranks of the *polis*.

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reach our *eidōs*, our form, on our own. Eros helps us to transcend our inadequacies. For Aristophanes this inadequacy can only be overcome by the unity of those who are similar, while Socrates the androgyne elaborates the importance of difference and the creative unity that does not lead to Aristophanic death." (AS, p.19)⁵⁴

The single clear aspect that I am able to thematize in Saxonhouse's puzzling analysis is her notion of an eros detached from politics. However, this detachment cannot be totally neutral as long as it is meant to undermine the male sterile and repressive attitude. If Strauss showed that the (still erotic) political life was essentially masculine, the role of female being almost completely ignored or dismissed, our feminist interpreter finds eros as radically feminine⁵⁵ and reveals through it a way to

⁵⁴ What would Strauss ask at this point: what is the function of *nomos* after the split? In this sense, he offered a much more astute interpretation, seeing in original punishment the genuine humanization of the first humans. No civilizing set up is possible without the introduction of law. The Olympian gods didn't split only bodies, but also transformed the ontological condition of the mutinous race. That is the reason why, I would dare to argue, Saxonhouse fails completely to offer a genuine account of eros' decisive connection with revolt – a point made explicit by Aristophanes himself. But of course, in order to respect her own demythologizing methodology she has to be very selective.

⁵⁵ Actually, in discussing Socrates' speech eros is equated with androgyny; cf. AS, p.21. Nevertheless, considering what's been already said about the female as fundamentally undermining male politics, how can we explain the fact that eros is apolitical? At least, in its male aspects, it must have political traits, given that Aristophanes explicitly links pederasty (specifically male sexuality) with the ruling of *polis*. However, in another article, Saxonhouse

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threaten a frozen and sterile patriarchal politics. Saxonhouse's love thus becomes an anti-political weapon that takes refuge in an ambiguous spiritual unity, leaving aside important aspects of Aristophanic encomium such as: the problem of a natural hierarchy, the insurgent potentialities of eros, the consequences of the absence of *nous* from the erotic life, and the political implications of the originary punishment. In the hands of Saxonhouse, Aristophanes' eros equivocally and aimlessly oscillates between a feminine revolutionary and a final trans-corporeal reconciler, which finally cures the "fall" of humans.

III. Eros as Perpetual Heterogeneity

I shall start my own analysis from the simple comment that Plato's portrayal of Aristophanes is in itself intricate, paradoxical to the brink of obscurity, and contains subtle allusions to Socrates' own speech. Let us remember that Aristophanes figured among the accusers of Socrates in the famous trial,⁵⁶ being also a comedian that did not draw a flattering portrait of the latter. Regardless of these historical or literary truths, Plato does not treat Aristophanes in a wholly negative manner; on the contrary, he offers him the fluid central place of the entire dialogue.⁵⁷ However, the Aristophanic speech lacks not an acrid irony,⁵⁸

mentions that in two plays by Aristophanes – *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae* – the female plays a positive and undeniable role in politics. This is why I think that, even though she might give the impression that she's not interested in the political outcomes, politics is a major issue in Saxonhouse's exegesis. See her "The Philosopher and the Female", art. cit., p.202.

⁵⁶ Cf. Bloom, id., p.104.

⁵⁷ Bloom's view is that "Plato makes Aristophanes the expositor of the truest and most satisfying account of Eros that we find in the *Symposium*"; Bloom, id., p.104.

⁵⁸ A possibly ironic remark is made at Symp., 189d.

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a few immoral remarks, and some barely hidden contradictions that do not make him the most appealing figure of the *Symposium*.

It is my contention that in explicitly linking eros with an actual absence and in stating that love always points to an unutterable non-corporeal aspect, Aristophanes' mythical rendering is a prelude to Socrates' speech, wherein eros is pictured as being born from Poverty (Penia) and has the potential to lead one toward the contemplation of universal beauty.⁵⁹ For both of them eros reveals (or has the capacity to imply) something other than the mere physical aspects of interpersonal relationships, even if in Aristophanes the nonphysical dimensions are difficult to detect, but not completely missing.

At the beginning of his quasi-eulogy Aristophanes states that the first humans resembled what Strauss called the cosmic gods⁶⁰ in their round shape and manner of walking.⁶¹ About the androgynous beings, he

⁵⁹ Contemplation will occur only after transcending the physical sight of beautiful bodies. Bloom, however, contrasts Socrates with Aristophanes saying that the latter puts forth a version of eros essentially unnatural and self-centered, whereas the former naturalizes eros and conceives it as love of good itself at its highest; cf. Bloom, id., pp.110-111.

⁶⁰ This is an aspect that Bloom completely ignores when holding that "Aristophanes abandons all attempts to give a cosmic account of Eros." Rosen is of the same opinion; cf. *Plato's Symposium*, op.cit., p.137. It is true that the myth in this speech might be a degraded version of an ancient genuine sacred story, but the importance of origins plays a significant role within Aristophanes' encomium. We have seen that, in opposition to Bloom – and despite their kinship in spirit – Strauss brought forth the consequences of the cosmic origins of originary beings.

⁶¹ Here we detect a slight contradiction, because first it is said that the original beings were still walking in an upright manner, but

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takes care to add that despite the actual nonexistence of such entities in the present, the name still bears a pejorative connotation.⁶² As we might infer, the other two types did not exist either any longer, but their denominations had no depreciative connotations. This peculiar line gives scholars the incentive to assume that Aristophanes proposes a kind of natural

only when running they looked like the three planets; Symp., 190a-b. It is also possible that Aristophanes intended a comic effect through this image of tumbling runners. Alan Bloom, for example, thinks that the circular humans “were ugly and ridiculous”; Bloom, id., p.106 - see also pp.102-104 where he makes explicit Aristophanes’ comic intentions, even though later Bloom speaks also about the genuine seriousness of eros; id., p.109. The ugliness of first humans is also admitted by Strauss; LS, p.124.

⁶² Actually, this might be an appropriate confirmation of Mircea Eliade’s reminder that “the ancients considered an actual, anatomical hermaphrodite an aberration of nature or a sign of the gods’ anger, and they consequently destroyed it out of hand.” (*Encyclopedia of Religions*, M. Eliade (ed.), McMillan, New York, 1987, vol.1, p.280) This means that androgynous beings stood for another kind of completion and perfection, which cannot be reduced to merely physical terms. Perhaps this is why Alan Watts stated that androgyny symbolizes a state “in which the erotic no longer has to be sought or pursued, because it is always present in its totality.” (A. Watts, *The Two Hands of God*, New York, 1963, pp.204-205; quoted by Eliade in art.cit., p.278) Androgyny as aberration, when physical, and commendable, when pursuing erotic ineffable desires, is exactly what Aristophanes tries to bring forth in his speech. For a radically corporeal reading of the myth, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, op.cit., esp. pp.172-173.

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hierarchy,⁶³ which plays an essential part in the human condition after the split. What is literally said at this point is just that androgynous primordial humans were related to the moon, because the latter shared characteristics of both earth and sun (Symp., 190b). And except the comment about the negative sense of the actual word, one cannot immediately find the (in)direct affirmation of any hierarchical picture.⁶⁴

⁶³ In contradistinction with Strauss, Bloom holds that there is no fundamental difference between various sexual tastes; cf. Bloom, id., p.108.

⁶⁴ Starting from this aspect, one can develop another interesting hermeneutic path, which I cannot pursue within the boundaries of this paper. And this is the explicitly religious or sacral perspective. Aristophanes is the first speaker who used a myth in explaining eros’ occurrence. He also proposes the interesting (phenomenological *avant la lettre*) tenet that humans reenact in the present what has been lost in a primordial past. As we know, this represents an excellent supporting example for Mircea Eliade’s phenomenological theory of religious manifestations and behaviors, according to which any rite is the reenactment of a sacred event that took place in *illo tempore* (originary time). In other words, the profane life is disrupted and regulated by sacred experiences, which give it meaning and ground its perpetuation. (See Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. Rosemary Sheed, New American Library, 1974, esp. ch. IX, “Agriculture and Fertility Cults”, pp. 331-367.) Now, concerning Aristophanes’ speech, Eliade holds that “the androgyne is explicitly denigrated...[because] creatures derived from it are excessively lustful.” (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol.1, p.277) He also holds that in modernity the myth of androgyne irremediably lost its *symbolic* signification, and was degraded to its literal connotation (to a merely “superabundance of erotic possibilities”). Until this historical point, the androgynous beings

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On the other side, it is true that adulterers of both sexes originate in the androgynous primordial humans, but to read into this an underlying inferiority would mean a total disregard of the obscenity and unethical behavior, with which Aristophanes' name was unreflectively associated. A mentioning of superiority is indeed made in connection with pederasty, but this has its own well-grounded reasons.

Immediately after the rearrangement of genitals, it is said about those who practice homosexuality that "there might at least be satiety in their being together and they might pause and turn to work and attend to the rest of their livelihood" (Symp., 191c). If after the split a few halves died of starvation and other unobserved vital needs, now once eros entered the scene together with a completely new form of sexuality, all humans have a means to re-achieve a sense of momentary unity after which they can dedicate their time to different indispensable activities. It is a fact that, besides satisfaction, the heterosexual relations contribute to the perpetuation of race, and Aristophanes never affirms that this would be something despicable.

In the special case of the descendants of the purely male humans, boldness and shamelessness are, nonetheless, two decisive and unique features. Leo Strauss has rightly proved that Aristophanes has a belligerent view on politics in the sense that those who after a certain age dedicate their lives to the ruling of the polis are seen as paradigmatic of virtues

had symbolized the final perfection of humans, the culmination of a decisive spirituality. The ritual androgyne, Eliade holds, represents "symbolically the union of magico-religious powers belonging to both sexes"; id., p.280. From this peculiar perspective, Aristophanes' speech seems a (deliberate or not) distortion of the genuine meaning of man's relation to sacredness. See also Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, op.cit., pp.420-425.

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essential in times of war.⁶⁵ Indeed, one has the feeling that for Aristophanes, political life is a battle ground, rather than an art of harmonizing opposite or multiple aspects of community. Consequently, because they are the only immodest and fundamentally courageous individuals, all pederasts "go off to political affairs" (S, 192a-b).⁶⁶ Again, if we adopt an image of politics as perpetual war, then there is a sense in which the superiority of exclusively masculine relations is evident. Yet, if we think that political life is not supposed only to win wars, but also to preserve the integrity of polis and prevent any kind of internal conflict which might lead to self-dissolution, then the previous bellicose values become futile or at least secondary. Therefore, I hold that the Aristophanic quasi-hierarchical political thinking should be carefully considered as limited to a certain paradigm, which does not exhaust the entire meaning of politics.

Another contradictory statement says that, in spite of their natural inclinations, pederasts can be compelled by law to marriage and procreation, whereas they would always want to be only with each other.⁶⁷ But if at maturity, all sun-descendants without exception end up going into politics, and if politics is, as Strauss pointed out, the realm of law *par excellence*, then we have to agree that pederasts want to be involved into that realm of life which contradicts, at least partially, their own sexual nature. If (some) political laws can go against natural homosexuality, why would

⁶⁵ Strauss talks also about a "preposterous" etymology of polis, which would be linked with *polemos*; LS, p.136. Rosen speaks of a natural connection between Eros and Eris; *Plato's Symposium*, op.cit., p.130.

⁶⁶ Here Plato is explicitly unfaithful to Aristophanes' own views; see Strauss' remark that Aristophanes actually considered Pausanias and his lover quite soft and womanish; LS, p.146.

⁶⁷ Cf. Symp., 192b.

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its adepts be the most fitful and inescapably drawn toward politics?

Now, concerning the female element: if in masculine matters Aristophanes is quite generous, women seem to fade into the background. Generally speaking, I think that there are, in all, three kinds of female types he refers to: a) those engaged into a familial life (marriage and procreation); b) a small number (probably) of adulteresses; c) lesbians, who are the genuine descendants of earth.⁶⁸ About the latter we are told that they share an almost complete contempt for the males (be they heterosexual or homosexual). Adultery, on the other hand, is dangerous for the life of the polis only as a threat to the integrity of family. But from a sexual standpoint, an adulteress might be an instantiation of a former androgyne who is continuously looking for the other (unique or

⁶⁸ Aristophanes explicitly states that before the split humans resembled insects in their procreative behavior. That is, earth was the bearer of a new human circular being. Now, earth is considered female from the viewpoint of the cosmic god's identity. Consequently, after the split, female halves became the bearers of children, which seems not a fundamental change from the previous condition. What changed is just the physical body of the bearer, not the "sexual" identity. Before the split, we speak about a cosmic sexual determination of birth, and after it, we deal with a transfer to the female bodily determination which becomes the shelter of the future human. Actually, in ancient Greek traditions, Gaia (earth) was the (female) symbol of limitless creative possibilities, the primordial creator of everything that is. See the entry "Earth" in *Encyclopedia of Religions*, M. Eliade (ed.), MacMillan, New York, 1987, pp.534-541. (Also, Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, op.cit., pp.239-264.) I hope to make clear that Aristophanes' account is not totally divorced from a sacred understanding of existence, an idea which is not generally acknowledged.

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not) half. From the text itself one may infer the probable disinterest of Aristophanes in familial matters.⁶⁹ And if we are to be rigorous and faithful to what is implied – and this not without a slight trace of maliciousness – we can also disclose a positive outcome of adultery which consists in the increase of population.⁷⁰ About the first type of women, one can only say that they faithfully follow their natural vocation (heterosexuality) and respect the political laws (of marriage).

Conclusively, throughout Aristophanes' speech we cannot identify any decisive meaning of the feminine as undermining the realm of (male) politics.⁷¹ At the most, women could be viewed as either careless of politics or as a threat to moral integrity, a fact that is totally discordant with the agonistic model after which Aristophanes' polis is shaped. We either give up the warlike picture of political life and identify family as one of the main grounds of the communitarian life, or we embrace the agonistic view and do away with the feminine as a menace.⁷²

⁶⁹ This can be actually tied with his proverbial obscenity.

⁷⁰ Amazingly enough, Bloom approaches the problem of adultery in an almost neutral fashion; see Bloom, id., p.109.

⁷¹ This was, we remember, Saxonhouse's view.

⁷² Of course this either/or sounds quite forced, but all I am trying to do is to remain faithful to the actual text and its major premises. It is my (non-argued, but probably arguable) tenet that feminists are resentful of the expulsion of women from the actual political life of ancient Greece. Therefore, they either equate the feminine with something considered higher than polis (philosophy, wisdom, which are particularizing strokes in Socrates' portrait) and dismiss politics as secondary, or they openly condemn the political realm for the explicit interdiction of female participation in higher ranks of decision. In support of the first possibility I can mention Saxonhouse's view that "the female and the philosopher live apart

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As a matter of fact, Leo Strauss suggests that Aristophanes might try to legitimate adultery⁷³ by linking it to the problem of the other half. However, one can always ask: is it really necessary that the partner is and should be unique? (This leads us to an unsolvable philosophical problem within the Aristophanic speech, which cannot be dealt with in the present paper: how do we conceive the ontological condition of the first humans? What kind of unity was there at the beginning and in what exactly did it consist? Was it a merely bodily unity? Did the primordial people possess a *psyche* of a sort? If yes, was it a shared but single *psyche*, or two which formed a unity?⁷⁴ What is the relation of this psyche with the body (before and after the split)? Is this the sense of wholeness that we've lost, and can the unutterable aspect of any love be identified with the "psycheic" other? These

from the political world. They both satisfy their erotic desires independently of the needs and demands of the city, though they both may need the security that the city offers." (Saxonhouse, "The Philosopher and the Female", art.cit., p.206) However, concerning Plato's *Republic*, for example, the acceptance of women into the class of warriors and rulers is seen as an implicit de-feminization, as an infamous deprivation of female innermost nature. Cf. Saxonhouse, "The Philosopher and the Female", pp. 202-203, 209. On the connection between female, family, and politics, see Susan Moller Okin, "Philosopher Queens and Private Wives: Plato on Women and the Family", in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol.6, issue 4 (Summer, 1977), pp.345-369.

⁷³ LS, p.135.

⁷⁴ At 192c-d Aristophanes suddenly mentions the existence of soul's longing that is not satisfied with the merely physical intercourse. He even uses the expression "the soul of each" lover to refer to the trans-bodily desire, which points to an ineffable goal. On soul's capacity to transcend the visible, see Bloom, id., p.109.

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questions will most probably remain unanswerable given the penury of information about the originary humans from the beginning of Aristophanes' "degraded" myth.)

At 192b-c Aristophanes speaks of the true other who is permanently looked for as "that very *one* who is his [read: anyone's] *own* half."⁷⁵ Nonetheless, we are also told that after the actual split many halves perished of hunger and other vital necessities which were neglected for a long time.⁷⁶ "Whenever one of the halves did die", it is stated, "and the other was left, the one that was left tried to seek out another and entangle itself with that, whether it met the half of the whole woman...or of a man" (Symp., 191b). At 191d it is said that eros is a search of one's own token, not of the other unique bodily half. The possible alternatives to this riddle are that after the split and rearrangement of genitals one looks for either just a mere representative of the original sexual condition or exclusively the other *unique* half that is never findable.⁷⁷

As a prelude to a possible answer to this thorny question, I want to dwell a little bit on Aristophanes' remarks on Hephaestus. Firstly, Hephaestus is supposedly able to make

⁷⁵ Emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Cf. Symp., 191a-b.

⁷⁷ Again, this might seem too Manicheist but I am under the impression that the envisioned other is conceived in quite formal or impersonal terms, which would also be in line with a possible tragic picture of eros. Mircea Eliade writes: "the androgyne may symbolize satiation without desire or desire without satiation;" *Encyclopedia of Religions*, op.cit., p.279. Bloom thinks that "eventually there are no true other halves. The result is that men continue the quest, but it is hopeless. This justifies both fidelity and promiscuity;" Bloom, id., p.108. Nussbaum concludes that humans "would like to find a way to retain [their] identity as desiring and moving beings, and yet to make [themselves] self-sufficient;" cf. *The Fragility of Goodness*, op.cit., p.176.

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explicit what the lovers long for but cannot put into words.⁷⁸ Thus we get the picture of Hephaestus as the master of language. Secondly, we are told that he makes his appearance by carrying tools, which are peremptory signs of his ability to use a certain *technē* in handling various situations.⁷⁹ Thirdly, he says he is able to offer a “conjunction and fusion with the beloved [in order] to become one from two” (Symp., 193a), after he explicitly boasted that he is “willing to fuse [the lovers] and make [them] grow together into the same thing, so that – *though two* – [they] would be one” (Symp., 192e; emphasis mine). This unity that cannot eradicate duality might be taken as an allusion to the original condition when each body had two faces, two pairs of hands, four legs etc. On the other hand, it can surreptitiously symbolize the unattainableness of origins.

In any case, I think we have enough elements to argue that Hephaestus is a mere blunderer, because he is trying to use artificial means in order to remake the primordial unity, and consequently dismisses the natural inner eros of human beings.⁸⁰ Accordingly, we can hold that love does not have a peculiar *tēchne*. At the same time, the union, which is so fervently pursued, remains fantastical or inaccessible. And from this perspective, the

⁷⁸ Symp., 192e.

⁷⁹ Concerning tools, I would like to notice that the ancients were not so sensitive and radically opposed to the constitutive artificiality of utensils. Despite an explicit condemnation of the *misuse* of tools, let us remember that in the economy of Aristophanes’ speech they played an important role: in splitting the original spherical humans, Zeus and Apollo were pictured as tool users; see Symp., 190d-191b.

⁸⁰ See also Homer’s *Odyssey* (8.321-343) where Hephaestus makes a fool of himself by using unnatural means to counteract and punish natural drives. Quoted by LS, p.139.

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question of whether the other is actually or just in principle unique becomes secondary.⁸¹

Finally, I have to add that Aristophanes depicts eros by means of a complex imagery: a great power with philanthropic and healing potentialities,⁸² the new inborn and consequently integrating element of the human “post-split” condition after the rearrangement of genitals,⁸³ the improbable⁸⁴ “bringer together of [lovers’] ancient nature” (Symp., 191d), the search of one’s own token, “our guide and general” (Symp., 193b), the closest reality to (though, not identical with) our best condition,⁸⁵ and last but not least the reminder of piety as a human duty toward the gods.

One should not forget that Eros can lead us to what is our own – the other half – only if we are pious to Olympians. Differently put, a successful erotic relation must be preceded by a reconciliation and friendliness with the divine.⁸⁶ At this juncture, Aristophanes makes an interesting remark about fear of gods as a means to maintain order:⁸⁷ a future mutiny can be prevented only

⁸¹ Aristophanes refers to encountering one’s lover as getting “a favorite whose nature is to one’s taste”; Symp., 193d.

⁸² Symp., 189c-d, 193d.

⁸³ Symp., 191c-d. This blatantly proves the falsity of Bloom’s hypothesis that eros is just an unnatural compensation for the loss of the natural order. He obviously ignores that the split effected also an ontological change. This aspect has rightly been made clear by Strauss.

⁸⁴ The verb “try” appears in this context, which depicts eros as an *attempt* to recover the original unity, whose success is not necessarily guaranteed.

⁸⁵ Symp., 193c-d.

⁸⁶ cf. Symp., 193b.

⁸⁷ We realize now that Hobbes and Locke did not hold something radically new, or that the ancients were not quite declared “reactionaries” in political and social matters.

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by the introduction of a threat,⁸⁸ the latter being doubled by the present awareness of the ancient punishment.⁸⁹

It is my contention that piety is not so much associated with liturgical sacrifices and sacraments – which the Olympian gods depended on – but hypothetically addresses the problem of the (nihilist) assault against the divine. We remember that the initial revolt arose from proud thoughts based on the actual wholeness of the original humans. In effect, piety will be an imperative countermovement that is meant to prevent any seditious behavior.

Therefore, on the one hand, eros itself seems in Aristophanes' speech a rather pious god. On the other hand, as the "bringer together of [lovers'] ancient nature," as the favoring instance of our highest good, eros is potentially mutinous, because unity brings completeness and power, which are two disastrous incentives to disobey the gods. Otherwise put, by virtue of its great power eros deserves a proper worship, which humans do not perform at present. However, eros is simultaneously the only divine being who recommends obedience as the most proper attitude toward Olympus. Love becomes thus an *protean* figure with multiple faces and potentialities. And to propose a different perspective from Strauss and Saxonhouse's, I dare hold that we can even detect a certain divorce between the political and divine matters in relation to the erotic.

Strauss pictured eros as fundamentally political and Saxonhouse as trans-political, but with the underlying explicit function of undermining politics as the realm of masculine power. Nevertheless, I think that, if Aristophanes starts from a mythological standpoint, in the sense that he ties the present

⁸⁸ The link between order and fear is made explicit at 190e and 193a; the threat of further cutting at 190d.

⁸⁹ Navel, wrinkles, and the orientation of the face toward the cut are visible signs that any revolt will be justifiably reprovved.

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human condition with an unattainable primeval origin, which is perpetually sought, then his obscure, multiform speech is mainly concerned with the relation to the divine.⁹⁰ And in support of my thesis I want to shortly reopen the topic of pederasty.

In Aristophanes pederasty is explicitly linked with political engagements, but regardless of the courage and manliness it is inspired by – and which are, by the way, quite far from the admonished piety – it is not deemed at all as threatening the order of gods. Of course, this is contrary to the Straussian tenet, which interpreted the original punishment in exclusively political terms, and inferred that eros is fundamentally anomic. However, this interpretation of Strauss might impel one to ask, why is it that Aristophanes never speaks of piety as the duty of (pederastic) politicians, and links the pious demeanor only with the erotic life of individuals, which sometimes might oppose certain agreed laws of society? Why didn't he see any danger in the manly intrepidity of pederasts?

A possible answer is that they can share proud thoughts *in relation to humans, rather than gods*. From this perspective, in the hiatus between politics and divinity we enter the dim and unstable dimension of Aristophanes' eros,⁹¹ wherein piety can be

⁹⁰ Bloom would disagree with me, given his tenet that there is no transcendent element in Aristophanes' speech. But he amazingly contradicts himself when, just a few lines after he affirmed the sheer immanency of eros, he states that "for those who have really plumbed the depth of the erotic experience, there is a haunting awareness that *one wants something beyond*, something that can poison our embraces." (Bloom, id., p.111; emphasis added)

⁹¹ Here I obviously depart from Rosen who thinks that "Aristophanes is a teacher with a message for mankind that can be formulated in essentially rational terms"; cf. *Plato's*

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subversive and satisfaction ever postponed, even if permanently envisioned and desired: eros wants more than politics and less than metaphysical mutiny, although it can lead to both.

Therefore, we can conclude that Aristophanic love is a powerful god, a partly divine, partly deceiving cure that deserves to be appropriately addressed, an inner drive that cannot be reduced to mere intercourse or handled in a "Hephaestian" fashion. In love, Aristophanes seems to suggest, we are confronted with an unsurpassable urge to regain a unity which is so heterogeneous that it seems almost perpetually unreal,⁹² with a passionate search for an other who will never be ours - and therefore for no one. Perhaps Eros is powerful (and tragic) because he is the only god that can playfully reveal the supreme solitude of humans...

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Symposium, op.cit., p.137. In fact, Rosen himself acknowledges on p. 149 of his book that, by replacing *logos* with *mythos* Aristophanes points to "the mystery and obscurity upon which human existence depends."

⁹² Affirming the frozen and static character of the erotic ideal, Martha Nussbaum holds that we might actually prefer our present split condition. Cf. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, op.cit., p.176.

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