

A Doctor's Folly: Diagnosing the Speech of Eryximachus

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Scholarly opinion is sharply divided concerning the value and interest of the speech of Eryximachus in Plato's *Symposium*. Until Edelstein's vociferous challenge to the position in 1945, there was a consensus in the literature that the speech was meant by Plato to be a comic send-up of Eryximachus, exposing him as a pretentious and self-absorbed pedant.¹ In more recent times, some scholars have worked to rehabilitate the speech and, with it, its speaker, as the serious expression of an interesting and valued medical expert.² The passages in which Eryximachus appears in the dialogue have thus been interpreted as having been penned either with satirical malice or with admiration and respect. In this chapter, I present a defense of the older consensus that the speech is satirical.

As it stands, the debate has fuzzy parameters: interpreters on the one side have not clearly formulated what is supposed to be serious about the speech, while those on the other have explained neither what exactly is comic about the speech nor what its larger role or significance is. The debate has also been hampered by an implicit fallacy of false dilemma: either the speech is comic – an *ad hominem* interlude that can be safely ignored – or it is serious – the sober pronouncements of an exemplary physician that demand our attention. I impose some structure on the debate (1) by formulating the different senses in which the speech may be considered serious; (2) by examining which senses of serious are compatible with comedy; (3) by establishing criteria for what would count as comic; and (4) by articulating a philosophical justification for the use of comedy. In my view, the reason that Eryximachus' speech has been

¹ Edelstein 1945. See e.g. Gildersleeve 1887, 1888; Bury 1909; Robin 1929; Wilamovitz 1929; and Friedlander 1930. Taylor 1926 was an exception to this trend.

² The most prominent rehabilitators are Konstan and Young-Bruehl 1982; Rowe 1999; McPherran 2006. For an opposing view, see Levin 2009.

the subject of so much disagreement is that it plays two distinct roles in the dialogue: it is intended by Plato both to advance the level of discourse on *erōs* beyond what is presented by the previous two speakers and to expose Eryximachus – and indeed medicine in general – as a pretender to philosophical wisdom.

1. The Facts: A Brief Overview of the Eryximachus Scene (185e6–189c1)

I want to begin by providing a short summary and outline of the Eryximachus scene, which I take to encompass the speech itself (185e6–188e4) and the two brief conversations with Aristophanes that surround it (185c4–e5; 188e4–189c1). I divide the speech itself into the following sections:

1. The scope of Love (185e6–186b2)
2. Medicine and the nature of Love (186b2–e3)
3. Love and the other crafts (186e4–188d3)
 - a. Music (187a1–e6)
 - b. Astronomy (188a1–b6)
 - c. Divination (188b6–d3)
4. Conclusion (188d4–e4)

In the first interlude (185c4–e5), it is Aristophanes' turn to speak but, since he has an attack of the hiccups, he asks Eryximachus "either [to] take his turn or [to] cure him" (185d2–3). Eryximachus advises Aristophanes to try three remedies (holding his breath, gargling and sneezing) and gives his own speech on love.

In Part 1 (185e6–186b2), Eryximachus takes over Pausanias' idea that there are two kinds of love – a good or noble kind of love and a bad or base kind of love. However, he criticizes the narrowness of Pausanias' speech in focusing on human desire and greatly expands the scope of love to encompass animals, plants, and indeed everything in the universe, including "both human and divine matters" (186b2).³

In Part 2 (186b2–e3), Eryximachus uses the case of the human body to explicate the nature of love and its relation to knowledge or science. The view about love consists of the following claims:⁴

³ Translations are from Nehamas and Woodruff 1989, with some minor corrections.

⁴ While McPherran 2006: 75 repeats Rowe's formulation of the main points of this section (1999: 56), I have chosen to make a fresh start, mainly because I think that Rowe (and thus McPherran) leave

- (1) “The nature (*phusis*) of bodies is such that they contain a double love” (186b4)
- (2) Healthy and diseased bodies are different and “desire and love (*epithumēi kai erai*) different things” (186b4–7)
- (3) Thus, healthy [good] love and diseased [bad] love are different (186b7–8).
- (4) “It is noble and necessary to gratify the good and healthy love in each body, and it is shameful to gratify and necessary to frustrate the bad and diseased love” (186c2–4)
- (5) “Medicine is...the science of the loves [desires] of the body for repletion and depletion” (186c5–7)
- (6) The doctor’s task is “to diagnose healthy and unhealthy love” and most importantly, “to transform diseased loves [desires] into healthy ones, to implant healthy love [desire] where it is absent and remove diseased love [desire] where it is present” (186c7–d5)
- (7) “For (*gar*) it is necessary [for the doctor] to be able to make the most hostile things in the body friends (*phila*) and to make them love one another (*eran allēlōn*)” (186d5–6)
- (8) These “most hostile things are what are most opposite, like hot and cold, bitter and sweet, wet and dry, and all other such things” (186d6–e1)
- (9) “Asclepius, the founding father of medicine, established science when he first learned how to implant concord and love (*erōta ... kai homonoian*) among such opposites” (186e1–2)

Since it is a matter of some interpretive controversy regarding how exactly to take these claims, I offer them here only as “the facts” and I will hold off addressing interpretive questions for now. The core question is whether and how they can be understood as comprising a coherent view, since (2) to (6) seem to conceptualize love in terms of an agent’s *desire*, while (7) to (9) seem to conceptualize love in terms of *friendship*, or concord, between opposites.

In Part 3 (186e4–188d3), the longest part of the speech, Eryximachus elaborates his view, showing the role and power of love in other areas (gymnastics, farming, music, astronomy and divination), subject to the relevant science and known by the relevant practitioner.

Eryximachus begins by providing an analysis of music (187a1–e6). Critically appropriating a fragment of Heraclitus, he claims that, “from a prior discord between high and low, a later agreement is established by the

out of their summaries what I take to be a central claim, what I label as (5). My inclusion of this point is not really an interpretive issue, since it is directly stated in the text, but it bears on interpretive issues, as I will later show.

musical science" (187a8–b2), and that this agreement is what "harmony" is (187b4); similarly, from a prior discord of fast and slow, a later agreement is established, and this is rhythm (187b7–c2). Music "implants concord and love for one another" in these opposites (187c3–4), such that "music is the science of loves concerning harmony and rhythm" (187c4–5). Though there is no double love in the structure of music, it does exist in the effects of music on its audience, that is, in education, or *paideia* (187c5–d4). Eryximachus claims that, with such music, "it is necessary to gratify orderly humans (in such a way that those who are not yet orderly are likely to become more orderly) and to preserve the [good] love of these men" (187d4–7). Love for the music of the "noble, heavenly Muse" must be protected, whereas the music of the "common, vulgar Muse" must be used only with great caution (187d7–e3).

Reiterating that love is found in "all areas" (187e8) and requires a knowledgeable practitioner to tend to it, Eryximachus extends his analysis to astronomy (188a1–b6), claiming that the "seasons of the year" are also comprised of opposites – hot and cold, wet and dry– and that when these are controlled by "orderly love, they possess harmony and a temperate mixture" (188a1–5); when this happens, the weather is mild, there is a good crop yield, all living things thrive, and nothing is harmed (*adikēsen*). However, when the "hubristic love" is in control, the opposites are "greedy and disorderly toward each other" (188b3–4), and this leads to "much destruction and harm" (188a7–b3). Eryximachus ends by defining "astronomy" as "the science of the loves concerning the movements of the stars and the seasons of the year" (188b4–6).

Eryximachus gives a brief account of divination (188b6–d3), which he defines as "the craftsman of friendship (*philiās*) between gods and humans through its knowledge of the human loves which concern divine law (*themis*) and piety" (188c7–d3).

In Part 4 (188d4–e2), Eryximachus completes his speech, emphasizing the "great power of love" especially when "directed, in temperance and justice, toward goods, whether in heaven or on earth: happiness and good fortune, the bonds of human society, concord with the gods above are all among his gifts" (188d4–9).

In the second interlude (188e2–189c1), Aristophanes, whose hiccups have been cured, claims that it required sneezing, and playfully mocks Eryximachus' speech by suggesting that the successful use of the sneeze treatment seems to undermine the idea that love involves a kind of harmony or concord. Eryximachus warns Aristophanes not to make himself vulnerable to similar mockery, and the latter retracts his joke.

2. Symptoms of the Serious Eryximachus

The arguments for taking Eryximachus and his speech seriously revolve around roughly five claims, which I will assess in this section. Eryximachus is thought to be a serious figure in five senses: he is important, self-aware, authoritative, coherent and insightful. If he is indeed aptly described as such, then we should certainly pay attention to what he says.

(a) *Important*

Eryximachus is said to be a serious figure in that he plays an important role in the proceedings of the symposium.⁵ He serves as *symposiarch*, sending away the flute-girl, proposing that they converse instead, and suggesting the topic of Love on Phaedrus' behalf (176d–177e); either Eryximachus (189a–c, 193d, 194a, 198a–b) or Phaedrus is addressed in between the speeches, confirming his role in the proceedings; his expertise as a doctor is acknowledged by the others (176d, 185d, 189a, 214b); and he persuades Alcibiades to give a speech in praise of Socrates, instead of allowing the party to descend immediately into drunken revelry (214a–c).

It is undeniable that Eryximachus plays an important role in the events of the dialogue and that his status as doctor gives him a certain standing within the group. That said, being important to the proceedings and having a certain standing within the group hardly rule out his being self-important and thus subject to comic ridicule.⁶ For example, Protagoras and Callicles are clearly portrayed as important in these senses, and this does not rule out their being subject to derision and ridicule. Indeed, it would seem odd for Plato to subject to ridicule someone who was not taken to be important.

(b) *Self-aware*

Second, Eryximachus is described as employing “self-conscious humour” (Rowe 1999: 62); “as entering into the general light-hearted sympotic spirit of things by speaking as bombastically as he does” (McPherran 2006: 77);⁷ and the speech is described as being “fanciful and whimsical,” “meant to

⁵ Edelstein 1945: 94–7; Rowe 1998: 147; McPherran 2006: 72.

⁶ Dover, e.g., recognizes both that Eryximachus acts as *symposiarch* (1980: 11) and that the speech is meant to ridicule him (1980: 105)

⁷ See also Taylor 1926: 217.

amuse himself" (Edelstein 1945: 88) and "festive and self-knowing in its overfullness" (Hunter 2004: 54). At least three pieces of evidence have been adduced in this regard: the ideas that the farmer and trainer are guided by *Love* (186e);⁸ the analysis of musical education (187c–d),⁹ and Eryximachus' mild reaction to Aristophanes' mocking him (189a–b).¹⁰ The idea here seems to be that, in these comic moments, Eryximachus is self-aware and being funny on purpose.

The claim that Eryximachus is good-humored and self-aware is a bit trickier to deal with, since this strategy seeks to turn any potentially comic moments at his expense into evidence against his ridiculousness. Once Eryximachus is let in on the joke, the joke cannot be at his expense.¹¹ If, as I have argued elsewhere, self-ignorance is at the core of the ridiculous and central to Plato's characterization of certain figures as imposters, then it will be difficult for Eryximachus both to be self-aware and a subject for ridicule.¹² It is much harder to sort the evidence on this question, since much of it depends on reading the tone of the Greek: for example, whereas Dover reads Eryximachus' response to Aristophanes' mocking as "authoritarian" (1980, *ad loc.*), Edelstein sees it as "sarcasm" (1945: 89). Are the mention of farming and gymnastics meant to be tongue-in-cheek, or are they signs of his ridiculous overreach? I will address these questions directly later in the paper.

(c) *Authoritative*

Eryximachus' speech exemplifies the medical thinking of the period, as can be attested by the numerous resonances with the Hippocratic corpus.¹³ His speech is thus "serious" in the sense of being authoritative within the domain of medicine and an accurate or honest representation of the medical literature. This is not to say that the literature is uniform, or taken to be uniform by Plato – indeed some of the authors are debating each other about core issues in medicine. However, as many scholars have noted, the speech resonates with many passages from the medical literature. To give an exhaustive list would be tedious and unnecessary, but here is a partial list:

⁸ Edelstein 1945: 88. ⁹ Rowe 1999: 60–2. ¹⁰ Edelstein 1945: 89.

¹¹ Both Hunter (2004: 54) and McPherran (2006: 76–7) affirm both that the speech is a parody and that Eryximachus is self-consciously being bombastic, but neither explains how exactly that is supposed to work. I will address this kind of position later in the chapter.

¹² See Trivigno 2012; Trivigno 2016, and my discussion below.

¹³ Edelstein 1945: 85–7, 90–1; Craik 2001; McPherran 2006: 76–7; Levin 2009; Hunter 2004: 54–7.

Theme	Text
Healthy vs. diseased appetites	<i>De vetere medicina</i> 20
Epistemic priority of medicine	<i>De victu</i> 1.3–10; <i>De flatibus</i> 1–5, <i>De vetere medicina</i> 20
“Emptying” and “filling”	<i>De flatibus</i> 1, <i>De natura hominis</i> 9, <i>De victu</i> 1.2
Opposites, hot and cold, wet and dry	<i>De vetere medicina</i> 14, 16, <i>De victu</i> 1.4, 11
Presocratics, esp. Heraclitus	<i>De vetere medicina</i> 20, <i>De victu</i> 1.5, 11, <i>De alimento</i>
Musical harmony	<i>De victu</i> 1.8, 18
Cooking as a <i>technē</i>	<i>De victu</i> 1.18
Concern with climate and health	<i>De aeribus aquis locis</i> , <i>De victu</i> 1.2

As Hunter notes, “some of the basic ideas of the speech – mixture, the harmonization of opposites, the alternation of excess and deficiency – are among the most staple tropes of medicine” (2004: 56). More broadly, we might say that there is a common commitment to an empirical methodology and a physicalist ontology, that is, to a concern with *physis*, as traditionally conceived. Material, bodily phenomena are basic, and need to be assessed and treated with physical interventions. Any interpretation of the speech must take the fact of the Hippocratic background into account.

Nearly all commentators agree that Eryximachus represents the medical type.¹⁴ But even if Edelstein is right to see Eryximachus as “a historically correct picture of a medical man of that time” (1945: 91), this does not necessarily weigh against seeing him as a target for ridicule. Indeed, if Plato intends to satirize Eryximachus, it is not necessarily (or even likely) out of a particular hostility toward the man but rather to what he represents – that is, medicine as a methodological rival to philosophy. If this is so, then satire or parody would demand that he bear the hallmarks of the medical type.

(d) *Coherent*

Eryximachus’ speech can be understood as presenting a logically consistent and interesting, i.e. serious, position on *erōs*.¹⁵ These defenders of Eryximachus are arguing, in particular, against Dover who charges that Eryximachus “runs together (1) the contrast between good desires or tendencies and bad desires or tendencies and (2) the contrast between

¹⁴ Edelstein 1945: 91; McPherran 2006: 74; Levin 2009: 277.

¹⁵ Konstan and Young-Bruehl 1982; Rowe 1999; McPherran 2006.

the good consequences of reconciling opposites and the bad consequences of failure to reconcile opposites" (1980: *ad loc.*) and those who take the speech (and perhaps all the pre-Socrates speeches) to contain, as it were, the seeds of their own destruction. Konstan and Young-Bruehl were the first to give sustained attention to this problem; on their view, Eryximachus does not conflate two senses of *eros* – he rather makes a distinction between love as "*epithumia* (desire)" and love as "*philia* (concord)" that he holds to consistently throughout his speech (1982: 40). Thus, they disarm Dover's criticism making Eryximachus consistent at that level. Rowe goes further and attributes to Eryximachus "a *single* 'kind of love'" (1999: 56), and interprets possible instances of the second kind, that is, love as friendship, in terms of the first, that is, love as desire (1999: 58).

Pace Konstan and Young-Bruehl, who claim that their "analysis of Eryximachus' argument points to a degree of systematic exposition and intellectual rigor in the speech that is incompatible with sheer parody" (1982: 40), I do not think that the consistency of Eryximachus' conception of love would by itself provide any general evidence against reading the speech as satirical or parodic. Even granting its consistency, one might still locate the parody elsewhere, that is to say, one might see its comic features emerge in other aspects or parts of the speech. Of course, one way to present the speech as parodic or to satire Eryximachus might be to give him a speech that was internally inconsistent or logically incoherent, but this is surely not the only way. One can have a coherent but *false* and even positively pernicious view, and that could form the basis for the parody or satire.

(e) *Insightful*

Last, Eryximachus' speech is a clear advance on the previous speeches and anticipates at least some of Diotima's claims. McPherran makes the most of such resonances, claiming that Eryximachus formulates "a Platonically-acceptable theory of physical Nature," agrees that "true physicians must be philosophers" (2006: 80) and himself represents or at least prefigures Plato's "ideal physician" (2006: 93). This is the strongest claim of seriousness, since the claim is that what Eryximachus presents is true, or at least thought to be true by Plato.

Even if the speech is an advance on the previous ones and there are resonances with what Diotima says, this does not imply that Plato does not take a critical stance towards the speech nor that he does not wish to portray Eryximachus as foolish. If the speech is, for example, superior to those of Pausanias and Phaedrus, this is still consistent with Plato rejecting it. That said, if it turns out that the position advocated by

Eryximachus is *true*, then this will be hard to square with the interpretation of the speech as comic. I will return to this issue at the end of the chapter.

All of the preceding senses of “serious” attributed to Eryximachus or his speech – important, self-aware, authoritative, coherent and insightful – are meant to imply that his speech is serious in the sense of “worthy of interpretive attention.” There is a kind of argument here: the premises characterize Eryximachus and his speech, and the conclusion concerns how we interpreters should respond. There are two things to notice about this argument: first, were its premises all true, Eryximachus would be wholly unique amongst interlocutors in having so high a standing in the dialogue – indeed, he would be a rival, in Plato’s eyes, to Socrates. Second, it seems to rely on an unstated assumption that, if Eryximachus and his speech were comic, they would be unworthy of interpretive attention. In my view, the speech may be worthy of interpretive attention *precisely because* it shows him and medicine to be, in some sense, ridiculous. We are thus not required to regard the speech merely as a “comic interlude” (2006: 72),¹⁶ since I think that properly understanding the comedy will be seriously informative, that is, it will give some content to a philosophically inspired criticism of medicine. Thus, to see comedy in the speech is not simply to “dismiss” it as philosophically uninteresting.

To sum up, the one sense of “serious” that is potentially inconsistent with the idea of comic presentation – serious as in self-aware – already takes comic content for granted, since it is in light of his alleged joking that Eryximachus is claimed to be self-aware. The only kind of seriousness that seems to rule out entirely treating the speech as comic is the strongest formulation of serious as insightful, that is, the claim that the speech is simply true. Thus, most of the claims to seriousness are actually compatible with the idea that Eryximachus is ridiculous and that his speech is comic. In the next section, I will set out some principles whereby one can determine whether and in what sense Eryximachus’ speech may be comic.

3. Definitions and Methodological Considerations

Before assessing the evidence, I think it prudent to provide some working definitions, so that it is clear what I mean when I use terms like satire and parody, and to make some methodological remarks about how to go

¹⁶ Cf. Levin 2009: 275–6.

about identifying these in the context of a Platonic dialogue. I propose the following:

Satire, primarily aimed at persons, involves the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize a character's stupidity or vices.

Parody, primarily aimed at texts, methodologies, or genres, involves the use of a distorted imitation that exaggerates some feature that is prominent in the original, often in order to undermine a text, methodology or genre's claim to authority.

The question of whether Plato is employing comic devices cannot be made to hang on whether or not we twenty-first-century scholars laugh at or are amused by the relevant text. Much of the debate currently seems to be stuck at the level of the interpreter's subjective reactions, but these cannot be taken as decisive evidence for Plato's intentions. However, at least three kinds of independent evidence may be adduced: first, we may look to Old and Middle Comedy to see whether some figure or device can be seen as the historical antecedent. This would provide some evidence that Plato's audience would have experienced the figure or trope as comic. Second, we may seek some philosophical grounds for understanding how Plato might have viewed his own use of comedy. This would provide some principled way of determining whether comedy would be the appropriate idiom. Last, we may seek to see whether there are some signals in the text that might suggest a comic context. This would help to provide some evidence that Plato's audience would have been prepared to experience the figure or trope as comic.

In *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, Francis Cornford mentions the doctor, or physician, as an instance of the comic imposter, or *alazôn*, a standard figure from Old Comedy, and the imposter motif may be considered a form of *satire*. The imposter is, in general, a pretender to certain advantages whom the comedy regards as a kind of parasite (Cornford 1961: 122).¹⁷ This general figure of the imposter has a professorial variety, what Cornford calls the "Learned Doctor," which encompasses intellectuals of all stripes, including poets, sophists, mathematicians, doctors and philosophers, etc. and of which Socrates in the *Clouds* is a prime example.¹⁸ The figure has some generic features: he proclaims himself to be wise; is self-important and pedantic, using specialized or technical jargon;

¹⁷ See also MacDowell 1990; Diggle 2004. Cf. Arist. *EN* 1108a20–22; 1127a13–b32; *EE* 1124a24–25; Theophr. *Char.* 23; pseudo-Pl. *Def.* 416a10–11.

¹⁸ For an account of the different imposter types, see Cornford 1961: 134–46.

and he aims at earning money; but his knowledge is exposed as fraudulent or useless. Though we only have two brief references to doctors in Aristophanes – *Birds* l. 584 and *Wealth* ll. 407–9 – in which doctors are treated as imposters seeking to get rich, we know of two Middle Comedies entitled *Iatros*, or *The Doctor* (by Antiphanes and Aristophon), and we have a fragmentary scene from Alexis (fr.142). In addition, we know of two New Comedies, entitled *The Doctor* (by Philemon and Theophilus), and there is a doctor scene in Menander's *The Shield* (*Aspis*). The tradition continues into Roman Comedy: Plautus wrote a lost play called *Parasitus Medicus*, or *The Parasite Doctor*, and there is an extended doctor scene in his *The Brothers Menaechmus* (ll. 889–956). So it is safe to say that the doctor is a stock figure from comedy, and there is a tradition within the comedy of Plato's time of portraying the doctor as a self-important, pedantic quack. If Eryximachus is portrayed in ways that evoke the stock figure, then we will be on secure historical grounds in thinking of him as comic.

As to philosophical grounds for the use of comedy, Plato gives us, in the *Philebus*, some resources for what his practice of comedy might look like. There, Socrates defines *to geloion*, the “laughable,” as a lack of self-knowledge, most commonly instantiated as a pretension to virtue and wisdom (48c–e). As I have argued elsewhere, this account is amenable to the comic practice of portraying certain characters as imposters, though there will of course be some differences.¹⁹ In Plato, we should expect to find comic devices aimed at those figures and methodologies that lay claim to moral or epistemic authority and expertise. Indeed, we might expect certain figures to be representatives of methodological rivals to philosophy that purport to have a universal scope and a systematic content, i.e. offer some rival vision of the whole. Thus, if we have grounds to think that Plato regarded his character, Eryximachus, as a self-ignorant pretender to wisdom, the latter will, by this standard, be both laughable and the proper subject for a comedy, and it would then be proper for us to take him as such. Further, if we take him to be ridiculed qua representative of medicine, then we will be justified in seeing Plato making a critical point against medicine's methodology or epistemic ambition.

The last methodological point concerns the presence or absence of certain cues indicating to the reader that a comic figure or scene is occurring or about to occur. It would seem peculiar of Plato as a writer to insert something comic into his text without signaling it in some way.

¹⁹ See Trivigno 2012; Trivigno 2016.

The absence of such cues would make it difficult for readers to understand that they should expect something comic and thus would seem to provide fairly strong evidence against taking a scene or figure to be comic. Therefore, if we find that there are cues indicating a comic context, then we will at least be on safer grounds in regarding Eryximachus and his speech as comic.

4. Symptoms of the Comic Eryximachus

In this section, I will focus primarily on the Eryximachus scene, but I will also touch on at least some of the other scenes in which Eryximachus speaks. I proceed by first considering whether there are comic cues from the context indicating that we should take his speech as parodic. Then I will examine the speech itself to see whether it is plausible to attribute to its speaker the features of the comic imposter. Last, I will consider whether we have reason to think that Plato regarded his character, Eryximachus, as a self-ignorant pretender to wisdom.

4.1. Comic Context

I have included the two brief conversations with Aristophanes that surround the speech (185c4–e5; 188e4–189c1) in my account of the Eryximachus scene because it is in these passages, if anywhere, that we should look for comic cues. Many commentators have noticed these scenes and provided some interpretation of them, but, for the most part, they have been used to say something about either Aristophanes or Plato's self-conscious ordering of the speeches. But few commentators have seen them as significantly bearing on the speech of Eryximachus.

The mere presence of Aristophanes, the master of Old Comedy, in these scenes might be enough to signal a comic context. But the scenes themselves are also comic in nature: in the first, Aristophanes is portrayed as having the hiccups, and Apollodorus speculates that he might have “stuffed himself again” (185c6); in the latter, Aristophanes is found making a joke and laughing. Further, the scenes are comic in ways that essentially involve Eryximachus. In the first, he is called upon as the expert on bodily conditions to provide a medical remedy for the hiccups. This might involve a pun on his name: “Eryximachus” literally means “fighter of belching.” Eryximachus provides three remedies, holding one's breath, gargling and sneezing, and we may detect some

self-importance in the doctor's suggestion that the hiccups might be "extremely severe" (185e1, e3).²⁰ The second comic scene is clearly at the expense of Eryximachus: Aristophanes wryly remarks, "It makes me wonder whether the 'orderly sort of Love' in the body calls for the sounds and itchings that constitute a sneeze, because the hiccups stopped immediately when I applied the Sneeze treatment" (189a3–6). Hunter rightly points out that we are meant to "sympathize with Aristophanes' evident amusement" (2004: 54). Eryximachus warns Aristophanes that the former "may be forced to be on his guard lest [Aristophanes] say something funny" (189a8–b2). Aristophanes laughs at this and rescinds his joke, but clarifies that saying something "funny (*geloia*)" would not be a problem – he is a comedian after all – so much as saying something "ridiculous (*katagelasta*)" (189b6–7). While Aristophanes certainly has his own speech in mind, a possible implication here is the thought that Eryximachus' speech was ridiculous, and, indeed, that Aristophanes' own joke was funny precisely because what Eryximachus said was ridiculous.

In these two scenes, Eryximachus plays the straight man to Aristophanes' more comic figure, but the joke is, in the end, at the straight man's expense. I should also like to point out one final contextual consideration: during the course of Eryximachus' speech, we are to imagine that Aristophanes is in the background hiccupping for much of it, trying to hold his breath for some time until he breaks out into hiccups again, then trying to gargle for some time until he breaks out into hiccups again, until he finally sneezes. We have every reason to think that this is happening during the speech and, since Aristophanes clearly knows what Eryximachus said, there is no reason to think that Aristophanes has retired elsewhere to do so.

4.2. *Eryximachus as Imposter*

The generic features of the medical imposter are the following: (a) he represents himself as possessing wisdom; (b) he is pedantic, using specialized and technical medical jargon; and (c) he primarily aims at earning money; but (d) his medical knowledge or wisdom is exposed as fraudulent or useless. Since there is no trace of the third feature (c) here in the *Symposium*, I will set it aside.

²⁰ See Dover 1966: *ad loc.*

(a) *Self-representation as Wise*

It is, of course, no surprise that Eryximachus thinks of himself as possessing knowledge, since he is a doctor. Whenever he appears in the dialogue, either he or someone else makes reference to his medical expertise, and his own speech makes repeated reference to medicine. Not only do we find many references to his discipline, Eryximachus regards the knowledge one gains “from medicine” (186a7) as providing a paradigm for understanding the entire universe.²¹ That is, Eryximachus takes himself to have an understanding of universal relevance, one that ranges over “both human and divine matters” (186b2; cp. 187e). The other forms of knowledge he mentions, gymnastics, farming, music, astronomy and divination, already cover a very wide range: the human body, the earth, music and education, the heavens and the gods.²² He thinks of medicine as a supreme knowledge, a kind of higher order *technē* that provides the standard for the other sciences. Those others, modeled on medicine, are said to consist in the knowledge of effects of love concerning the relevant opposites and to share a common methodology, namely, establishing the right kind of love and effecting a harmony between the opposites. Eryximachus’ knowledge of the human body and its physical processes puts him, he thinks, in a unique epistemic position that enables him to see all this.

In short, Eryximachus thinks that to possess medical knowledge makes him, not merely a doctor, but a wise man who possesses a knowledge of universal scope, systematic content, and consistent methodology. He sets himself apart and above, not only poets like Agathon and Aristophanes, but natural philosophers like Heraclitus. Eryximachus ends his speech by claiming “not to have omitted anything willingly” (188e1–2) and even Edelstein admits that claim “betray[s] [Eryximachus’] belief in his own wisdom and superiority” (1945: 91).

(b) *Technical and Pedantic Use of Language*

Eryximachus uses quite a bit medical and technical jargon: as we saw, he twice refers to the hiccups as potentially “extremely severe” (185e1, e3), and he continues his repetitive technical ways in the opening of the speech, using knowledge, or knowledge words, an astonishing number of times. He uses “medicine (*iatros*)” and cognates no fewer than six times within a

²¹ Robin writes, “La médecine est...l’art des arts, celui qui donne le secret de tous les autres” (1929: LII).

²² Edelstein acknowledges that the scope claim seems to indicate “a rather ludicrous pride in the importance of the medical art” (1945: 89), and McPherran points to this aspect of the speech as clearly parody (2006: 76–7).

single Stephanus (186a7, b3, c3, c5, d1, e3). If this were not sufficient for comic accumulation – a classic strategy for parody – then, in addition, he employs other knowledge-words an additional eight times over that same span (186b1, b3, c5, c6, c7, d4, d5, e1). Eryximachus is also made to use the rare superlative adjectival form, *iatrikōtatos*, meaning “most doctorly” (186d1).

Given the list of parallels to the Hippocratic corpus I gave earlier, it is clear that the speech is full of medical jargon and terminology: “emptying and filling,” “opposites,” “hot and cold,” “wet and dry,” etc. He may be showing off in his technical uses of musical terminology in his definitions of “harmony” and “rhythm” and of meteorological phenomena, with his reference to “both frost and hail and blights” (188b3).

In addition, we have Eryximachus’ interpretation of Heraclitus’s aphorism (187a–c), “being at variance with itself is in agreement with itself like the attunement of a bow or a lyre,” which quarrels with the details of formulation in a way pretty nearly universally acknowledged to rely on an incorrect reading. The doctor treats Heraclitus pedantically, as though the latter needed a wise doctor to express himself, claiming that Heraclitus’ “mode of expression certainly leaves much to be desired” (187a4) and that, taken at face value, the claim is “patently absurd” (187a6–7). Eryximachus reveals his lack of understanding of the philosophical point of the saying, never mind the enigmatic nature of Heraclitean aphorisms. His insistent insertion of “later” and “prior” (187b1; cf. 187c1) to modify pre-harmonic states and emphasize the asynchronic nature of the phenomenon are ham-handed and clearly *mal apropos*.²³

(d) *Knowledge and/or Wisdom Exposed as Useless and/or Fraudulent*

Before elaborating on this feature of the imposter, it will be worthwhile to pause and to make two important distinctions: first, between Eryximachus’ (I) knowledge of medicine, narrowly speaking, and (II) his alleged wisdom, that is, his knowledge beyond medicine, and second, between (1) exposing someone’s knowledge as useless and (2) exposing it as fraudulent, or nonexistent. To anticipate, on my reading, Eryximachus’ medical knowledge is exposed as useless *in a certain sense* (I–1), and his alleged wisdom is exposed as fraudulent (II–2). There are two moments in the dialogue

²³ Nehamas and Woodruff 1989: *ad loc.* Rowe acknowledges that the interpretation is flawed, but thinks that Eryximachus is being tongue-in-cheek (1999: 62 n. 34). See the extensive discussion of this passage in Levin 2009: 290–8.

when the *value* of Eryximachus' medical knowledge is called into question: at the very beginning of the dialogue and in the middle of his speech.

When we first see Eryximachus in the dialogue, he is giving advice based on his medical knowledge: he says, "If one thing is absolutely clear from medicine, it is this, that inebriation is bad for everyone" (177c8–d2). It is worth noting that nearly everyone at the party, including Eryximachus, engaged in heavy drinking the night before, and what explains their refraining this evening is not Eryximachus' medical advice, nor even the fact that the lot of them are hung over – it is, rather, the fact that Agathon "is not up to drinking heavily" (177b6–8). Eryximachus proclaims this to be "a lucky stroke (*Hermaion*)!" for the light drinkers, including himself and Phaedrus (176c1–2). Further, after Eryximachus declares drinking to be bad, he continues: "I myself would never wish—if I could help it anyway—to drink heavily, nor would I advise another to do so, especially when one has a hangover" (176d2–4). Eryximachus thus admits that he doesn't always take his own advice, and, as we know, most of the participants, including Agathon and Socrates, do drink heavily after the arrival of Alcibiades. Last, Eryximachus also mentions that Socrates, who is immune to the effects of alcohol, is an exception to his proclamations on drinking (176c3–5), and this suggests that medical advice, dedicated as it is to the maintenance of the body, is useless for a philosopher.

It is in light of this passage and its implications that we should understand the force of Eryximachus' discussion of "a serious issue" in medicine, one that is parallel to the difficulty of "enjoying the pleasures of the vulgar Muse" without "slipping into debauchery" (187e2–3). This issue is, in Eryximachus' own words, "how properly to manage the desires related to the craft of fine cooking (*tais peri tēn opsopoiikēn technēn epithumiais*), so that one may enjoy its pleasure without becoming ill" (187e4–6). There are several things to notice here: first, this is the only practical medical issue he raises in his speech, and it seems rather trivial, especially when compared with the grand claims about education, astronomy and divination that surround it;²⁴ second, this may be another implicit pun on the name of Eryximachus; third, it continues the tendency in the speech to pile up knowledge-terms and it seems pompous to refer to "prepared food" via such an elaborate locution; fourth, classifying cooking as a *technē*, at

²⁴ This is not to deny that nutrition formed an important part of medicine as conceived by fifth- and fourth-century practitioners. But cf. the critical remarks about this aspect of medicine in *Rep.* 406c–408b.

best, reveals an unreflective epistemology;²⁵ fifth, and perhaps most significantly, it suggests that the medical art is really about *bodily pleasure* – the focus on filling and emptying in the speech seems to confirm this (cp. the accounts of pleasure in the *Gorgias* and *Philebus*), and one might further add that his advice on drinking earlier in the dialogue resulted in each person drinking “as much as he wants” (176e5) or “according to pleasure (*pros hēdonēn*)” (176e3). Thus, in raising this issue, Eryximachus seems unwittingly to undermine the value of his medical knowledge.

It is not, then, that Plato wants to deny that Eryximachus has medical knowledge. Indeed, he does manage to cure Aristophanes’ hiccups, though the disjunctive nature of the prescription perhaps suggests that medicine lacks precision.²⁶ The core point is that this knowledge is only useful for one who cares about the body and filling and emptying it.²⁷ From the philosopher’s perspective, these are trivial concerns – in the *Symposium*, Socrates is presented as perfectly indifferent to whether he abstains from drinking or drinks heavily, whether he enjoys a big feast or does not eat for days, whether he has weather-appropriate clothing and shoes or not, whether he sleeps or does not sleep. What possible use could Eryximachus’ advice be for him? This is, of course, a modification of Old Comedy’s use of imposter motif, which takes the common man as its standard, but one would not expect Plato to slavishly follow Aristophanes.

4.3. *Eryximachus’ Speech as a Parody of Medical Discourse*

If the preceding is correct, then it already provides a good deal of evidence in favor of taking the speech as a parody. Recall that parody, as I defined it, targets “a text, methodology or genre.” In this case, it seems clear that the medical texts of the Hippocratic corpus are a relevant target, along with the methodology that they seem to endorse, and the genre of medical display speeches, of which some of the Hippocratic texts are arguably examples.²⁸ The proponents of the serious approach have done all of the work in finding the relevant Hippocratic texts, such that it would be hard to deny

²⁵ See Levin 2009: 299–301. In the *Gorgias*, fine cooking is classified quite emphatically as an *empeiria* and not a *technē* (462d–e).

²⁶ Cf. *Phil.*, in which medicine, along with music, is classified as an *empeiria* (55e–56b).

²⁷ Cf. *Rep.*, in which certain applications of medicine are associated with “excessive care of the body” (407b5–6).

²⁸ Jouanna 1984; Hunter 2004: 53–4; McPherran 2006: 76–7. Hunter makes “the medical profession and its theorizing” (2004: 54) the target of the parody, while McPherran identifies it as “high-flying medical rhetoric” (2006: 76–7).

that the speech is an imitation of them. I would like to pick out two ways in which the parody amplifies, goes beyond, or exceeds its target and what kind of criticism we might discern from the parody. To anticipate, I suggest that the parody targets medical methodology, insofar as it purports to a more general relevance, that is, to have implications beyond medicine, narrowly construed. In short, the parody focuses its critique on the alleged *scope* of medical knowledge.

First, what I describe previously as Eryximachus' pedantic use of language functions also, within the speech, as a parodic accumulation. Such linguistic accumulations are often employed to reveal that the target discourse is nothing but the repetition of high-flown terminology. Eryximachus is demanding by repetition, precisely what the arguments of the Hippocratic *De Arte* try to accomplish, namely that the status of *technē* be firmly established for medicine, but his repetitions extend well beyond references to medicine, and indeed, there are knowledge terms all over the place. The parodic point seems to be – not that medicine is not really a kind of knowledge – but rather that medicine thinks it contains more knowledge than it really does. Indeed, Eryximachus goes beyond what actual medical authors seemed to want to claim. We might, in particular, pick out *De Victu* 1.11–24 as being especially genial in this regard, since it too foregrounds medicine as a preeminent *technē* with special insight into the other crafts: “[T]hough the crafts they employ are like the nature of the human being, they do not know it” (1.11).²⁹ Since medicine knows the nature of the human being, it better understands those other crafts: divination, iron-work, shoe-making, carpentry, building, music, cooking, basket-weaving, etc. The basic strategy of Eryximachus is the same as the author of *De Victu* in that medicine possesses a structural insight that gives it a special epistemic status. However, Eryximachus goes beyond *De Victu*'s author in the case of music and divination, and with the inclusion of astronomy. The Hippocratic author restricted himself, in the first case, to the sounds made by musical instruments (1.18), and in the second, to forms of divination that do not involve the gods (1.12). Eryximachus extends his analyses to include both musical education and “friendship between gods and humans” (188d1),³⁰ and he includes astronomy, which seems

²⁹ Translations of the Hippocratic texts are from the Loeb editions with some emendations: Jones 1923 and 1931.

³⁰ There may be historical irony at work in Eryximachus' inclusion of divination: Eryximachus was denounced as having taken part in the mutilation of the herms (Andocides, *On the Mysteries* 1.35), that is, the defacement of the faces (Thuc. 6.27) and genitals (Ar. *Lj.* 1093–4) of the statues of

to lack a practical function – how can one “doctor” the heavens? Thus, he extends his epistemic authority even further, making the Hippocratic author look modest by comparison.

Second, connected to medicine’s epistemic authority is a methodological focus on bodies and an ontological point about the priority of bodies, or physical nature. Connected to this is an understanding of human nature in terms of the human body. The fundamental point is that medicine emerges as a rival to philosophy both on the nature of the whole and on the nature of human being. One might recall here the passage in the *Phaedrus* in which understanding the body is made dependent on understanding the whole (270c). As I understand that claim, it is meant to subordinate medicine to philosophy. Consider *De vetere medicina*’s take on debates within medicine:

[My] view is, first, that all that philosophers or physicians have said or written on natural science no more pertains to medicine than to painting. I also hold that clear knowledge about natural science can be acquired from medicine and from no other source, and that one can attain this knowledge when medicine itself has been properly comprehended, but till then it is quite impossible – I mean to possess this information, what man is, by what causes he is made, and similar points accurately. (20.1–14)

Like Eryximachus, the Hippocratic author seeks to displace philosophy as the proper route to understanding human nature and sets up medicine as the appropriate methodology for investigation into nature in general. Eryximachus goes even further than the ambitions voiced here and in *De Victu*, since he wants his epistemic authority to encompass the gods as well. That is, this Hippocratic author wants to restrict investigation into those physical matters that may affect humans – the scope here is limited, whereas that of Eryximachus seems unlimited. Eryximachus’ move amplifies the actual epistemic ambitions of medicine into a domain that seems virtually impossible for the empirical medical methodology (and physicalist ontology) to get a foothold.

I would like to end this section by reflecting on how Aristophanes’ comment on Eryximachus’ speech seems to confirm my reading. To repeat, Aristophanes said, “It makes me wonder whether the ‘orderly sort of Love’ in the body calls for the sounds and itchings that constitute a sneeze, because the hiccups stopped immediately when I applied the Sneeze

Hermes in the city. Plato’s audience would likely have been aware of this and perhaps found his remarks evocative. That Plato has Eryximachus exclaim “*Hermaion!*” (176c1) earlier in the dialogue may serve to confirm this line of thinking.

treatment" (189a3–6). The violent and disorderly cure for the hiccups stand as a counterexample to Eryximachus' grand theory – who better than Aristophanes to deliver a mundane yet fatal blow to the epistemic pretensions of the doctor? It is as though Aristophanes said, "Your remedy works, dear doctor, but it shows that your theorizing is bullshit."

4.4 *A Diagnosis*

If the preceding analyses are on target, then we have seen sufficient number of symptoms that we may diagnose Eryximachus with self-ignorant foolishness. He has craft-knowledge, and indeed, he may even be good at it, but he greatly overvalues his own knowledge both by thinking it to be more important than it actually is and by thinking it gives him a grander insight into, or vision of, the whole. He suffers from the same flaw as those craftsmen described in the *Apology*: "each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other more important pursuits, and the error of this overshadowed the wisdom that he had" (22d6–8). Eryximachus' encomium to Love turns out to be an encomium to medicine, and thus an encomium to himself.³¹ Thus, I think it is safe to conclude that Plato regarded his character, Eryximachus, as a self-ignorant pretender to wisdom, who is both laughable and the proper subject for a comedy. Given that Eryximachus is a representative of certain medical theorists of his time, the criticism seems to hold of a certain type who believes that medicine holds the key to wisdom. Part of the point seems to be to show that the ambitions of medicine's empirical methodology in understanding the whole – including human nature – are misguided. Thus, Plato is serious about making Eryximachus ridiculous, since he embodies a seriously ridiculous flaw, self-ignorance, that is characteristic of practitioners of medicine at the time. We should pay attention to Eryximachus and his speech because it is comic and has comic content not in spite of its being comic.

One might object that I have not adduced decisive textual evidence against the reading of Eryximachus as *self-aware* and intentionally comic. This objection accepts that the speech is comic but insists that Eryximachus is its "author" not its target; in short, it denies that Eryximachus is an imposter but accepts that the speech is a parody. Indeed, even on my view, Eryximachus lacks one hallmark of the imposter, namely, the concern to make money. Nevertheless, I think the weight of the evidence as I have

³¹ Cf. Hunter 2004: 56.

presented it seems to be squarely in favor of the thesis that Eryximachus is an unintentionally, rather than intentionally, comic figure. That said, even if I conceded, for the sake of argument, that Eryximachus delivers the parody of medical discourse willfully, as it were, the core philosophical upshot of my position remains, since the speech still functions as critique of the epistemic ambitions of medicine.

5. Conclusion: Eryximachus, Diotima and the Order of the Speeches

In this conclusion, I want very briefly to situate Eryximachus' speech in relation to the order of the speeches, and to Diotima's speech in particular. Here, I come back to the questions of whether Eryximachus' speech contradicts itself in its presentation of love and whether it formulates a Platonically acceptable theory of Nature, that is, to what extent the speech really is *coherent* and *insightful*.

It is clear that Eryximachus' speech is an advance on those of Pausanias and Phaedrus. Their focus on individual love between humans seems to correlate with the initial rung on the ladder – “one body” – whereas Eryximachus' generalizing move seems to get us to the next step: “all bodies” (210a–b).³² Further, Eryximachus' emphasis on “knowledge” is an advance on Pausanias' reliance on “custom” – this is also verified by the ordering of the ladder of love (210c–d). This is not necessarily to “place” Eryximachus anywhere on the ladder, but rather to show that his concerns are appropriate to a higher rung than those of his predecessors.

It seems equally clear that Eryximachus' speech is not to be taken as seriously as those of Aristophanes and Agathon. Socrates provides a direct refutation of Agathon and an indirect one (via Diotima) of Aristophanes, but he provides no such attention to Eryximachus.³³ One way to see the dialectic between the speeches of Eryximachus, Aristophanes and Agathon is as follows: whereas Eryximachus makes love do double duty, both as the thing wanting (the desire) and the thing wanted (the aim), Aristophanes restricts love to the thing wanting (the desire), while Agathon makes love the thing wanted (the aim). Aristophanes and Agathon both see that these must be separated, and while Aristophanes is right about the desire but

³² Cf. McPherran 2006: 74.

³³ Socrates does say that Eryximachus “competed well” (194a1–2), but this can hardly mean that he made true claims, as McPherran seems to want (2006: 77 n. 17), since he is even more effusive about Agathon's speech (198a6, b2–3) before very quickly exposing it as incoherent. It does mean, as Edelstein rightly points out, that the doctor's speech was not the worst (1945: 94).

wrong about the aim and Agathon is right about the aim but wrong about the desire, it seems that Eryximachus is wrong about both. This way of looking at the progression lends some support to the idea that Eryximachus is (wrongly) conflating or confusing the aim and the desire in his account of love. Thus, in my view, despite the ingenious reconstructions provided by Konstan and Young-Bruehl and by Rowe, Dover's criticism of incoherence still stands.³⁴

We might say that the problem is precisely that Eryximachus remains stuck at the level of the body. He begins with *phusis*, and his analysis cannot escape the parameters set by this. It is thus highly unclear how to fit Eryximachus' passing mention of the soul at the beginning (186a) and brief talk of virtue, happiness and goods at the end (188d) into the physicalist framework he articulates. The medical writers do not deny the existence of soul but rather give it a physical basis: in *De Victu* I.7, for example, it is claimed that "soul consists in a blend of fire and water" (cp. I.25). It is hard to see how Eryximachus would avoid some such account of soul, and thus it is hard to see how Plato could endorse this view of nature. McPherran, who sees the view of nature as Platonically acceptable, admits that the picture is physicalist (2006: 87), but he cannot have it both ways. If physicalist reading of the speech is correct, then Eryximachus would be wholly concerned with bodies and what Diotima derides as "mortal nonsense" (211e3). I am therefore inclined to accept the opinion of Gildersleeve, who considered the idea of identifying Eryximachus with Plato himself to be "as monstrous a theory in [his] eyes, as if Shakespeare had been supposed to identify himself with Malvolio" (1909: 110).

³⁴ Konstan and Young-Bruehl do not provide compelling evidence to indicate that Eryximachus *self-consciously* marks the distinction between the two kinds of love. Rowe's solution involves attributing love (desire) exclusively to the opposites (1999: 56–7), a move that ignores 186c5–7, where Eryximachus quite directly attributes them to the body – this is what I label as (5) above, and given the centrality of the claim – it is the definition of medicine – it is hard to see how one gets around it.

PLATO'S *Symposium*

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