

Reimagining *Symposium*

by Carla Nappi and Carrie Jenkins

The following is an excerpt from a project that reimagines Plato's *Symposium*. The genesis and nature of the work are explained in the introductory dialogue. There's no particular way that you're supposed to read it: some read it as a commentary on Plato's text, others read it as a kind of translation, some read it as a pedagogical tool for teaching with Plato, and some read it simply as a book of poems without worrying about the work that inspired it. All of this is fine by us. Prior knowledge of Plato's *Symposium* isn't an advantage or a disadvantage, just a difference, like the difference between reading this on a particular bus or on a particular beach. The numbers followed by letters (178A etc.) refer to sections of Plato's *Symposium*. (We worked from a 1989 translation by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff.) These juxtapositions with parts of the original text can be ignored or investigated, as you prefer.

NAPPI: When you're teaching in the humanities, the question of what reading is, of what we're doing when we read something, becomes exceptionally important and exceptionally fraught. Even outside of the classroom, for some of us writing is a way of reading. And writing with – or from – a text can be a way of reading it, of making it part of you, and of making yourself part of it.

When we were teaching Plato's *Symposium*, I struggled. How could I do what I was urging my students to do, and make

this text a part of me? Where was I, in those pages? How might I weave those words into my flesh and sinews, make them part of the matter that would help me make choices and move in the world? If there wasn't even room for a flute girl among the couches and the wine vessels, how could there be room for me?

JENKINS: When I studied philosophy, I was taught about men. Men's ideas, men's conversations, men's writing. I learned to value and cite the work of men. On first reading, the exclusion of women from the *Symposium* didn't strike me as at all remarkable. It didn't strike me at all. Nor, for years, did the exclusion of women's voices from my own discipline, from my own work, or from my own mind. During those years, I did not see the problem. I was the problem.

When I returned to the *Symposium* in 2016, teaching it in an interdisciplinary context, it looked different. Strange. So much of contemporary academic philosophy – its norms, where it sets its ideas of “normal” – look *strange* from the outside. Not in a good way. The rest of the world, even the rest of academia, has moved on. But academic philosophy is still nailing its colours to the ideal of the “Great Man”. The solo genius, gifted with “natural talent” and intellectual “pedigree” (yes, we actually use that word). Founding father to boy wonder.

We doubled down on this reproductive fantasy and encased it in layers of armour:

“prestige”, “reputation”, “esteem”. What we called the “core” of the discipline – where its heart could be – hardened and became brittle. A relic, perhaps. If a Platonic dialogue is one.

NAPPI: Yes, exactly this. When first reading *Symposium* I didn’t even notice the absences that became such striking presences the more time I spent with the text, and the more my reading-of became reading-with: in a classroom with other readers, as we were making our way together through the speeches of the philosophers on the couches, and as we came to those speeches in the course of a journey that had brought us there from earlier encounters with Jocasta and Ophelia and Sappho, many of the voices we heard in *Symposium* were the voices that were silent in the text. So if it’s true that a text is a living organism, and if it’s true that reading a text helps give it life (or lives, or afterlives), and if it’s true that writing with a text is a way of reading it, then it seemed time to make new pages with new spaces where new voices in the *Symposium* could move.

JENKINS: The present absence of Diotima in the *Symposium* is one way in. On the one hand, she is set on a rather extreme pedestal (who in the world would Plato depict as *wiser than Socrates?*) and on the other, I cannot even know if she was a real person. She is permitted a voice in this conversation only because she has inspired Socrates (whose position in the text is then intriguing, sounding a gender-switched echo of the Pythia’s relationship to Apollo).

But the one moral I cannot help drawing is that the topic where this happens is no accident: “love” has been considered *women’s*

business for thousands of years. So when philosophy genders itself as a male pursuit (as in the *Symposium*, so in a never-ending stream of contemporary all-male conferences and collections) the very idea of a “philosophy of love” becomes its own kind of problem. A hot conceptual mess waiting to explode. Perhaps it’s not a coincidence that there are volcanoes in our book...

NAPPI: So many volcanoes! And stones and satellites and skulls. Readers might wonder where all of that is coming from. We set ourselves the goal (I want to say the “task” but really it felt like a joy) of voicing *Symposium* anew by writing in conversation with the original text, or at least with the translation thereof that we were teaching with. We each picked individual speeches to start with, and took our own approaches to using the original speeches as creative constraints. (When Socrates made a pun about a Gorgon’s head at the end of Agathon’s speech, for example, Medusa immediately came alive as a figure in my version of “Socrates Questions Agathon”, and she brought bodies full of stones with her.) In our version of *Symposium*, then, we’re playing with proximity: of our own writing to (a translation of) Plato, of the relationships of our pieces to each other, and ultimately of our work and play as writers, readers, and teachers. Alongside Plato, we were also discussing Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* with our students, and so volcanoes exploded into the work. And *Hamlet* brought skulls. And that’s just the beginning.

JENKINS: Speaking of proximity and juxtaposition, we find ourselves writing through (or in, or because of, or about) a moment in time where movements like

#MeToo and Time's Up have brought sudden mass attention to an explosion of women's voices, making suddenly audible and unignorable how much molten pain and damage bubbles just below the hard, brittle surface of the world we're taught to call "normal". Academia is no better than Hollywood: too many academic "stars" have taken for granted their right to harass, creep on, and assault their women students and colleagues, and are horrified by the idea of a future in which they will no longer be entitled to do this.

For all kinds of reasons, literary traditions reacting to systemic oppression often turn towards futurism, space travel, and other sci fi tropes. When I was thinking about the closing sections of the *Symposium*, I was drawn to its mentions of winter and night and sleepiness, as well as to a strong sense of "zooming out". In my mind, these things translated themselves into images of the darkness, coldness, and vastness of space, and I began writing a piece inspired partly by video images of Earth streamed live from the International Space Station (which experiences a sunset every ninety minutes). *Hamlet* snuck itself back in there in the form of dream sequences, and the ways we had been playing with ideas of gender in earlier sections of the text began to materialise in the form of questions about the perspective of satellites and how a moon feels. In philosophy, women's work is easily eclipsed. I wanted to work through a sense of cyclical motion, not only in space but also in time: feminism cycles through patterns of progress and pushback, much as the ISS looks down at the same world on each pass, although the clouds move around and the cities turn their lights on and off.

Of course, I only learned a few days ago that we might be about to turn out the lights in the ISS itself...

NAPPI: So much was resonating between us when we were making these pieces. Both of our pieces are making space (and spaces) with voice and voices and voicing. You'll see that in the excerpt I've contributed here. "The Speech of Phaedrus" is the very first *Symposium* speech that I worked on, and I was trying to use the writing of my version of the speech to learn how to read the (translated) original. I had been thinking and writing a lot about gods, and about the physical and conceptual metamorphoses that turn selves into gods and vice versa. When I came to Phaedrus's speech, then, what I found there was a creation story. But the story created a world that felt like it wasn't for me: it was too cold, and it was too focused on individuals, and the women in the speech seemed merely instrumental. And so in my piece, I undid that world by writing it as a decreation and an unmaking. I transformed Love's mother from an afterthought into a central voice. *As you read her voice*, you'll hear her as she's framed by a translation of the dominant voicing of Plato's text (as I read it).

JENKINS: A similar thing was happening to me when I worked on the speech of Aristophanes. Although we each started out by working independently with separate sections of the original text, there were some really striking parallels and overlaps in our processes. Plato's Aristophanes tells an origin story and is also an origin for a story: the myth that grounds "soulmate" love in this potent, damaging image of the single person as broken, incomplete, suffering, des-

perate. I wanted to reach back to before that picture got its claws into us. And I wanted to tell a more basic origin story about splitting and suffering. As I thought about what that would have to mean, I experienced terror. Then out of habit I started counting to ten. When I realised what I was doing and why, that count became the structure of my story. The derealisation that can accompany this

kind of terror gives me a warped sense of scale, and by passing through this warp effect, I found I could approach something as huge as Aristophanes's myth and talk back to it: that I could make a warped kind of use of its ideas, even eventually its wording, rather than just being overwhelmed by the damage done and falling silent.



Before Aristophanes

Zero.

Have you ever gone into space?
Up there, on a good day and from the right angle, you can almost see what we used to look like.

One.

Down here there are no good days and no right angles.
To punish us, we were split and this is the history of what we call selves.
The break was messy.
Bleeding.
Solitary confinement, as we all pretend we don't know, is a form of torture.
Like sensory deprivation, only not for a body's senses.
Cruel.
And unusual, once.
It's amazing what you can make usual if you try.
If we all really try.
In a desperate effort to return to being whole we have started seeing things.
Nations.
Universities.
Football teams.
Women.
Our failed "we"s created intensely painful "they"s and were created by them and this is the history of hate.
I think I said hate I meant love.
I think I said love I meant war.
I think I said we.
We no longer understand what one means because knowing that would kill us.
But when we are nine tenths asleep a hundredth of us can half remember what it is not.

That it is neither each nor all.

That it does not have an arithmetic, which would surprise many of us though maybe not the monks who call themselves our mathematicians.

Two.

Because we are afraid of understanding one we animate ourselves with the idea of two.
Animation is making a picture breathe.
We make moving pictures of two and we try to breathe in these pictures like using a paper bag to calm a panic attack and this is the history of art.
It never fixed anything, any more than old Sawbones over here ever healed anyone.
Were you hoping it would?

Three.

A few days after the division we started seeing women and then men and then there was nothing left in our imaginations.
Three, we began to say, is a crowd of third wheels.
Too big to stay in any hotel room and not big enough to believe in.
As if acknowledging three might damage two.
Make two feel small.

Three point one four one five nine.

The division did not proceed along rational lines.
Nobody is sure what we're being punished for, but it must have been something terrible and wonderful and we have spent a few centuries fighting about what exactly it could have been and whom exactly we could have offended and this is the history of religions.
Above all we feel there should be some

numerical clue.
A key to understanding all cycles.
Life and death, day and night, digestion,
abuse, agriculture, blood, laundry, and the
moon.
A key that would unlock our spinning
crystal prison.
There isn't.

Four.

We made should as a cushion for isn't and
this is the history of value.
We put it in the stars along with the future.
But should turned out to be quite edgy too.
Should hurt just as much when it burrowed
in through our ribcages and stuck like a
black mass to our lungs until we couldn't
breathe in the old pictures any more.
Counting breaths is another strategy for
dealing with a panic attack if you do not
have a paper bag handy.
Or you can do it to measure how long a
body has been alive.
Animated.

Five.

Keep breathing.

Six.

There's nothing special about six so let's
take a look at the letters instead.
S. I. X.
Are they beautiful?
How about VI?
We used to mistake letters for numbers but
we have been getting better at counting.
Counting has been necessary since the
division though honestly we have not
mastered the skill.
Somewhere in a remote monastery
an order of cloistered mathematicians

has been counting under its breath
continuously since the division.
Day shift, night shift.
When one monk dies another monk is
born.
Every day they can count twice as fast as
the day before.
But as they get faster and faster they count
in smaller and smaller subdivisions, so it
doesn't really help.
We do not know what would happen to us
if the monks stopped counting and this is
the history of time.

Seven.

At some point in the past, present, or
future, the division will be called a natural
event and an explosion.
It will be argued that we did it to ourselves
and that nobody did it and this will be the
history of science.
And we will make weeks in order to have
weekends.
It is something to look forward.

Eight.

If you see a body dying you should breathe
into it like a paper bag to calm the panic
attack you are having.
Count one Mississippi two Mississippi.
This is also a good way of achieving
immortality because those two seconds will
go on forever.
Once you are immortal, come back and tell
us what happened after the monks stopped
counting.
Never tell us what one means.

Thoughts

Nine.

I have forgotten what happened.
Long ago we were united, as I said.
One theory is we didn't split cleanly and
that is why we leak.

Ten.

Now don't get ideas.
Love does the best that can be done for the
time being.
Don't make a comedy of it.



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The Speech of Phaedrus

178A.

*I was there when the gods died. I came to
unmake my son.*

178B.

He came third. It was Chaos, and the Earth, and then Love. Chaos was first and was everything and was alone. Earth had a broad chest, and people sat on him, and they were safe there. Love was designed by a goddess.

And we know this because of the agreement of the men. Because knowledge is what happens when men agree. And this is how history is made.

And so there was everything, and then there was safety, and finally there was design. And we know nothing of everything except that it was first. And what we know of safety is that it was useful. And once there was everything, and once it was useful, then there was intention, and with intention came the first woman of the story, and she was a designer. And so from the beginning, the history of woman is the history of manipulation.

*He was love, and I came to him and sat with
him and took him apart into refuge and
disarray. (Chaos sang a dirge that drove me
mad, for a bit, and Earth held me while I
shook.) And then he was gone. And then safety
was gone, and then there was only everything
and I was alone with everything.*

178C.

All sides agree, then.

I had nothing.

178D.

With the woman came love, and with love came shame, and with shame came pain.

And that pain was the pain of being seen.

And that pain was the pain of not being seen.

And so the eyes carved public from private with the hot knife of a glance and the “me” was made in blood and bubbling fat.

And shame and shame and shame and shame, lovers made of shame, families made of shame, cities made of shame, and shame and shame and shame and shame and shame and shame.

*I sat in his death and raised hands to eyes
and looked for him in the darkness but now
there was no I to look or to be seen and so
I became everything. Flesh into soil breath into
wind, heart beating a tectonic pulse,
translucent language rippling the sand
as it arced and dipped.*

178E.

And shame and shame and shame and shame.

We are misbehaving prey, we are hunters.

We are soldiers at war, we are comrades in arms.

We are a city of lovers made lovers made beloved by shame and shame and shame and shame and shame and shame and shame and shame.

*The language puts its fingers to your lips – its
fingers do not belong to it, she has become
everything now and everything cannot have,
everything cannot own, everything cannot
possess or covet, love is dead there are no gods
now, no selves, no she, so let us say there simply
are fingers and they are at your lips which*



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