

From *Comic Cure for Delusional Democracy: Republic*, by Gene Fendt

Chapter Three
Enlarging Homer
An Aristophanic Sex Comedy

Better well hung than ill wed.

Book 5 is often considered Plato's most Aristophanic comic writing. The question is, what is the import of this comic, ironic—or is it serious?—part of the dialogue? Is it a proleptic amicus curiae brief that dares bring Title Nine to face “Brown v. Board of Education” as a jury-rigging attempt to offer “separate but equal” about a matter which in principle is demonstrably unequal if it is separate? Or is it a *reductio ad coed* naked *absurdum* of the demands democracy is likely to make regarding “equal rights and freedom . . . in the behavior of women toward men and men toward women” (563b)? Or is it merely male hegemony by another name, that is, a proposal that “dispenses with the notion of gender,” but in such a way that “the female guardians . . . should simply turn themselves into men”? And what should be thought of the entire class of public servants who have no private to call their own and whose sacred matings last maybe a week, and in any case less than two months? Or what should we make of the expenditure of much time, testing and educational effort to produce exceptional female guardians—whose prime will be spent in celebratory matings—as many as possible—and their consequent pregnancies? Perhaps paying attention to this discussion's place in the dialogue we can measure the extension, purpose and intended dramatic force of these wave-borne questions.

THE NEED FOR THE COMEDY

Socrates and his interlocutors have (supposedly) finished consideration of the city that has been built as a catharsis for Glaucon's excessive desires; they have investigated the just soul that is like it, and the virtues within both city and soul. One half of the terrible, fear-inspiring project laid out by Glaucon

and Adeimantus has been accomplished. In book 2 the brothers had demanded that Socrates set up the just man as he is, without rewards and reputations, in order to compare him to the ideal unjust man and answer the question about human happiness. The ‘just’ and purgative city has been founded, the statue of the ‘just’ and purgative man set up, and both city and soul have been polished to finished products with their virtues detailed, and Socrates is ready to go down to the ideally unjust; he is “about to describe [the devolving regimes] in order” (449a) to conclude the projected great argument when Polemarchus pulls on Adeimantus’ cloak and whispers something of which Socrates only hears the question, “shall we let it pass or what?” (449b). The question is about sex; Polemarchus, the symbol of the desiring part in the original ex-urban polity of scene one, is at least not demanding and enslaving as he was then, but he still has the ear of the spirited brothers, who are easily co-opted by desire’s tongue.

Socrates has been attempting to tamp down and shape desire through most of the discussion, and was hoping he had managed it. Since Glaucon’s spirited approval of courtesans and cakes—“many kinds of many of them” (373a)—Socrates has presented a cathartic city, a purification of their souls through the story of a city, in which they agree it is necessary for the education of real guardians to send away certain of the previously invited luxuries—Corinthian girls and Attic pastries among them (404d). In the course of that long purification there had been one sentence about sharing all things in common with regards to women and children (424a), but despite this rather close girdling (or perhaps face covering, 503a, cf. Phaed 237a), Socrates has not been able to spirit Aphrodite far enough away from the quick eyes of Polemarchus. So, just as in an already excised passage of Homer (390c), in which unsleeping Zeus suddenly—at the sight of Hera flitting past in the girdle of Aphrodite—forgets all the plans he had been carefully making, the model polity that has been forming now forgets all about its own high charge and master design, and votes unanimously to pursue *ta aphrodisia*. We will see in a later chapter that this three-book interruptus about the details of

coitus is itself something of a test—to see who can hold on to the truths about cities while being tempted through the wizardry of sexual pleasure (413d); it is, as well, a further education of desire, and we see that Glaucon (having come to the end of the tale) passes—not only remembering where the train of the discussion got caught in the train of Aphrodite, but also seeing something further about (and through) the argument Socrates has entrained as well.

Having attempted (and largely succeeded) in keeping the youthful and unruly desires in place by inspiring spirit to a way of life directed to an invincibly wisdom-directed honor while building up the city, Socrates now needs some stronger medicine for the desires which are both symbolized by, and introjected afresh into, the discussion by Polemarchus—modernly called Id. The latter's desire for the sex talk is infectious and runs through the whole polity of the house in moments—surging up to Thrasymachus' forceful reentry into the dialogue (450a, b). It doesn't take much for these noble dogs to start baying together: a whiff of . . . something. The new medicine will have to be stronger than any so far used—a lie that can reach deeper than honor, deeper than the thymos which has thus far been Socrates' ally against desire; so no ordinary ridicule will be sufficient—that seems socially constructed and ordered (as is mimetically engendered thumotic competition); something ridiculous to nature will have to be brought in: something on par with flying to heaven on a dung beetle, or soldiers—and even old men—with day long and week long erections.

In his book on Greek laughter, which is perhaps a bit too culturally limiting for its most important points, Stephen Halliwell says that “Socrates' case here [in suggesting coed naked wrestling] depends on driving a wedge between local, mutable cultural perceptions . . . and the rational standards of good and bad which he believes should . . . underpin justified laughter.” I only wish for a little less distinction here: suppose Socrates is not making a case, but wants to provoke a laughter that will be cathartic? Or what if he aims at both at once? That is, suppose the laughter he aims to provoke is our natural response to a division between a cultural *nomos*—real or imagined—

and a physis that can't bend its head so far in the direction the nomos pretends it should go? Laughter is nature convulsing. Seeing or feeling what is the case and the laughter occur at the same time, through the acrobatic misshaping of physis in the comedy. The convulsion is both caused by, and brings us back to, a nature which cannot possibly be all things to itself, or to anyone else; nor can it be whatever it wants (for itself or another)—despite what its hubristic delusions pretend. Eros is full of such things; such excessiveness must be cured or purged; we may not excise eros itself.

At any rate, we see in beginning book 5 that the power of Aphrodite has once again (cf. 373a, 420a) performed a reversal on Socrates in the psychic wrestling of the dialogue, just as she is the most likely contributor to the downfall of the city (546b, d)—and just when he was “rejoicing at having already gotten to the end of it” (450a), perhaps echoing a line Cephalus had put in the mouth of Sophocles (329c–d), or Shakespeare gives to Mercutio. We should not be surprised. As Homer says, she was the downfall of noble cities long before Socrates' time, and many heroes found their death because one among them failed to resist her promised rewards. If the eros of these young men is to be turned rightly—back to a concern with justice, as is fitting of would-be rulers—Aphrodite will have to be pinned by their mind and spirit, rather than pinning them, as she just has—through the tongue of Polemarchus—to do her service. Or perhaps the wave born golden one must be mocked; according to Homer she runs away from that (Od. 8: 360–370, e.g.). The laughter loving goddess does not love to be laughed at: she rather shrinks from it.

PLOTTING THE COURSE

Book 5's first two waves are dialectically structured to make the reader play between an essentialism of ungendered human capacities and an essentialism of sexual difference; it is the 'between' constructed by these dialectically related poles which defines the realm of the complementarity of the sexes.⁸ Considered as a geometry problem, both of the two hyperbolic endpoints are exhibited (not logically demonstrated) as ridiculous solutions to the issues of

the upbringing and relation of the sexes. Plato thereby implies that the true relation between the sexes lies somewhere between the ends of these legs, denying both extremes: the true relation is one of natural and necessary complementarity in which an autarchic essentialism of somatic sexual difference is as mistaken as an ideal antimateriality. The sexes have neither definition nor existence except in relation. In other words, if these waves are read correctly, Plato's point is that the male/female relation has logical and ontological priority to the 'parts'; this thought is one of the details implied in the city-founding principle that "no one is self-sufficient." The relation of the sexes has to be understood correctly before the sides of the drama can be anything other than ridiculously laid out. Socrates proceeds precisely oppositely: he starts from the wrong end, and then closes with the correct first question. Let us call this comic procedure headasswarding the problem; perhaps this is the wrong way. Pretending, first, that the sexes can be understood separately, Socrates begins sailing into the first wave by suggesting, "maybe this would be the right way, after the male drama has been perfectly finished, to finish the female drama in turn" (451c). He then concludes the argument at the end of the second wave thus:

Do you agree, then, with the partnership of the women with the men, which we have rehearsed,

. . . that they'll be doing what is best and nothing contrary to the nature of the relation of the female to the male, nothing contrary to the natural community of the two with each other? (466c,d)

As with Thrasymachan and modern possessive individualism this process begins with one, turns to the other, and then asks about the relation. Maybe this is the wrong way; maybe the community is first; that, at any rate is what Socrates claimed as his first principle of city building. Socrates' dialectical headasswardness here mirrors the movement Polemarchus' book 5 question instigates in the dialogue. For, if the important question is the relation of justice and injustice to happiness and its opposite—and without answering this no other questions about justice or happiness can be answered correctly,

then skipping over half of that first assignment in order to come—quickly—to discuss the proper measure of *ta aphrodisia* and its enjoyment is as skewed and inconsistent as to talk about the parts of something without an overview of the whole. What such argument results in, then, cannot be expected to be “Plato’s teaching about families” or the relation of the sexes, except in a comic, twisted, headassward way. If the head belongs here, then this follows.

But the discussion is more than a fun-house mirror or a contortionist’s trick possible only in speech; by inducing disordered desire to shape itself into ever more absurdly acrobatic positions we might be able to unbend ourselves into something less queerly ordered; we might, at least, tire of following such a desire’s exercises, or the exercises it requires as foreplay. In addition, as true-born (*gennaios*) but comic (*geloios*) and perhaps even common, cheap or low (*phaulos*) lies, the pictures Socrates’ arguments paint must shape to a truth; there must be something in them able to “persuade even the rulers themselves” (414d). Both a good joke and a medicinal lie open one up to a truth, even if neither joke nor lie expresses it directly—or even presents anything possible.

In the case of this headasswardly designed dialectical discussion, each hyperbolic essentialist extremity has political and social implications that Plato is exhibiting perspicuously. Each set of implications is necessarily true if one accepts its hyperbolic originating premise.¹⁰ So, if men and women are essentially and naturally quite different in their psychosexual functions and capacities (gender essentialism concomitant with the autarchy of the sexes—or at least of the male), then the only legitimate argument for equal education and opportunity dissolves. Ancient Athens and modern fundamentalist Islamic regimes are willing to accept these political and social consequences and, quite naturally, think they are right to do so. They are right to do so. The premise of gender essentialism (with or without male autarchy determining the female) requires inequality of education and opportunity. Anything else is both ridiculous and a waste of social resources. It follows that adjusting

budgets regarding variety and extent of equal looking divertimenti for essentially distinct genders is an utterly unsolvable problem (for there is no equality at the root), therefore it can be answered differently every day, guaranteeing full and useless employment to the political class as well as administrators of educational systems. Gender essentialism certifies liberal ‘equal’ educational policy as necessarily incontinent.

Following the other leg, accepting the essentialism about human nature which treats gender and sexual relations as inessential and an entirely social construction, leads to—at its best—an entirely utilitarian construction and technê of those relations: very like the technê of dog breeding. As we might breed dogs for hunting, show, racing, or leading the blind, each society may set up the relationship between the sexes for whatever result is considered best (perhaps the greatest pleasure for the greatest number rather than Socrates’ best moral gene pool—whatever that is). Further, there is nothing in the nature of sex, gender, or natural relation to stand in the way; there is only the stolid impassivity of previous social constructions, now demoted to atavistic prejudice preventing the progressive—or, even better, avant-garde—prejudices from achieving their progressive goal: whatever. Illustrating precisely this point, Socrates takes pains to show how his “sharing” arrangements are “most advantageous” before considering their possibility (457d, 458b). But such a way of arguing is the equivalent of offering a bribe; if the bribe is sufficiently aphrodisiac we have a good idea how his interlocutors will respond—Plato’s interlocutors too. At its worst this view would merely leave the sexual relations in a Hobbesian state of nature, outside political consideration and deliberation—that is, just that total untouchability of the sexual relation from political and legal “interference” for which some modern liberal democracies argue. Unfortunately for this position, where there are no limits naturally drawn to law, the force of law is unlimited, and any arrangement is possible. (Stage direction: the previous sentence should be read with teeth clenched.)

The complementarity Republic implies between these hyperbolic legs in-

sists that while it is not an entirely incorrect approach to weigh the embodied difference between men and women, the presumption that the man is one thing and the woman is another (an autarchic notion of the sexual) and only thereafter raising the question of (hegemonic or non-) relations (political, social, economic, and sexual) is a logical and ontological error. Further, this sexual complementarity does not merely lie in their “roles in procreation”—though that is necessarily part of understanding the natural relation, nor is it “in the first place political,” since it is natural. Plato’s point is that men and women cannot either be or be humanly understood apart from one another. The first wave, according to the reading to be explicated in this chapter, does set up the question of the sexes as a somatically essentialist one; this is how the problem first appears, and Athenian social practice read everything off of (or into) this somatic appearance, a procedure which Socrates is mocking at 453e–454e. We have been seeking real justice, however, not its appearance; we should seek for it “in some need these have for one another” (372a)—a phrase standing athwart any attempt to define an autarchic being.

Socrates’ sailing over the first wave thoroughly discredits the somatic sexual essentialism Athens presumed. His argument there is frequently read as positing (in its place) a human essentialism, discounting most physical, sexual and psychosexual facts (be there any) entirely. It seems the dialectically less sophisticated (or are they more erotically driven?—perhaps these are not really separable questions?) young men take it that way, but being more interested in sex than in the person, don’t see that the women might be losing something of being a person. Nor, being under the hold of Aphrodite, do they feel that they themselves might be losing something as a person; as Hermes said in another previously redacted story (390c), being held in the newly designed Hephaestan net with a golden girl sounds like a pretty good deal to this godlet. Close attention to the metaphors used within the waves (dogs, horses, fighting cocks: decidedly not persons) and then to the question Socrates asks when sailing over the second wave, requires considerably more dialectical sensitivity. Perhaps the question also requires a bit more humanity,

a little less dog. Socrates, in closing, asks his interlocutors (and us) neither to consider what is essential to an ungendered human being, nor what essentially belongs to one somatic sex rather than another; rather, he asks us to consider the natural community of women with men. By emphatically phrasing his concluding question this way Socrates suggests to his interlocutors and to us that we need to think a new tack through these waves—one which is neither as ridiculous as the one he proposes following the first (ideal ungendered) heading, nor one which turns us in the trough to be rolled back under the previous wave as would occur by our following the second (essential and autarchic psychosomatic difference) heading—Athens' own.

As a merely literary point, it seems to me that this Platonic organization of the discussion is an example of how irony works. Satire we might see as single edged; the one coming at you is very sharp, behind it is a blunt moral, relatively easy to grasp. If we are not to reduce irony to satire, we must see that irony challenges us to find a way between the dialectical extremes it posits: the moral, as it were, is 'to be discovered' by the one faced with the irony. If a person sees only one of the extremes operative in an ironic situation or text, one is confessing one's dialectical incapacity; perhaps it is due to a hindering eros, an eros that stands between the soul and the light of the good. In attempting to answer he will grab, perhaps, the opposite edge—and something totally unexpected (and probably bad) will happen. Here in book 5 we might see the following irony about the city: The best leaders, we have agreed, are those who cannot possibly make laws for their own benefit apart from the good of the whole city; the denial of all privacy to them effectively controls for this matter. Unfortunately, these laws also destroy the natural human erotic relationship upon which all cities depend for the continuation of the city in time. It looks like the laws must destroy either the best guarantee for good leaders, or destroy the natural human eros for the continuation of the community in time in those leaders. Every city (and citizen) has to solve both problems, at once. We must take the problems and solutions Socrates is raising in this section both seriously and not seriously at the same time.

Seriously, insofar as it makes visible a moral problematic; not seriously, insofar as seriously means taking the literal story as the solution to the problems.

Returning to Platonic scholarly particulars, I will be agreeing with Wendy Brown that “Plato’s challenges to Athenian masculine practices . . . are delivered not from the standpoint of masculinity’s ‘opposite,’ that is, femininity . . . [rather] his aim is to reduce the distance between them.” I do not, however, agree that “elements of soul, temperament, ethics, thought, and politics, which existed in an antinomial (and gender specific) relation in Plato’s own milieu, he accepted as inherent antinomies.” He is, rather, showing precisely how dialectical antinomies are or are constructed, how they work, and, if not handled with considerable care, how they swamp us with laughter (457b) or reduce us to an absurdity we perhaps are too involved in—are too strongly cathecting—to see. Philosophy is the practice Plato instantiates for sailing in the high seas dialectical antinomies naturally raise; comedy has already been invented to draw us into such extremities as our own cathexes would instantiate, and, through laughter, to purify us of them. Plato is marrying these.