

Other Desires and Public Recognition: Re-reading Mayo's Plato's Aristophanes

James Stillwaggon
Iona College

Desire is often hailed as a liberating or equalizing force in educational practices; some consider its very presence to be endowed with the power to interrupt oppressive educational practices as well as the social norms that undergird these practices.¹ Cris Mayo reflects this attitude about desire's potential within dominant educational discourses in her 2007 essay, "Disruptions of Desire: From Androgynes to Genderqueer," describing desire as "the bridge between what is and what might be, disrupting stale patterns and creating new formations."²

Bringing Aristophanes' account of the origin of Eros in Plato's *Symposium* into dialogue with contemporary issues involving desiring differently in schools, Mayo's essay suggests new landscapes for thinking about the relationship between desire and the publicly held values we profess, practice, and reproduce in schools. In this essay I pursue an exploration of the same terrain by identifying what I see as a misreading in Mayo's account of Aristophanes' story about love, namely her impression that desire existed prior to the division of the first humans, according to the will of the gods. This misreading seems insignificant, as it does not, Mayo asserts, represent the kind of desire she is interested in examining. Yet, as the notion of desire as being prior to or independent of the law informs the remainder of her essay I consider what implications Mayo's reading of Eros may have for her understanding of the role desires play in social change.³ I finish by considering how a different understanding of desire might also change our ideas about how gay-straight alliances serve to transform the culture of schools.

DESIRE BEFORE THE LAW

Aristophanes' story about the origin of Eros establishes a break in the order of the speeches in Plato's *Symposium*, as well as a break in the momentum of the discussion. In his mocking response to the more obviously self-serving eulogies of Eros presented by the speakers who precede him, Aristophanes also resets the basic understanding of Eros around which the dialogue revolves, introducing instead a notion of desire that derives from a particularly human awareness of one's own lack. This break is not insignificant to the dialogue as a whole: Aristophanes' idea of desire as a suffering of one's own lack later grounds Socrates' and Alcibiades' speeches and shines a new light on the speeches that precede his own. In contrast to Phaedrus' praise of desire as the oldest and noblest of the gods, Aristophanes describes the origin of desire as a new creation of the younger Olympian gods, contemporary with human society (190c). While Pausanias' and Eryximachus' speeches each praised a heavenly, ennobling notion of Eros in deliberate contrast to bodily lust, Aristophanes' earthy account of Eros brings desire back to the body, at the same time removing both excessive garlands of praise and the stains of sin from the discussion of desire.

In returning to the finitude of the body as the lowest common denominator of human experience, Aristophanes' story lives up to his reputation as comic poet as well as to the democratizing spirit of comic poetry itself. It is therefore appropriate that Mayo turns to Aristophanes' account of Eros as a way of democratizing desire as a universal mark of humanity even within the diversity of its manifestations. Without the nobility or beauty accounted to desire by the other speakers, Aristophanes' Eros is a specifically human phenomenon, connected to the human trait of suffering one's own incompleteness or human finitude in relation to the absolute nature of divine law. While the democratic tendencies of Aristophanes' account have their limits, as Mayo recognizes, even in his stated purpose Aristophanes provides less of a traditional eulogy of Eros and more of an explanatory account of "how far back we can trace our innate love for one another, and how this love is always trying to reintegrate our former nature, to make two into one, and to bridge the gulf between one human being and another" (191d).

As Mayo relates, in Aristophanes' story desire comes about as the result of a punishment for the hubris and aggression demonstrated by the first race of humans, who in appearance and movement took after the more ancient, planetary gods:

The males were descended from the Sun, the females from the Earth, and the hermaphrodites from the Moon, which partakes of either sex, and they were round and they *went* round, because they took after their parents. And such, gentlemen, were their strength and energy, and such their arrogance, that they actually tried — like Ephialtes and Otus in Homer — to scale the heights of heaven and set upon the gods. (190a–b)

The original humans were divided in two for their offense — a solution that limits their power against the gods while at the same time doubling their number and their potential for making sacrifices to the gods. The plan fails at first because of Zeus' initial failure to appreciate the newly divided humans' sense of sorrow at losing their other half: the race begins to die out because separated halves cling to one another until they starve to death. After some tinkering with anatomy, however, the newly divided humans have new reasons to cling to one another, as well as new identities based on this clinging (191a–192b). Sexual activity provides a fleeting feeling of completeness and fulfillment against the loneliness of being human while it provides for continued expansion in human sacrifices to the gods.

In analyzing Aristophanes' story for its lessons on desire, Mayo distinguishes between what she sees as positive and negative desires as a way of clearly delineating her strategy for the rest of the essay. In doing so, however, she includes two human motivations in her definition of desire that Plato clearly establishes as something other than erotic. The first of these appears in Mayo's discussion of the original humans' attempt to overthrow the Olympian gods as an action motivated by desire:

The first desire the androgynes attempt to satisfy is ambition, which motivates them to attempt to overthrow the gods. This first desire is grounded in an attempt for certainty and control through the exercise of power. ("Disruptions," 50)

From our contemporary perspective, in which we understand all of our actions to be motivated by some desire or other, it is easy to follow Mayo in understanding the arrogance or hubris that led the first humans to launch their attack upon the heavens

as a desire for greater power. The problem with associating desire and arrogance in this case, and thereby attributing erotic motivations to the pre-lapsarian humans' actions, is that Aristophanes' story is intended as an account of the origin of Eros, and the actions of the first humans are the part of the story that predates the introduction of desire to the human race as the result of Zeus punishing humanity.⁴ The first humans' actions cannot possibly be attributed to a desire for certainty or control because, according to the story, desire did not exist yet. Aristophanes' explanation for the first humans' actions is that these beings took after their planetary parents, moving according to the force of necessity or the cosmic order, in which desire does not exist because everything is already complete.

In addition to ascribing desire to the pre-lapsarian humans, Mayo describes a second form of what she terms "nostalgic" desire in her analysis of Aristophanes' story, citing the first divided humans' longing for a return to their original state: "This homeward desire of the androgynes is as deadly as their direct attempt at immortality. In their attempt to restore a form of harmonious reattachment that is now impossible, they die" ("Disruptions," 51). While Mayo characterizes nostalgia as a negative form of desire, it might be better described as a longing for wholeness that is not a desire at all. While nostalgia, like desire, has its origins in relation to the divine law that divides and thereby produces the human subject, looking backward to a time before the law or a space outside of it drives the subject in the opposite direction of the response characterized as desire, which entails attempting to fulfill one's longing through the dictates of the law as the limits of one's condition. According to Aristophanes, Eros is a longing for a return just as nostalgia is, but one that drives us forward in search of what we have left behind rather than refusing to move forward before our wholeness is restored. Similarly, Werner Jaeger claims that "Eros is born from man's metaphysical yearning after the wholeness which is forever impossible to the individual nature," but this yearning can only be understood as erotic insofar as it seeks its completion in the world around it rather than through an attempt at returning to its origins.⁵

Ultimately, Mayo focuses on neither of the two first forms of human motivation that she characterizes as negative desires, but instead on what she calls the divided humans' "third attempt at desire...the recognition that desire is not desire for a return, but a movement toward possibility" ("Disruptions," 50–51). While the distinction between the backwards movement of nostalgia and the forward movement of desire may not be so easy to distinguish, insofar as Aristophanes holds that Eros is "a relic of that original state of ours, when we were whole, and now, when we are longing for and following after that primeval wholeness, we say we are in love" (193a), Mayo directs the reader's attention by pointing to the necessary link between desire and futurity. The wholeness that we seek as a result of our desires is not a return to what once was but instead seeks the fulfillment of the divided human subject through the terms of its existing conditions. Mayo sees this future-directed tendency demonstrated especially in desire's capacity to disrupt staid patterns of human life through its endless searching for a self-completion that is always out of reach ("Disruptions," 52).

Given Mayo's interest in moving forward, a return to the distinctions she draws in order to define desire may seem a move in the wrong direction. Yet it is in the distinction she draws between negative and positive desires rather than desires and non-desires that Mayo produces a concept of desire incapable of the kind of social change she would like to see it accomplish. Contrary to Mayo's reading, the difference between the three categories of motivation in Aristophanes' story is not that some are bad desires and some are good. Such a judgment could only be made in relation to other values. The difference between these three motivations and the groups they define is their respective relations to the divine laws that command each.

The original humans stood in a passive relation to the totalizing, necessary force of cosmic law, arrogant and full of themselves but ultimately without any say in their own movement. The first divided humans recognized Zeus' law as the source of their division and resulting feelings of incompleteness, but sought to deny this law as a denial of these same feelings. As a result of their anatomical alterations, the later divided humans come to associate their incompleteness with the social action that must be taken up in order to secure their own future, embodied in the products of their incompleteness: their offspring and the justice of their cities.

By collecting these three motivations under the umbrella term of "desire," thus distancing desire from the law that conditions it, Mayo gains a great deal of freedom in determining what may be called desires and also in how we might determine their use. According to Mayo's definition, as long as a feeling is my own and as long as I am moved by it, the feeling must be desire. The subject effectively stands in the place of the lawgiver, giving and responding to the law as it sees fit. Mayo demonstrates the kind of autonomy that she builds into her concept of desire in the contrast she draws between her idea of desire and Jim Garrison's. Mayo's disagreement with Garrison revolves around the purposes to which we should put desire, specifically whether desires ought to be directed toward stable and harmonious goals or whether it ought to be used to disrupt and destabilize ("Disruptions," 53). Garrison's view in favor of harmony seems closer to Aristophanes' account, insofar as desire is regarded there as a means of becoming whole and overcoming the instability of incompleteness and loneliness. But what this digression misses completely is that whether we want desires to promote disruption and difference or whether we want desire to promote peace and harmony is beside the point, because desire tells us what we want, not the other way around. Unless our discussion of desire acknowledges the law's formative role in shaping our desires and our identities, we risk attaching ourselves to an understanding of desire that is socially and politically insignificant and that can do little to change political conditions for those who stand in a minimized place in relation to the law by virtue of their desires.

HALF A PERSON

If an understanding of Eros as independent of the law turns out to be ineffectual as a response to oppressive norms, we are pressed to return to Aristophanes' story to consider a definition of Eros as defined by the law as an alternative. As Alan Bloom suggests, Zeus' punishment of the first humans for their hubris enforces the new law of the Olympian gods in two ways. After their punishment humans not only

suffer losing their original sense of self, but “again resembled the gods, but this time the Olympian gods,” their punishers, rather than their planetary parents.⁶ Having lost their former identity of wholeness, signified by their circular shape and quasi-planetary movement according to the laws of nature, the newly-separated humans are driven to seek a sense of identity according to their new condition, in which they resemble their new lawgivers in their outward appearance.⁷ The image of the Olympian god holds the mirror in which the divided human subject may view herself as a completed being — human as absolute lawgiver — rather than as half a person.⁸

Yet while humans have come to look like Olympian gods and to behave more like them, they have lost what was their own. Neither like the gods of the cosmos nor like the gods of Mount Olympus, “[i]t is at this point that man becomes separated from the cosmos and has a nature peculiar to him.... The human is in its essence, defined by desire, an incomplete being, and full awareness of this incompleteness is essential to his humanity and ground for the specifically human quest for completeness or wholeness.”⁹ Thus, the wound inflicted by Zeus on the original humans establishes Eros as a second nature — man is no longer moved by necessity but by longing for an otherness that completes him. This longing to become like the mirror image of the lawgiver in essence and power as well as resemblance is Eros.

By the end of Aristophanes’ comedy-turned-tragedy, we understand that Eros is a specifically human relation to divine law that is contrasted with the natural laws of necessity that move the planets and that made the cartwheeling original humans storm heaven. According to Aristophanes, Eros is also distinguished from a response to the law that would look backward toward some ineffable sense of wholeness, an “oceanic feeling” that precedes the emergence of the human as subject to the law. Instead, desire moves human subjects to overcome their divided selves by completing themselves in the image of the law. The gods in Aristophanes’ story provide the humans with the possibility of sex, so that humans may act like the gods, momentarily experiencing something like completion in a reunion with their original self, while at the same time patterning their actions after the gods who serve as their models of completeness.¹⁰

Yet no sooner is sex introduced as the primary example and enduring activity of erotic self-completion than it is categorized according to the same divine law that brings erotic striving into being. As sex is introduced to humanity to prevent humans from dying out as a result of longing for the past, so that the gods may continue to enjoy the sacrifices humans make to them, sexual couplings are categorized in terms of the relative benefits they provide to the gods as absolute authorities. Eros between men and women is applauded because it creates more humans who will make more sacrifices (191c). Erotic relationships between men and men are supported because, as Pausanias has already argued, these relationships produce friendship and justice — the goods of the city that allow humans to thrive and worship the gods (192a). Erotic relationships between women and women, as Mayo points out in a footnote, are dismissed as “lewd” because they are unrecognized by the gods or by divine law as having any public role or any significance within the furtherance of human life for the enjoyment of the gods (“Disruptions,” 57).

Aristophanes' celebration of desire between men and women and between men and men according to the vitality of the state and his corresponding silence on desire between women and women marks a significant point in the relationship between desire and the law. While often overlooked, the status of love between women and women in Aristophanes' myth demonstrates that the law does not authorize all of the desires and identities it inspires. Instead, by outlawing the very desires it produces, the law, or the social body said to be law abiding, refuses responsibility for the very desires and identities it brings into existence through its division of the human subject.

As stated above, love between women and women is marginalized in Aristophanes' myth because it is not recognized as serving the flourishing of humans or gods. The law's failure to recognize what it has produced points to its own blindness, or a collection of blind spots wherein the subjects of those desires that correspond to these lacunae are highlighted in their difference. The historical association of othered desires with inwardness, illness, outlaw culture, and melancholia as a turning away from language and the law attest to the effects of the law's failure to recognize that which it brings into being.

On the one hand, precisely because desire is not something chosen by the subject, we might regard this non-recognition as a particularly tragic flaw in the structure of our social norms. At the same time, the role of othered desires in relation to the law as its unrecognized progeny may be precisely where we can locate Mayo's understanding of desires as productive of social change. If othered desires such as those between women and women in Aristophanes' myth can be recognized *as* human and *as* desires by society, then their motivations are not mere instances of necessity or nostalgia, but of desires that presume a law as the condition of their social existence. In the next section, as a way of illustrating this relationship and of concluding, I turn to Mayo's example of gay-straight alliances as the public face of those desires that society refuses to recognize as such.

FACING DESIRES

As an illustration of how "[d]esire destabilizes previously held ideas about the containedness of the self," and thereby provides possibilities for social change, Mayo turns to a discussion of "sexual minority youth in public schools" as a demonstration of "new possibilities for organizing for more just communities within the contingencies and disruptions of desire" ("Disruptions," 55). One of the instruments of change that Mayo comments on is the deliberately public nature of one school's gay-straight alliance:

They would not change their name from gay-straight alliance to something less obvious like the "Rainbow club" or the social justice club...they wanted the public face and were well aware that publicity meant challenge. ("Disruptions," 55)

Mayo demonstrates that these students' awareness of the public challenge was not only a recognition of the challenge they faced as sexual minorities but an understanding that their publicity could also serve to challenge the existing rules that define the center and the margins of sexuality in their school: "they want not only more public space in their schools, but a broader range of sexual or gender possibilities to be

represented or to be acknowledged as not fully representable” (“Disruptions,” 55). By maintaining a public face, and thereby challenging their peers, they recognized that their marginalized social position is also related to their othered place within the limitations of language: “They also knew that they were more complicated than the simple words ‘gay–straight’ could explain and struggled for language to represent that difference as well” (“Disruptions,” 55).

The public character of the challenges these students sought to make to their school culture and to culture more generally is directly related to the idea of their organization. By forming an alliance with those who are already deemed to have acceptable desires according to current standards, sexual minority youth are creating a public demonstration of their recognition as human (rather than outlawed, anti-social, and so on) by others whose erotic validity needs no proof. This alliance works precisely because it establishes sexual minority youth as desiring subjects in relation to the law.

First, the public nature of the alliance signifies the school’s recognition of the group and its purposes as valid. The students’ insistence on the accuracy of their group’s name underscores the importance of the recognition of their desires as legitimate under the school’s laws. Second, insofar as the alliance includes heterosexual students, the validity of the group as a whole is underscored in the recognition of particular sexual minority members by heterosexual members of the group who presumably conform to the same social laws that govern heterosexual society as a whole.

Between these two levels of recognition, sexual minority students in gay–straight alliances may be able to gain the leverage to change not only individual perceptions of their identities and motivations but also their recognized status by legal bodies and social norms. If desires presume a law in relation to which the desiring subject stands, then the recognition of human motivations *as* desires presumes the recognition of the law that must accompany it, and as such might entail a change in our understanding of who the law includes and validates. As Mayo suggests, recognition works insofar as it serves to “underscore critical shortcomings in those categories” that currently define norms of sexual identity. If we understand desire as prior to the law or in no relation to the law at all, sexual minorities might be able to achieve some kind of individual recognition, but would have no means of acting to correct those critical shortcomings aside from seeking recognition from every person individually. While our recognition of the law’s place in producing desire highlights a potential tragedy in the law’s failure to recognize that which it produces, it also reminds us that in those places where the law breaks down we might see a possibility of reframing it to better reflect our ideals of ourselves as the completed human beings we desire to be.

1. See, for instance, Kerry Burch, “Eros as the Educative Principle of Democracy,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 18 (1999); Daniel Cho, “Lessons of Love: Psychoanalysis and Teacher-Student Love,” *Educational Theory* 55, no. 1 (2005); and bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

2. Cris Mayo, "Disruptions of Desire: From Androgynes to Genderqueer," in *Philosophy of Education* 2007, ed. Barbara S. Stengel (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007), 50. This essay will be cited as "Disruptions" in the text for all subsequent references.

3. I use the term "the law" throughout this essay to refer to norms of public behavior and belief, whether embodied, codified, or represented in ideals, but most significantly for this discussion having authority in the shaping of subjectivity.

4. Absent desire, which is understood by Aristophanes and at later points in the dialogue as the fundamental form of human motivation, it would be difficult for us to account for reasons in the first humans' actions. If we follow Aristophanes' metaphor in comparing the first humans to the planets we must say that these early humans were moved by necessity, like the Olympian gods, but that the forces of necessity that rule planetary gods and Olympian gods are in conflict — a point expressed in Hesiod's *Theogony* in terms of violent clashes within divine families. Mayo's reading of the "second desire" as "nostalgic" simply bends the terms of desire. The first humans' refusal to recognize the validity of the divine law in shaping their existence on earth approximates some sort of opposite of desire, or melancholia. The death suffered by the first humans in their longing for lost wholeness is akin to the extreme versions of melancholia described in Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

5. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 184.

6. Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 480.

7. "Olympian gods are beautiful and somehow make possible what we think of as the specifically human" (Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 480).

8. The parallel to Lacan's mirror stage as an originary moment in the subjectification of the subject, both alienating the child and providing it with an ideal image of itself, is clear here. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 5.

9. Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 480.

10. "Sexual satisfaction is a momentary self-forgetting connected with the permanent remembering that afflicts men" (Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 481).