

The *Symposium* is one of the most interesting, well-written, and influential works of the philosopher Plato. This work, written in dialogue form, is a dramatic account of a drinking party to celebrate the successful performance of a tragedy by the playwright Agathon. Attended by a number of aristocratic Athenian men, it recounts an evening of relaxation one night in 416 BC. As the men are not inclined to heavy drinking on this night, they decide to spend the evening not in their cups but in discussing the god of Love, Eros. It is soon decided that each banqueter will offer words of praise for the god, noting his attributes and powers.

Including the clinical speech of a medical doctor named Eryximachus, who provides a rather sterile account of the effect of Eros in humans, as well as the hilarious, tongue-in-cheek speech of the comic playwright Aristophanes, the *Symposium* leads the reader on to the magisterial account of Socrates, who is the last to speak on the topic of love. But whereas the reader is prepared en route for Socrates to have the last word, it is in fact the teaching of one Diotima of Mantinea which culminates the dialogue. After refuting the obviously wrong or incomplete accounts of the other symposiasts, Socrates recounts how he was instructed in the matters of Love by the mysterious Diotima. In short, it is she who reveals the true meaning of Eros and its powers.

Unfortunately, there is no testimony about Diotima of Mantinea independent of the *Symposium*, and many wonder whether she ever existed. Those who support the position that she was a real personage make the following observations. First, Plato gives exact information about Diotima: she was a priestess from Mantinea, who in the years preceding the Peloponnesian War used her oracular powers to postpone the plague which afflicted the Athenians. Secondly, Diotima appears to promote a teaching about Eros and its functions that is different from what we know of Socrates and Plato; she appears to have ideas independent of the main speaker in the dialogue as well as the author's own views as stated in his other writings. And the third reason some give for the authenticity of Diotima is the fact that for at least 100 years after the publication of the *Symposium*, no one suggested that she was a figment of Plato's fancy.

On the other hand, a majority of scholars believes that Diotima is not real. They argue that the *Symposium*, as Plato's most literary composition, is a careful construct of the author's imagination. And while the name Diotima is not unattested (Diotimos was a common boy's name), the word's etymology suggests that it serves a literary purpose. Literally "Diotima" means 'honoured by Zeus' (or 'honouring Zeus'), a name extremely appropriate for the priestess who has received special revelation on the topic of Love. So too the name of her home town, Mantinea, although real, has a connotation befitting the woman's role in the *Symposium*. The word is related to the Greek verb 'to provide divination; to reveal an oracle'. In Socrates' account, this is exactly what Diotima does, and on more than one occasion Socrates states that he is eager to receive her 'divine' instruction. Most importantly, the skeptics argue, there is no evidence for Diotima's existence, let alone her miraculous powers and semi-divine knowledge, outside the *Symposium*.

Regardless of the debate about Diotima's existence, one may wonder why Plato brings her into the discussion at the most important point in the dialogue. One suggested reason is that Plato wishes to raise the level of discussion from personal testimonies about individual experiences of Love to a more general contemplation of Love itself. By moving away from the participants in the drinking party to the legendary personage of Diotima, Plato may be elevating the discussion of Love to a universal level. And whereas the other speakers focus on love between males, as a woman Diotima introduces other aspects. The imagery in her speech, for example, is more befitting females: she speaks of the procreative powers of Love, including conception and birth. Yet another explanation offered for Diotima's important place in the *Symposium* is that as a priestess associated with the divine, Diotima expresses the special revelation Socrates enjoyed as philosopher. She serves to separate Socrates from the other, merely human symposiasts, and to lend his teaching an air of authority. Whatever the reason for the inclusion of Diotima in the dialogue, her definition of Eros and its powers forms the climax of the discussion.

According to Diotima, Eros is not a god but a spirit or force (*daimon*) which mediates between the immortal and the human. Of the many attributes of Eros, the most important one is that it connects the world of humans, which is subject to death and corruption, to the world of the divine, which is eternal and beautiful. Love strives for perfection and

completeness, which are characteristic of immortality. Also contrary to what one of the previous speakers suggests, Diotima notes that Eros himself is not beautiful. According to her, Love is not to be identified with the object of Love. Indeed, Love wishes to have what is beautiful; it desires to have what it does not possess. Love, then, should not be confused with the beloved. Love desires to have that which is beautiful, and seeks to possess it permanently. Without opposition from Socrates who reports her teaching to the other symposiasts, Diotima equates that which is beautiful with that which is good. Thus she arrives at this definition of Love: "Love is desire for the permanent possession of the good".

Having defined what Eros is, Diotima next explains the process whereby humans practice love. One begins with the appreciation of physical beauty in another human being. Falling in love with one particular beautiful person, one learns to understand what beauty and goodness are. Realizing that true beauty is not skin-deep but spiritual, the lover comes to know that the beauty he sees in one is akin to the beauty in others. One then moves from a particular instance of beauty and goodness to an appreciation of all that is beautiful and good. Ascending from the physical world of mortal beauty, the lover contemplates eternal and universal beauty. This absolute and divine beauty is completely distinct from the examples of beauty in the corruptible and mortal world in which we live. In other words, Diotima argues, in association with divine beauty and goodness, the mortal human being is able to re-produce goodness. Thus, she concludes, the process of love is a reaching for immortality itself. Understandably silenced by Diotima's brilliant exposition, the symposiasts can only turn to their wine to contemplate the true meaning and power of Love.