

*Why Agathon's Beauty Matters**Francisco J. Gonzalez*

There is a tendency to treat Agathon's speech as the most superficial and philosophically vacuous of Plato's *Symposium*. Though acknowledging that "some valuable points are made," Waterfield, for example, characterizes Agathon's speech as "little more than a tour de force" (2009: xxiv) and concludes: "Underneath the pretty exterior lies a conventional encomium and a conventional view of Love, which reflects the god's portraits we can find in paintings and in literature. It is therefore a perfect speech for Agathon the artist" (xxv). Bury a century earlier likewise judged the content of the speech purely conventional and suggested that nothing better describes it than the Pauline phrase: "Though he speaks with the tongues of men and of angels, he is become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." (Bury 1909: xxxvi). To add just one more to the countless examples of such a negative judgment, Brisson describes the speech as "empty but magnificently constructed" (2006: 245). This impression is of course encouraged by Socrates who characterizes the speech as a piece of Gorgianic rhetoric concerned only with impressing through its choice of words and phrases and not at all with telling the truth about its subject. In other words, Socrates suggests that the speech is an attractive or beautiful one (198b3), but not a good one. Indeed, the speech makes love itself something merely attractive, like the author in whose image it is conceived: despite his name, Agathon is more pretty boy than good.

But careful consideration of Agathon's speech and its place in the dialogue shows that this assessment cannot stand. Considering first its place in the dialogue, Agathon's speech immediately precedes that of Socrates and is thus given a prominent, central place in the dialogue. If we see the series of speeches as an ascent of some sort, Agathon's is near the top. One could of course reject the view that the speeches represent an ascent, as many scholars have done precisely in order to avoid giving Agathon's speech too much honor. Dorter's argument that the speeches cannot form an ascent is based on his unquestioned assumption that the

speech of Agathon “even allowing for its humorous intent, can hardly be placed above (or even alongside of) the inspired myth of his predecessor Aristophanes” (1992: 253–254). Bury already made the same point in arguing that the thesis of an ascending order is made untenable by “the obvious fact that Agathon’s speech is in no real sense the best or most important of the series; rather, from the point of view of Socrates, it is the worst” (1909: liii).¹ But we do not need to assume such an ascent in order to see in the position of Agathon’s speech a sign of its importance. The reason is that the *Symposium* explicitly justifies this position by making it clear that Socrates’ contest is with Agathon more than with any other participant. Right near the start we have Socrates’ ironic comparison of his wisdom to that of Agathon and then Agathon’s suggestion that Dionysus will soon decide between their claims to wisdom (175e7–9). We are reminded of this towards the dialogue’s end when Alcibiades in the guise of Dionysus first crowns Agathon and then, upon seeing Socrates, crowns him as well (note that *both* are crowned).² Furthermore, if Socrates claims expertise in love (177d7–8), Eryximachus suggests that Socrates *and* Agathon are the two experts in love among the party (193e4–5). Now why would Plato set up this contest and this rivalry if he thought that Agathon was a mere airhead with nothing but pretty words to offer on the subject of love? Agathon and Socrates are the last to speak on the topic of *erōs* because *both* are recognized to have the most to say on the topic and therefore to be the real contenders in the contest of praising *erōs*.

It might seem that Agathon, far from being any kind of expert, as a poet only panders to public opinion and therefore is not worthy of having anything he says taken seriously by Socrates. This is why the short

¹ One exception to this tendency is Sedley 2006. Defending what he calls the “crescendo” interpretation of the speeches, Sedley interprets Agathon’s speech as being the one closest to Socrates’ own, even calling it “sub-Socratic.” As will be noted later, some of the observations Sedley makes in support of this reading coincide with the points made here, though some exception will be taken to his overall account of Agathon’s role in the dialogue and of his relation to Socrates.

² A point rightly emphasized by Robinson 2004: 93. Robinson interprets this double-crowning as an indication of two sides of the worship of Dionysus: the public polis-cult, represented by Agathon with his dramatic victory at a Dionysian festival, and the private mystery-cult, represented by Socrates through his account of *erōs* in the voice of Diotima and in the language of the mystery religions: see especially 87. Agathon and Socrates on this interpretation are both legitimated, the first as representing discourse that “is exoteric and public, and extends to *all* citizens, who *all* partake of it” and the second as representing discourse that “is esoteric and private, and extends only to those few citizens who are capable of meeting its very high demands, and who also participate in the public discourse” (98). But this interpretation appears to eliminate any real *contest* between Agathon and Socrates: if each has his own domain, what is the contest *for*?

conversation in which Socrates engages Agathon prior to Agathon's speech is of much importance. Here, in response to Socrates' suggestion that he cannot possibly be worried about the opinions of the few present at the party after having addressed a vast multitude in the theater, Agathon protests that he is not so "full of the theater" (194b7) as to ignore that we should esteem only the opinions of the wise and not those of the many (194b6–8). His plays may be "crowd-pleasers," but Agathon no less than Socrates values wisdom and expertise above popular opinion. Indeed, two surviving fragments of the work of the historical Agathon appear to express well Agathon's view here and thus his kinship with Socrates: "No envy would there be in the life of men / If we were all constituted equal by nature;" "To envy wisdom more than wealth is noble" (fr. 24 and 25; Nauck 1889: 768).

If we turn to Agathon's speech itself, we see that far from being empty rhetoric and saying nothing true, it is a conceptually coherent and sophisticated speech that makes for the first time a number of important points with which Socrates will himself agree. These contributions can be outlined as follows:

- 1) Agathon claims that we must distinguish between the nature of Love and what it effects or produces, criticizing previous speakers for neglecting the former (194e5–195a5). This is presumably why Socrates engages only Agathon in discussion: the latter, unlike the others, has something to say about the nature of love. As Sheffield observes, "If one must begin an investigation, as Socrates suggests, with an identification of the subject matter, then examining Agathon's speech will be the best place to start" (2006: 35). Socrates will therefore explicitly praise the soundness of Agathon's methodology and embrace it as his own.
- 2) This methodological shift brings with it a shift in how the causality of love is understood. While previous speakers treated love as a verb only rather than as a subject, so that it is a property of people or things that "do" the loving, Agathon makes love itself the subject and cause of loving. This shift in perspective is not only adopted by Socrates, but is essential to his entire argument. As David Sedley has shown (2006: 56–57), the argument by which Socrates tries to prove that love lacks beauty and goodness works at all only if the subject is understood to be not people who love but the love itself that causes them to love. Lovers can of course possess good and beautiful things and still be lovers, but the love itself that causes them to love must, as desire for what is good

and beautiful, be utterly lacking in these properties. In other words, in loving I can myself possess good and beautiful things, but the love that causes me to desire good and beautiful things cannot itself in any way be good or beautiful. In this way, the very starting point of Socrates' account of love would be impossible without the shift towards treating love as itself the cause and subject of loving brought about by Agathon.

- 3) In addressing the nature of love, Agathon argues it to be happy because both beautiful and good. This identification of happiness with the possession of goodness and beauty will of course play a central role in Socrates' speech (204e1–7). But Agathon is as conceptually careful here as he is in his opening distinction between the nature and the works of love: rather than simply conflating the properties of "beautiful" and "good," he argues for love's possession of each in turn by further analyzing each property into a set of characteristics Love can be shown to possess.
- 4) Love is shown to be beautiful by being shown to be young, delicate, supple and always in bloom. Though these may at first appear to be trivial characteristics that tell us nothing important about the nature of Love, Agathon's argument in fact has him defending some important claims that imply a critical distancing from the poetic tradition. Love cannot be old because the violent deeds the poets attribute to the gods at the beginning could not have been caused by love, but only by necessity. In Agathon's view, poets like Homer and Parmenides have at the very least failed to make the important distinction between love and necessity, a distinction that Agathon will make again later in the speech to connect beauty and the good in their opposition to necessity. But here he suggests that the poets may not even be telling the truth in their attribution of violent deeds to the gods, since after citing their views, he adds: "If they spoke the truth" (195c2–3).³
- 5) In defending the claim that Love is delicate, Agathon cites Homer, but in a strikingly clever and subversive way. Citing a passage in which

³ Sedley suggests that we understand 195c1–3 as follows: "and the ancient goings-on concerning the gods, of which Homer and Parmenides speak, were due to Necessity, not to Love, <as they themselves would say> if they were speaking the truth" (2006: 67–68). On this reading, Agathon is agreeing with Phaedrus that Homer and Parmenides made Love rather than Necessity rule during the time of castrations, etc., and is claiming that the poets were wrong. Agathon is in this case, as Sedley notes, simply "rejecting their authority" (69). Yet Sedley thereby makes Agathon in another respect more conservative as he has him not question the attribution of immoral actions to the gods (only their attribution to Love), whereas on the other reading ("if they spoke the truth," i.e., about the ancient goings-on) Agathon at least doubts this.

Homer describes Delusion (*Atē*) as having delicate feet because she walks on the heads of men (195d4–5), Agathon first substitutes Love for Delusion, as if he were correcting the poet for confusing the two just as he confused love with necessity. In another important correction, he then claims that Love has delicate feet not because it walks on men's heads: after all, heads are not really soft! Instead, love makes its home in what is truly soft: the souls and characters of men and gods (195e4–7). Agathon thus uses a rather trivial anthropomorphism in a rather subversive way in order to locate love in the soul, as Socrates himself will do.

- 6) Turning to the argument that Love is not only beautiful but good, he analyzes the latter into the virtues of justice, moderation, bravery and wisdom (196b5–197b3), an analysis that can be recognized as distinctly Platonic.⁴ In the judgment of Sedley, “Agathon . . . is speaking with a sufficiently Socratic (or Platonic) voice for it to be worth tracking his ideas and seeing what will become of them in the hands of Socrates himself” (2006: 59). Specifically, Sedley sees the serious content running through Agathon's account of the virtues as lying in the notion that virtue is a matter of non-coercive control, a notion that “has obvious enough resonances with the theory of virtue, in both city and soul, developed . . . in Republic 4” (59). Agathon proceeds to discuss each virtue one by one, defending in each case its attribution to Love. There has been much indignation at the weakness of Agathon's arguments. Agathon's claim that love is just because it commits no violence is described by Dover as “a somewhat reckless statement, considering the importance of *erōs* as a motive of violence and fraud in myth, history and everyday life” (1980: 127). But then would Socrates' account of love be any less “reckless”? The important point is that all the speakers are engaged in the explicit project of defending love against its more negative depiction in earlier literature.⁵ But what of Agathon's other arguments? Is love really temperate because it is a desire stronger than, and thus able to control, other desires? Is it

⁴ See the interpretation of this part of Agathon's speech in Ficino, *In Convivium* V.8. Citing Adam's observation that the identification of good character with just these four virtues appears to be new with Plato, Bury rather absurdly counters that “a peculiarly Platonic tenet would hardly be put into the mouth of Agathon” (1909: 77). See also Rowe 1998: 164, who insists that there is nothing Platonic about the virtues Agathon describes.

⁵ One surviving fragment (though of uncertain attribution) might show that Agathon was well aware of the darker side of love: “Should I judge you hubris or Cypris? Desire or distress of the heart?” (fr. 31; Nauck 1889: 769).

courageous because the god of love is stronger than the god of war? But not sufficient importance has been given to the fact that, weak as they are, Agathon still gives *arguments*. Can that be said of any of the preceding speeches? Even Socrates' speech, put into the mouth of a priestess, has been judged, in its more positive part, as rather lacking in the argument department. Furthermore, Agathon acknowledges, as we will see, that there is some playfulness mixed in with seriousness in his speech. Can a Platonist condemn *that*? Most importantly, Agathon's arguments, however playfully presented, are not as absurd as they are often taken to be. When scholars, for example, find ridiculous the argument that *erōs* is temperate because it is a desire stronger than, and therefore capable of controlling, other desires, one must ask why they don't find the same view ridiculous when defended by Socrates. Have they forgotten that the opposition between temperance and erotic desire in Lysias' speech and Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus* is explicitly rejected in Socrates' second speech where true temperance (256b1–2, as distinct from the contemptible purely 'mortal' temperance, 256e5) is achieved through erotic desire? Have they forgotten that in the *Symposium* itself Socrates describes true virtue as being the product of the erotic desire for beauty? In arguing that temperance, rather than involving an opposition to all desire, is rather the ruling of lower desires by a higher desire for a higher object, Agathon is defending a sophisticated and distinctly Platonic conception of temperance.

- 7) Among the virtues, Agathon significantly devotes the greatest amount of space to the *wisdom* of love (196d5–197b9). Surviving fragments show Agathon to have been, as he is here, especially concerned with the notion of *technē* (see frs. 6, 8, and 20; Nauck 1889: 764–765, 767). Socrates' own tendency to compare with *technē* the kind of wisdom that constitutes virtue is notorious. Sedley, noting the importance of Agathon's emphasis on wisdom, comments that nevertheless "Agathon's view of wisdom (*sophia*, the goal of philosophy) is a deeply unphilosophical one, and the same may be said of his treatment of virtue in general" (2006: 62). Agathon of course does not include philosophy in his treatment of wisdom, but to consider this a defect is to assume that Socrates has already won the contest and that the nature of philosophy and its relation to other forms of knowledge is something perfectly clear. Furthermore, while Agathon here characterizes love as being a poet like himself, he does so in the context of describing love as a "poet" in the broadest sense possible that includes

not only all artistic production, but also all natural and technical production. Love's wisdom is an ability to produce or create in general. This is another idea that will be taken up by Socrates with his characterization of love as giving birth and with the suggestion that poetry like love has both a broader and a narrower meaning (205b8–c10).⁶

- 8) In the context of claiming that the gods associated with different arts discovered these arts through the power of love, Agathon returns to the idea that what reigned at the beginning, if the stories of the poets are to be believed, was not love, but necessity (197b7).⁷ But this idea now enables him to connect the notions of beauty and goodness that have until now been kept distinct. Agathon first claims that the love that ended the disputes between the gods and inspired the different arts was the love of *beauty* (197b5). In thus treating beauty as the object of love, Agathon is of course introducing the idea that will prove absolutely central to Socrates' own account; in later critiquing the ambiguity in Agathon's formulation, Socrates is also acknowledging a debt. But Agathon goes even further: he proceeds to conclude that it is the love of *beauty* that brings what is *good* to both men and gods (*ek tou eran tōn kalōn pant'agatha gegonen kai theois kai anthrōpois*, 197b8–9). Beauty, if distinct from the good, is still a cause for good. Again, the anticipation of Socrates is impossible to ignore, especially since for Agathon too it is apparently through providing wisdom that the love of beauty is a cause of good.
- 9) Finally, the speech concludes with a poetic peroration that is clearly distinguished from the rest of the speech in form, as it exhibits the rhythms and alliteration of verse,⁸ and adds nothing to its content, as it only recaps the main conclusions. Poet he may be, but Agathon still knows the difference between argument, however playfully expressed, and poetic flourish.

Agathon's speech is thus rigorously organized according to important conceptual distinctions: between the nature of Love and its effects, between beauty and goodness as the two components of Love's

⁶ See Stokes 1986: 156–157. Sedley also stresses the way in which Agathon's connection of love with poesis and his broadening of the sense of both terms anticipates Diotima (2006: 60–61), even suggesting that “Diotima is formally theorizing what Agathon has already done *de facto*” (61).

⁷ Much is made of this distinction by Ficino, *In Convivium* V.11. In a surviving fragment of Agathon we find *technē*, here associated with love, explicitly opposed to both necessity and chance (fr. 8; Nauck 1889: 765).

⁸ See Dover 1980: 124.

happiness, between the different characteristics that comprise beauty and the good respectively, between the analysis itself and a poetic peroration that only recaps the conclusions of the analysis in verse. Furthermore, if we consider all of the anticipations of key points in Socrates' own speech outlined here, it seems impossible to deny that the contributions of Agathon's speech far outdo in importance the contributions of all the other speeches.

But why, then, does Socrates dismiss the speech as mere pretty rhetoric with no truth content? One puzzle in Socrates' reaction to the speech is indeed just how unfair it is. While Agathon's speech does contain some pretty Gorgianic rhetoric, especially in its last part, it also contains, as we have seen, much more than that. Most importantly, Agathon is quite aware of the distinction between this kind of rhetoric and the attempt to say the truth about love since he concludes with these words: "Let this, Phaedrus, be my account dedicated to the gods, partaking partly of play (*paidia*), partly of measured seriousness (*spoudē metria*), to the extent of my ability" (197e7–8). Belfiore rightly finds in this statement "a self-awareness shared by none of the other five speakers" (2012: 137) and therefore an indication that Agathon's *amathia* "is less serious than that of the other speakers" (136). Here Agathon acknowledges the playfulness of his speech, playfulness that would presumably include the play with words and sounds, the mischievously subversive use of the poets, the more blatantly sophistical argumentation (e.g. Love is courageous because Aphrodite is stronger than Ares!), and the flights of poetic fancy, especially in the entire concluding section: precisely the kind of playfulness, in other words, that readers of Plato find in his own dialogues! Yet Agathon also claims a measure of seriousness and with ample justification, as we have seen.⁹ What, then, is Socrates' reaction? Unbelievably he says: "I didn't find the rest quite so wonderful, but who would not be enchanted in hearing the ending with its beauty of language?" (198b3–5). Socrates thus chooses to ignore the serious content of the speech and focus only on the beautiful language concentrated in its conclusion!

⁹ Centrone notes that this mixture of seriousness and play is what characterizes the true art of writing in the *Phaedrus* 276bff. (in Nucci 2009: xxv), a connection also made by Heidegger in a seminar on the *Phaedrus* he gave in the summer of 1932 (2012: 143). Rowe rightly observes that with this comment Agathon distinguishes himself from Gorgias (in a way, I would add, that Socrates deliberately ignores!): while Gorgias characterized his *Encomium of Helen* as mere play (*paignton*, fr. 11. 21), Agathon insists on the partial or moderate seriousness of his own speech (1998: 166). Rowe nevertheless asserts: "It is not clear where exactly the seriousness of Agathon's speech is supposed to lie; but then P. clearly wishes to leave us with a picture of someone who has a distinctly uncertain relationship with anything resembling the truth" (166).

This unfair focus should give us some pause before simply accepting the critique that follows.¹⁰ Indeed, we should remember that Socrates is in a contest with Agathon, which means that he naturally seeks to belittle the contribution of his rival.

The upshot of Socrates' critique is that Agathon's is a beautiful speech, but lacks truth (see 198e2, 199a7, b3). This is indeed a puzzling critique in a number of ways. First, as we have seen, there is much in Agathon's speech that Socrates himself will acknowledge as "true" in his own speech. Therefore, as we have seen, Socrates can make this critique only by initially ignoring the serious content of Agathon's speech and focusing on the poetic peroration. Second, Socrates targets with his critique not Agathon in particular, *but all of the preceding speeches*.¹¹ He claims that none of them understood an encomium as required to tell the truth, but thought it sufficient to say anything to magnify the subject, whether true or false (198d7–e2). Third, when after this general condemnation he turns to Agathon's speech in particular, the first thing he does is praise as correct the organizing principle of Agathon's speech: i.e. that we need to exhibit the nature of *Erōs* before exhibiting its effects (199c3–5), a principle reiterated at the start of Socrates' own speech (201d8–e2). This is not to deny that the principle undergoes some modification in Socrates' adoption of it. As Sedley has argued (2006: 52–54), Agathon's starting point is an account of what love is like (*hoios estin*, 195a4) that takes the form of a description of the qualities that make love good and beautiful, rather than an account of what love is, i.e. its essential nature, which is Socrates' own starting point. If Sedley, accordingly, concludes that "Agathon's method is not yet fully Socratic" (54), that is not to deny the extent to which it *is* Socratic. Fourth, the question to Agathon with which Socrates begins his elenchus is formulated thus: "Come, since you have so beautifully and magnificently (*kalōs kai megaloprepōs*) expounded in other respects what Love is, tell me this about it: is Love such as to be the love of something or of nothing?" (199c6–d2). Finally, while Socrates indeed goes on to refute a central contention of Agathon's speech, i.e., that Love is itself beautiful and good, he claims at the start of his own speech that he once believed exactly what Agathon believes (201e3–5). There is no reason to dismiss this as mere politeness; Socrates has not

¹⁰ Nucci appears to consider Socrates' response here as justified by the weakness and therefore negligibility of Agathon's arguments (2009: p. 115, n. 189). This is why it is important to show that the "serious" part of Agathon's speech is not so weak and empty as Nucci and others take it to be.

¹¹ Though Rowe (1998: 167) insists that Agathon is the main target.

shown himself elsewhere in the dialogue to be very concerned with politeness. Rather, if he engages Agathon in discussion, this is because he recognizes in Agathon a serious position that he himself once held. Agathon's view, after all, is not so obviously ridiculous or false. After outlining Socrates' refutation of Agathon, Sheffield rightly notes: "But this is not to say that Agathon's speech is nonsense. Socrates goes on to show that Agathon is right that *Erōs* has some relationship both to beauty and to divinity; he is muddled about the precise nature of those relationships. This is a muddle to which Socrates himself, apparently, was subject, before he met the mysterious Diotima (201e3–7)" (2006: 36). Dover, despite expressing "our" annoyance at Agathon's "verbal sophistries or his apparent inability to draw distinctions which, if drawn, would profoundly affect his generalizations" and claiming that the speech "is appropriate to a man whose business in life is the manipulation of language," must nevertheless concede: "In so far as it subsumes under *erōs* all kinds of desire for *ta kala* (197b8) and seems to attribute to this desire all good in the life of gods and men, it may be regarded as expressing, although in ways which make it immediately vulnerable to systematic criticism, some degree of 'right opinion' . . . on the role of *Erōs* as Diotima sees it" (1980: 123). Given that Diotima assigns "right opinion" to that same intermediate position occupied by *Erōs* and by the philosopher, this is actually high praise.¹² It is hard to avoid the conclusion: if all of the speeches failed to speak the truth about Love, Agathon's speech in Socrates' view came the closest and is the most deserving of serious discussion.¹³ Of course, this means that Socrates' judgment disagrees with the prevailing view in scholarship on the dialogue that tends to consider Agathon's speech the most vacuous and least worthy of serious discussion among all the speeches.

Presumably one reason why Agathon's speech has not been taken more seriously is Socrates' repeated description of the speech as "beautiful," reflecting Agathon's own extraordinary beauty,¹⁴ and the assumption that beauty is something superficial having little to do with truth. One of the

¹² See also Allen 1991: 44, n. 69.

¹³ As Centrone suggests, "il suo discorso sembra contenere molti spunti accettabili nell'ottica di Platone; ma forse proprio per questo sarà anche quello attaccato più direttamente nei suoi fondamenti" (in Nucci 2009: xxii). Stokes has sought to show how Socrates' critique of Agathon genuinely engages with the content of Agathon's speech, so that "Agathon sheds the foolish weakness he is often saddled with, just as Socrates sheds his overbearing rhetoric. This passage, at least, can now be read as a *dialogue*" (1986: 145).

¹⁴ Considering all the surviving testimony, Lévêque concludes: "Éclatante beauté, telle est donc l'impression qu'Agathon produisit sur tous ses contemporains" (1955: 36).

central points of similarity, however, between Socrates and Agathon is to be found in their understandings of the relation between beauty and goodness. Both neither completely identify the two terms nor see them as separable. Central to Socrates' own speech is Diotima's substitution of "good" for "beautiful" in order to arrive at the conclusion that what we seek from the possession of beautiful things is happiness (204d–e). At the same time, this substitution does not appear to presuppose a simple identity given the different roles assigned to the beautiful and the good in the higher mysteries: what the lover pursues, both in its different manifestations and in itself, is beauty and not the good, while the good, in the form of true virtue, is what the lover gives birth to through intercourse with beauty.¹⁵ The relation is thus neither a simple identity nor a sharp distinction. Socrates therefore would hardly be justified in dismissing the beauty of Agathon's speech, and indeed Agathon's own beauty and the beauty of love on his account, as *mere* beauty, as something superficial having no necessary connection to goodness. At the very least, this beauty of Agathon's is something that could lead us to the good.

It is significant that immediately after calling Agathon's speech beautiful, Socrates' asks him if anything good is not also beautiful (201c1–2). Some, such as Waterfield (2009: 84), have taken this to imply that the contrary is not true, i.e. that not everything beautiful is good, and have seen here an implicit critique of Agathon. But since what Socrates seeks to establish here is that to be deprived of beautiful things *is* to be deprived of good things, an opposition of the beautiful to the good (i.e. the suggestion that some beautiful things are bad) is not even implied. Even in his critique of Agathon's rhetoric, Socrates does not oppose beauty and truth, but rather suggests that they go together: a good encomium is one that *chooses the most beautiful truths* (198d3–6).¹⁶ Thus there is nothing to suggest that Socrates sees the relation between beauty and goodness or truth as a discordant one. It is hard to see, then, how Socrates could join so many modern commentators in dismissing Agathon and his speech as "merely" beautiful.

¹⁵ See Stokes 1986: 154–155 and 181. As he notes with regard to Diotima's "higher mysteries," "The functions of the good and of the beautiful in the argument and its exposition are quite different" (181). See also Sedley who denies that the good and the beautiful are ever identical in Plato's dialogues (2006: p. 49, n. 4).

¹⁶ As Nucci notes, commenting on this passage: "La bellezza segue la verità ma le dà anche luce" (2009: 117, n. 194).

As for Agathon himself, he surely is not guilty of simply reducing goodness to beauty. As we have seen, his speech clearly distinguishes between the two: he first sets out to show how *Erōs* is *kallistos* (195a8–196b5) and then how it is *aristos* (196b5–197b10). As Berg notes, “Agathon is thus the first speaker since Phaedrus to distinguish the beautiful and the good and he makes explicit what Phaedrus left implicit” (2010: 77).¹⁷ As we have also seen, however, Agathon relates the two characteristics, seeing the love of beauty as a means to acquiring what is good, as it is in the highest mysteries of Diotima’s account.¹⁸ Thus Agathon’s understanding of the relation between the good and the beautiful appears no different from Socrates’ own. Furthermore, far from sacrificing truth to beauty, Agathon questions the veracity of the poets¹⁹ and carefully distinguishes between the more serious and the more playful aspects of his own speech.

One must therefore suspect that the reason for the contest between Agathon and Socrates and for Socrates’ unfair critique of Agathon’s speech is that the beauty cultivated and promoted by the poet is not so easy to separate from the goodness pursued by the philosopher. The beautiful Agathon is not so indifferent to goodness and truth as Socrates pretends and Socrates is not so indifferent to beauty as he sometimes pretends. In the words of the *Philebus*, after all, in the nature of beauty lies the power of the good (64e5–6).²⁰

One might of course be tempted to identify Agathon with the mere appearance of the good while identifying Socrates with its reality, just as one might be tempted to identify poetry with mere imitation and philosophy with an unmediated grasp of the truth. Thus Allen, though showing the many ways in which Agathon’s speech anticipates Socrates’,

¹⁷ Yet Berg claims that Agathon goes on to conflate the two in attributing the power of effecting good to *erōs* as a poet, i.e. as a maker of images: “What Agathon shows, then, is that the beautiful is an image in speech of the good that speciously appropriates to itself the being of the good. Agathon’s entire speech is just such an image. His claim, then, that wisdom is the good is the beautiful masquerading as the good. His god *Erōs* in the wisdom of his making is the unreal unity of the beautiful and the good” (88). This critique I address later.

¹⁸ See Stokes 1986: 125–126, who claims that Agathon is trying to have things both ways. But isn’t Socrates as well?

¹⁹ Rowe simply dismisses this evidence: “whether Agathon has any interest at all in ‘truth’ must be at best an open question (cf. S. at 198d–e)” (1998: 163).

²⁰ Commenting on the distinction between beauty and the good in Agathon’s speech, Ficino concludes: “bonitatis florem quemdam esse pulchritudinem volumus” (V.1.40). But for Ficino there are two senses to this analogy: beauty is the flower of the good not only in the sense that it is the outward manifestation of inner goodness, but also in the sense that, as the flower carries the seed from which other flowers will grow, beauty leads us to the good (V.1.40).

concludes: "Both speeches are rhetorical. But Agathon's rhetoric deals with appearance, as Socrates' examination of it will show, and Diotima's with reality" (1991: 40). Likewise, Sedley, while emphasizing the Socratic content of Agathon's speech, in the end sees in Agathon nothing but "a pale ghost of the Platonic truth" and "mere 'images' of the philosophical understanding in which real virtue resides" (2006: 65). If Sedley acknowledges that Agathon's speech comes closest to the Platonic position, this "closest" is still in his view immeasurably far. For Berg, Agathon is "a peculiarly Socratic false image of Socrates whose sole expertise is erotics" (2010: 89). There can be no doubt that Agathon's speech shows him to be an imitator par excellence, as it literally depicts love *in his own image*. Furthermore, this is the characteristic of Agathon that is emphasized in his portrayal by Aristophanes in the *Thesmophoriazusae*. There, in the context of explaining why he is dressed as a woman, Agathon argues that the poet must himself be beautiful in order to compose beautiful plays, since "one necessarily composes things like one's nature" (l. 167). This is a principle both explicitly articulated in Agathon's speech in the *Symposium* when he cites with approval the old saying that like is drawn to like (195b5) and put to work there, since both the beauty of the speech itself and the beauty it attributes to love are only reflections of Agathon's own beauty. But if we return to Aristophanes' play, Agathon there is made to express the view that imitation is not simply the result of being good or beautiful, but can itself be that by which we become good and beautiful. In claiming that the poet must become like his characters, Agathon explains that "*mimēsis* can provide us with the things we do not possess" (l. 155–156).²¹ It is thus possible that in imitating the beauty and goodness of love Agathon seeks not only to reflect what he takes to be his own nature, but also further to become himself good and beautiful. Here it is worth noting that Socrates describes the young Agathon in the *Protagoras* as being not only very beautiful in appearance, but as having a beautiful and good nature (315d7–e1). Furthermore, it would be wrong to identify Agathon with the poetic tradition Plato otherwise criticizes. For one thing, as we have already noted, Agathon, unlike the other speakers, treats his poetic sources critically.²² This should not surprise us since Agathon's distinctive

²¹ Lèvêque sees here "une évolution dans la conception de l'artiste: il n'est plus le créateur d'une oeuvre qui exprime avec une nécessité intime sa nature profonde; il devient un acteur qui veut produire une impression et se prête, pour atteindre son but, à toutes les transformations de son être. A la place de la *phusis* naît la *technē*, à la place de l'inspiration qui contraint, la rhétorique préméditée" (1955: 125).

²² See Belfiore 2012: 136.

trait as a tragedian was to invent his own plots rather than imitate the traditional stories told by the poets.²³ And Agathon's theatre, from what we know of it, could be considered to be especially philosophical in character.²⁴

If we are tempted to think that Socrates has nothing to do with the imitation practiced by Agathon, we should first recall that Socrates goes to Agathon's party all dressed up because, he explains, Agathon is beautiful and he must go to him looking beautiful (*houtō kalos gegenēmenos*, 174a5). But then just a few lines later he alters a proverb to describe himself and Aristodemus as good men going unbidden to the feast of the good (174b4–5). So it is Socrates himself who is here not distinguishing between beauty and goodness, is ascribing both to Agathon, and is understanding our relation to both as one of imitation. Furthermore, if we are inclined to criticize Agathon for describing love in his own image, asserting that he thereby misses the truth about love, we should recall that Socrates does the same thing in describing love as ugly, barefoot and poor! Socrates is even like the Agathon of the *Thesmophoriazusae* in giving his speech in the guise of a woman! Finally, Agathon's claim in Aristophanes' play could be made Socrates' own: we become what we imitate and therefore the solution to not possessing goodness and beauty is to imitate them. In short, while there can be no doubt that what Agathon provides is in some sense an image, to assume that such an image is to be disparaged and rejected by the philosopher is to assume that the philosopher is capable of an unmediated access to the truth. Diotima of course describes such an ideal, but to believe that Socrates or any other philosopher could fully attain it, as

²³ "Nevertheless even in tragedy there are some plays with but one or two known names in them, the rest being inventions; and there are some without a single known name, e. g. Agathon's *Antheus*, in which both incidents and names are of the poet's invention, and it is no less delightful on that account" (Aristotle, *Poetics* 6, 1451b19–24). Lèvéque argues that this was the play with which Agathon achieved the victory celebrated in the *Symposium* (1955: 55). One piece of evidence he offers is the use of forms of the word for "flower" (*anthos*) at 196a8–b2, which can be plausibly taken as an allusion to the title of the tragedy (56; see also 111). Apart from its being original, nothing is known about the play's plot; even the title *Flower* has been disputed (see Lèvéque 1955: 105–114). From the other titles that have been preserved, it is clear that Agathon was often faithful to the old classical subjects. But he was also an innovator with regard to the musical dimension of tragedy and in two respects: he reduced the choruses to mere intermezzi with no necessary connection to the plot and he introduced a chromaticism that enabled him to express all the nuances of the sentiments and passions (151). As Lèvéque concludes, "C'est donc avant tout comme un novateur que se présente Agathon . . ." (153).

²⁴ As Lèvéque notes, "nous retrouvons dans la tragédie d'Agathon cette même attitude réflexive, ce même besoin de connaître l'homme et le monde, cette même curiosité inlassable de l'esprit, ce même effort d'analyse s'appliquant à la totalité du réel. Son théâtre est un théâtre raisonneur, et même philosophique et, comme tel, rappelle de près celui d'Euripide" (1955: 116–117).

Sedley apparently does (see: 65), is to ignore the context of Diotima's teaching and thus to misread the dialogue as a whole.²⁵

It is here, however, that we can begin to perceive where the real difference between Socrates and Agathon lies. If Agathon tends to think that he is what he imitates, that he possesses what he loves, Socrates interprets all imitation as desire and all desire as lack. Agathon the poet is satisfied with images because he fails to see the great gulf that separates the image from the original. This is why Agathon's wisdom is manifest and bright (*lampra*), while that of Socrates is "ambiguous like a dream" (*amphisbētēsimos hōs onar*, 175e3–4). Because he in contrast recognizes this gulf, Socrates can at least envisage, through the eyes of the priestess Diotima, a beauty that is no longer an image and the contact with which will give birth to goodness that is no longer an image (212a4–6). But if Socratic *erōs* recognizes the deficiency of images and is directed beyond them, that need not make it any less enamored of images. On Socrates' account, it is only through beautiful images – and this includes *beautiful bodies* – that we can access, if at all, the good. That Socrates critiques Agathon and the beautiful images he represents, that he wishes to go beyond him, in no way shows that he does not remain attracted to him.

Agathon, we must note, is indeed attractive for more than his physical beauty. Not only does the serious content of his speech show him to possess at least an approximation of the wisdom Socrates himself seeks, but he also recognizes that he can at best offer a "measure" of the truth according to the limits of his abilities. This is reflected in the perfect graciousness with which he endures what can only be described as extremely rude behavior on the part of Socrates and in his acceptance of his refutation with an open acknowledgement of his ignorance rather than with anger or evasion.²⁶ Agathon is indeed one of the very few good interlocutors in Plato's dialogues and we should not forget that he is in the current dialogue the only person Socrates chooses to engage in conversation. If in comparison to Alcibiades he lacks a sufficiently passionate nature and does not experience fully the pain of shame regarding his deficiencies, this makes him less of a lover but not less of a beloved.²⁷

²⁵ See Gonzalez 2012.

²⁶ Lèvêque does not neglect to emphasize the goodness of Agathon: his graciousness, hospitality, solicitude towards his many friends, but also his courage in publicly defending the politician Antiphon at a very sensitive and dangerous time (for details, see 1955: 46–47).

²⁷ Lèvêque in stressing the similarities between Agathon and Alcibiades (1955: 78–79) ignores the important differences in character.

This is made clear at the dialogue's end when Socrates expresses his desire that Agathon sit next to him so that he can praise him as Alcibiades praised Socrates: Socrates even claims that "I'm really desirous of praising him" (223a2). While on the usual assessment of Agathon and his speech, Socrates' desire here must come as a surprise (though not for long, as commentators always have ready to hand the convenient device of dismissing surprising claims as being only "ironic"), there is nothing surprising about it on the current reading. After having critiqued Agathon and his earlier self for not conceiving of love as a lover (204c1–3), Socrates is eager to praise Agathon as the embodiment of the good and beautiful qualities that belong to the *beloved*. Socrates indeed twice in the dialogue addresses Agathon as "beloved" (201c9, 222d5). After Alcibiades' speech praising Socrates the lover as if he were the beloved and as if he possessed a wisdom he disavows, Socrates is eager to counter by assuming the role of lover again in praising someone who, having misunderstood what it means to be a lover, can still be an object of love.

The dramatic action is significant here. At first Alcibiades tries to come between Socrates and Agathon, but only to witness what he describes as Socrates' resourcefulness in getting Agathon to sit next to him (223a8–9): a description that clearly echoes Diotima's description of love's resourcefulness as explained by its mother Poverty lying down with its father Resource (203b7–c1). But in the end it is the sudden arrival of drunken revelers that comes between Socrates and Agathon (223b2–6). Is it too much to hear the suggestion here that Alcibiades and the drunken revelers come between Socrates and *the good* he desires, or at least its beautiful image?²⁸ We can assume, of course, that Socrates' praise of Agathon, like Alcibiades' praise of Socrates, would have been mixed with critique, and this for the simple reason that it would have been a praise of *the good* and therefore implicitly a critique of the eponymous person who is only a deficient if beautiful appearance of the good. Yet Socrates knows perfectly well that the pursuit of the good cannot dispense with beautiful images, however deficient.

Even the disorder that puts an end to the speeches and prevents Socrates from praising Agathon cannot stand in the way of Socrates's passion for dialogue. And who is the last person to stay awake in discussion with

²⁸ Belfiore finds this play already in Socrates' refutation of Agathon: "... when Socrates says that *Erōs* is deficient in (or needs) good things (*tōn agathōn endēēs*; 201c5), he is simultaneously refuting Agathon and paying him a compliment, by stating that *Erōs* is in need of Agathon. This pun also helps explain why Socrates addresses Agathon as "beloved." In identifying him with the things *Erōs* needs, Socrates casts Agathon in the role of beloved, a role that Agathon's speech already gave to his soft and delicate *Erōs* (see 204c1–5)" (2012: 176).

Socrates but Agathon? Even if Socrates is trying to persuade both Agathon and Aristophanes that their respective arts should form one expertise, Aristophanes nods off well before Agathon, the latter not falling asleep until it was already daylight (223d8), leaving us to wonder if in the end it is only Agathon who can follow Socrates' point and perhaps even be persuaded by it. Even Rowe must grudgingly admit that "Agathon has shown at least some ability to follow an argument, and certainly more than Aristophanes (But perhaps this is to press the text too hard?)" (1998: 215). Furthermore, if Rowe can see a critique of Agathon in the final argument only by assuming that Agathon "was exclusively a tragic poet" (214), there is evidence of the historical Agathon bringing the forms of tragedy and comedy closer together in key respects and even, if one scholion is to be believed, writing comedies himself. One scholiast of Aristophanes' *Frogs* describes Agathon as *kōmōidopoios* (Lévêque 1955: 84). Lévêque dismisses this as an error perhaps having its origin in Socrates' argument at the end of the *Symposium* (87). But why not instead take this as some evidence that Agathon was persuaded by Socrates to the extent of going on to write comedies? Lévêque himself sees an anticipation of the New Comedy in Agathon's innovation of an original plot (113) as well as his innovative reduction of the choruses to simple intermezzi (141). In this case Agathon would have much in common with that tragedian-turned-writer-of-tragicomic-dialogues named Plato. But at the very least the concluding conversation between Socrates and Agathon as all others have fallen asleep or passed out confirms the kinship between the two suggested by the nature and central importance of their rivalry in the dialogue.²⁹ While most commentators do not consider Agathon worthy even of speaking before Socrates, Dionysus crowns both. And Socrates, far from begrudging the poet his laurels, does not allow the destructive infatuation of Alcibiades or the indiscriminate noise of the multitude to keep him from giving Agathon what is surely the highest possible praise: engaging him in serious conversation. It is for this purpose, after all, that Socrates made himself beautiful.

²⁹ At the very least, there is between Socrates and Agathon, as Lévêque has concluded, "une solide amitié" (1955: 44). Completely groundless is Rowe's claim that "Certainly, by the end of the dialogue it will have become perfectly clear that Socrates has no high opinion of Agathon's qualities, either as intellectual or as poet" (1998: 161). Edmonds (1931: 2.1.2., note 10) suggests that the following verse that has come down to us under Plato's name (see Diogenes Laertius 3, 23, 3) was written by Plato impersonating Socrates: "When I kiss Agathon my soul is on my lips, whither it comes, poor thing, hoping to cross over" (trans. Edmonds). Lévêque, not considering the possibility suggested by Edmonds, just dismisses the verse as a fabrication by someone who forgot the respective ages of Agathon and Plato (1955: 53).

PLATO'S *Symposium*

A Critical Guide

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