
Images of Love and Politics: Plato's conscious manipulation of myths

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Abstract

This paper offers a comparative analysis of the ways in which Plato used mythical language in order to convey his views on love and politics. For politics, the myth of the metals in the Republic and of Atlantis in the Timaeus/Critias will be analysed. For love, the function of myths in the Symposium and Phaedrus will be compared and contrasted. The emphasis will be on the self-conscious and subtle ways in which Plato manipulated imaginative constructs in order to serve his philosophical views.

In about 180 CE the Platonist Celsus argued in his *Alēthēs Logos* (*True Doctrine*) that the Gospels were fictional stories (*plásmata*), which purported to be read as historical stories (*historiai*). The Christian story of Jesus' bodily resurrection was according to Celsus not an historical event (*historia*) that really happened, but a fabrication/fiction (*plásma*) invented by a hysterical female, Mary of Magdala (*Contra Celsum* 2.55; cf Bowersock 1994:3, 95, 118). Bowersock (1994:3) notes: "Celsus knew of course all the pagan parallels to the resurrection, but he considered them no less fiction than the story of Jesus itself." Neither the Greek heroes nor the Christian Jesus rose, according to Celsus, factually and historically from the dead.

Origen, in defense about 60 years later, "strained every nerve ... to confute Celsus' elaborate attempt" by trying to prove that Gospel stories like the resurrection were not fabricated fiction (*plásma*) but historical truth (*historia*) (*Contra Celsum* 1.42, 2.48, 2.56; cf Bowersock 1994:9, 115, 118). Since Celsus raised the issue in terms of fact versus fiction, Origen (in spite of being an allegorist!) had to reply to him in the same terms:

That he really did raise the dead, and that this is not a fiction (*plásma*) of the writers of the Gospels, is proved by the consideration that, if it was a fiction (*plásma*), many would have been recorded to have been raised up, including people who had already been a long time in their tombs. But, since it is not a fiction (*plásma*), those of whom this is recorded may easily be enumerated (*Contra Celsum* 2.48; cf Bowersock 1994:115).

"Perhaps not one of Origen's strongest arguments," as Bowersock (1994:115) observes. Nevertheless, it let us see the exact terms in which

attack and defense were launched.

But can we be more precise about what Celsus and Origen understood under those categories of history (*historia*) and fiction (*plásma*)? The answer is probably to be found in the sceptic Sextus Empiricus' discussion (ca 190 CE) of the three types of story that are told. He defines the three types as follows: Under *historia* he understands "the presentation (*ekthesis*) ... of what actually happened," under *plásma* (fiction) "[the presentation] of things that did not happen but resemble things that have happened" and under *muthos* "[the presentation] of things that did not happen and are false (*pseudē*), such as stories of the Titans, the Gorgon, or Hecabe turning into a dog" (Bowersock 1994:10). This threefold typology of story goes according to Bowersock (1994:10) back to Cicero, who probably got it in turn from Hellenistic theorists and translated the three Greek terms into Latin as *historia*, *argumentum* and *fabula*.

It should also be noted, in passing, that the contrast between literal and symbolical/metaphorical was an important point of contention **within** second century Christianity – between orthodox Christians on the one hand and gnostic Christians on the other. On Pagels' reading of the evidence much of the early tradition (Luke, for example) insists that Jesus literally came back to life, which became the orthodox position (Tertullian, ca 190 CE, for example). Over against these, however, she argues, stood the gnostics who rejected the literal interpretation:

The gnostic Christians rejected Luke's theory. Some gnostics called the literal view of resurrection the "faith of fools." The resurrection, they insisted, was not a unique event in the past: instead, it symbolized how Christ's presence could be experienced in the present. What mattered was not literal seeing, but spiritual vision (Pagels 1990:41).

My purpose is to argue that the conscious reflection on and purposeful manipulation of fiction and fact can be traced back to the origin of the debate in classical Greece (cf Cartledge 1993:18-19); more specifically I intend to demonstrate this point by showing how **Plato**, in the fourth century BCE, **exploited myths in a self-conscious and subtle way** in order to convey his views on politics and love (cf also Morgan 2000:29). To illustrate my point I will first analyse Plato's political use of the myths of Atlantis in the *Timaeus-Critias* and of the metals in the *Republic*; I will then show, by way of comparison, how he skilfully uses myth in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* to express his views on love.

In two probably late dialogues, the *Timaeus* and *Critias* (ca 350 BCE), Plato has Critias recount the story of **Atlantis**. Critias holds that he heard it as child from his old grandfather, who had heard it from his father, who in turn had heard it from the 6th century Solon, who again had heard it earlier

from an old Egyptian priest during a visit to that ancient country. According to the story, 9000 years before Solon's time, there was a gargantuan war between proto-Athens and Atlantis, which was caused by the latter's imperialistic expansion. When Atlantis threatened to occupy Libya, Egypt, Asia and Greece, virtuous and just proto-Athens stepped in and eventually all by herself liberated those threatened countries from slavery. Zeus himself punished Atlantis for its imperialistic arrogance (*hubris*) by having it disappear into the ocean that came to bear its name. Although the heroic army of Proto-Athens was also swallowed by the ocean on that day, land-based Proto-Athens itself survived but was unfortunately heavily reduced to the bone. Because of numerous floods through the ages only people in the rural mountains survived, and thus the story was lost to the Athenians. That is why Solon now has to learn the history of this war anew from the Egyptian written records.

The point of the story is to praise Proto-Athens as the model city to be emulated by Plato's own Athens, and to warn against the imperialistic sea-power Atlantis as the anti-model which should have been avoided by Periclean Athens and now still is to be shunned by contemporary Athens (Vidal-Naquet 1995:38-39). Solon and antiquity are used, in the story, to validate the myth for a fourth century audience (Morgan 2000:261-271). It is not my purpose to focus on the message/ideological content of the story so much. Suffice it to say that the myth is intended to show the hierarchical ideal state of Plato's *Republic* in action. I wish, instead, to highlight **the self-conscious way in which the story is presented**: it is told as if it were historically true (Vidal-Naquet 1995:39).

Critias begins: "Listen then, Socrates, to a tale (*logos*) which, though passing strange, is yet wholly true (*alēthēs*), as Solon, the wisest of the Seven, once upon a time declared" (*Timaeus* 20D). And after the story has been concluded, Socrates comments: "the fact that it is no invented tale (*plastheis muthos*) but genuine history (*alēthinos logos*) is all important" (*Timaeus* 26E). These words have been interpreted by many, up to our own times, as an indication of the physical existence of a lost civilisation (whether America, Sweden or Thira/Santorini). Already the geographer Strabo (*Geography* 2.3.6), at the beginning of the 1st century CE, tells us that literal and metaphorical interpretations existed before and in his time. Many critics indeed think that the debate can be traced back to the fourth century BCE: with Aristotle taking Atlantis as metaphor on the one hand, and Crantor, the first commentator on the *Timaeus*, taking it as literal place on the other (cf Cameron 1983; Ramage 1978:23; Forsyth 1980:1; Gill 1980:vii; Vidal-Naquet 1986:264-265; Bichler 1999:335-336).

When we **compare the Atlantis story with Plato's use of myth elsewhere** and especially with his reflection on the subject in his middle dialogue, **the**

Republic, there can be no doubt as to his intention. Plato is well-known for his criticism and censure of immoral myths which portray the gods in a bad light (Forsyth 1980:61-62): stories about Cronus castrating his father or devouring his children should not be taught to children and should not be heard in his ideal state (*Republic* 378a). On the other hand, Plato argues, the first thing one needs when establishing an ideal state, is to fabricate a myth which will benefit the city, which he promptly provides: the **myth of the metals**, which holds that those made of gold by the gods are to act as rulers, those of silver are to be the soldiers, and those of iron and bronze the farmers and manual workers (*Republic* 415a). Before he tells the story, Socrates reflects on the necessity of creating **a noble lie** (*pseudos gennaion*), “which will be believed by everybody – including the rulers, ideally, but failing that the rest of the city” (*Republic* 414b). After completing his account of the myth, Socrates asks Glaucon: “Well that’s the story (*muthos*). Can you think of any possible way of getting people to believe it?”, and Glaucon answers: “No. ... Not the actual people you tell it to. But their children might, and *their* children after them, and the rest of the population in later generations” (*Republic* 415c). Earlier in the dialogue Plato insists that “lying is a task to be entrusted to specialists” (meaning the rulers), “for the benefit of the city”, and that “ordinary people should have nothing to do with it” (*Republic* 389b). Plato is thus deeply aware of what he is doing: he is creating **a non-factual myth, which he will present to the common people as fact, in order to achieve his objective of establishing the ideal polis**. Kathryn Morgan (2000:265) aptly observes: “A successful Noble Lie does not make its fictional status transparent. [But] this does not mean that its status cannot be transparent to the reader.” Indeed, Plato gives the reader more than enough clues about the nature and intention of his myths.

It is clear from the myths of the metals and Atlantis that Plato *consciously* manipulated imaginary constructs in order to express his political views. It is possible to maintain that he similarly fabricated myths in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* (both from Plato’s middle period) to enunciate his views on love.

In the *Symposium* Socrates narrates a dialogue between him and the priestess Diotima, from whom he claims to have learned the truth about love. Inserted into the argument is a myth about Eros’ birth which serves to illustrate the nature of Platonic love. “Who are his father and mother,” Socrates asks. And Diotima answers: “That’s a rather long story (*makróteron ... diēgēsthai*), ... but I will tell you anyway (*hómōs de soi erō*)” (*Symposium* 203b). The story is clearly intended as a reaction to and correction of the versions of some of the previous speakers. Eros, Diotima says, is the son of the god Poros (Resource) and the human beggar Penia (Poverty). As such he is an intermediate being (*daimōn*) between his divine father and his object

mother – a vivid myth used to illustrate the conclusion of the preceding dialectical argumentation between both Agathon and Socrates on the one hand and between Socrates and Diotima on the other. Whereas Agathon praised Eros as the most beautiful and youngest god, Socrates persuades him that Eros is no perfect god but rather the desire for perfection. The myth Socrates claims to have heard from Diotima underscores this conclusion: like his mother Penia, he is always destitute, “tough, with hardened skin, without shoes or home ... always in a state of need”; but also, “taking after his father, he schemes to get hold of beautiful and good things ... he desires knowledge and is resourceful in getting it, a lifelong lover of wisdom (*philosophōn dia pantòs tou bíou*)” (*Symposium* 203d).

This myth of Eros’ birth, it seems, was meant to be understood in comparison with those of some previous speakers. Phaedrus praises Eros as one of the oldest gods, who according to Hesiod and other authorities had no parents. According to Agathon, on the other hand, Eros must be the youngest of gods if he is the most beautiful. Plato’s intention is probably to bring out the sophistry of these two speakers, whose main interest is a clever play with words instead of a serious search for truth. Pausanias, speaking after Phaedrus, in his turn holds that since there are two Aphrodites, there must also be two Eroses. Aphrodite Ouranía is the daughter of Uranus and has no mother, whereas Aphrodite Pándēmos is the daughter of Zeus and Dione. The first kind of Eros is between an older man and an adolescent boy. It is right and deserves praise, because it concentrates on the psyche. The second Eros is either between an *erastes* and *paidika* or between a male and female. It is an inferior kind of Love, since the focus is solely on the body. Pausanias’ distinction between psychological and somatic Love, which he substantiates by means of his myth of two Aprodites/Eroses, clearly anticipates the Platonic Socrates’ *scala amoris*. But whereas Pausanias attempts to leave room for the validity of somatic pederasty, Socrates/Diotima expects the lover to leave the somatic behind and even to despise it as he moves from love of an individual beautiful body to love of beautiful minds/psyches and finally to love of Beauty as such (cf *Symposium* 210b-d).

Aristophanes’ eulogy presents a comic but serious instance of myth-making and usage. Aristophanes tells the doctor Eryximachus, who has just completed his pedantic speech and who has had no use for myth, the following: “‘Actually, Eryximachus,’ Aristophanes said, ‘I do intend to take a different approach from the one taken by you and Pausanias in your speeches’” (*Symposium* 189c). He then tells his famous myth of the three originally round sexes (male-male, female-female and male-female), whole beings who were cut in two by Zeus on account of their *hubris*, and who should from now on honour the gods lest they be punished again.

Aristophanes uses this myth, a story that happened “long ago” (*pálai* in *Symposium* 189d; *archaia* in *Symposium* 191d), to explain why one would feel incomplete and would desire another person. The gender of the person that each individual is attracted to is naturally determined, Aristophanes explains, by the type of original being it once formed part of. Aristophanes notes:

When a lover of boys, or any other type of person, meets that very person who is his other half, he is overwhelmed, to an amazing extent, with affection (*philia*), concern (*oikeiôtēs*) and love (*eros*). The two don't want to spend any time apart from each other. These are people who live out whole lifetimes together, but still couldn't say what it is they want from each other. I mean, no one can think that it's just sexual intercourse they want, and that this is the reason why they find such joy in each other's company and attach such importance to this. It's clear that each of them has some wish in his mind that he can't articulate (*Symposium* 192c-d)

In his speech Socrates responds explicitly to Aristophanes' central claim. “The idea has been put forward”, Diotima now says with reference to Aristophanes, “that lovers are people who are looking for their own other halves. But my view is that love is directed neither at their half nor their whole unless ... that turns out **to be good** (*agathon*). After all, people are even prepared to have their own feet or hands amputated if they think that those parts of themselves are diseased. ... The point is that the only object of people's love is the good (*tou agathou*)” (*Symposium* 205e).

When the drunken Alcibiades bursts into the room after Socrates' speech, he delivers an encomium on Socrates, which not only offers a welcome relief to the previous serious discussion but also employs mythical language that presents Socrates himself as the very embodiment of Platonic eros. “The way I'll try to praise Socrates, gentlemen, is through images (*di' eikónōn*),” says Alcibiades. And he continues: “Perhaps he'll think this is to make fun of him; but the image (*hē eikōn*) will be designed to bring out the truth (*tou alēthoūs hēneka*) not to make fun” (*Symposium* 215a). Like Silenus statues and Marsyas the satyr, Socrates is unattractive on the outside and appears to be erotically attracted to beautiful boys. But “if you could open him up and look inside”, Alcibiades maintains, you would discover divine “statues” inside him just like when you open up the statues of Silenus and you would find a man “full of moderation (*gēmei ... sōphrosúnēs*)” (*Symposium* 216d-217a).

My last example of Plato's deliberate use of myth comes from Socrates' second speech in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates here sets out to withdraw the plea of his previous speech in which he responded to Phaedrus' recitation of Lysias' speech. According to Lysias an *eromenos*, like Phaedrus, should grant his favours only to an *erastes*, like Lysias, who is not in love

with him. Socrates' first speech develops this idea, but in his second speech he recants it. His *daimonion* warns him that he has done something wrong, that he has uttered a blasphemous speech against Eros and that he needs to purify himself by delivering a palinode. He tells Phaedrus: "there is no truth in the idea that if you have a lover, you should still grant your favours to the man who is not in love with you, because he is sane, while the lover is mad" (*Phaedrus* 244b). In order to prove that madness (*manía*) sent by the gods is not necessarily an evil, but that it can indeed benefit both *eromenos* and *erastes*, Socrates insists that a clear understanding of the soul is imperative.

After he has emphasized that the soul is immortal because it is self-moving, Socrates continues: "To tell you what the soul really is (ie, its Form/*idéa*, *hoion esti*) would call for a lengthy explanation (*diēgēsis*) – one altogether and in every way beyond human power. To tell you what it is like (*éoiiken*, a perfect with a present meaning, from *eíkō*), on the other hand is within human capability (*anthrōpínēs*), and briefer. So let us approach it in that way" (*Phaedrus* 246a). The myth, which Socrates tells, distinguishes between divine souls and human souls. Both types of soul are compared to a charioteer and a pair of winged horses, but whereas the divine soul has only noble horses, the human soul has one noble and one evil horse. Socrates recalls later in the speech: "At the beginning of our story (*muthos*) we divided every soul into three parts – two having the form of horses, the third that of a charioteer. Let that still remain our model" (*Phaedrus* 253c).

In the case of divine souls, the charioteer and horses work in perfect harmony so that these souls are able to constantly contemplate perfect Beauty and Goodness. In the case of the human soul, however, the task of the rational part (the charioteer) is to struggle with and control the irrational part (the evil horse) with the assistance of the spirited part (the noble horse). The structure is similar to the tripartite division of the soul and the polis in the *Republic*, but a new element enters: an appreciation of divine madness, absent also from Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates now uses the Platonic theory of recollection (*anamnesis*) to argue that the human soul which once in following the soul of its god saw glimpses of perfect Beauty before it fell to earth (ie, before it lost its wings and became embodied), remembers this ideal Form when it sees a beautiful individual and begins to regrow its wings which will carry it upwards to true Beauty. It is this kind of madness, sent by the gods, which Plato presently praises in his second speech. Souls, which have an adequate recollection of perfect Beauty, "when they see some likeness of what is there [in that other world], are dumbfounded; they are no longer masters of themselves, though their perception is unclear, and so they do not realize what is happening to them" (*Phaedrus* 250a-b). The lover who is corrupted, will not move from this individual in whom he recognizes an example of Beauty, to Beauty as such,

but will foolishly give “himself up to pleasure (*hēdonē*), going at it like a four-footed animal, and trying to father offspring. Excess (*hubris*) is his companion, and he follows pleasure (*hēdonē*) without fear of embarrassment” (*Phaedrus* 250e). To the lover of wisdom, on the other hand, who remembers the ideal Beauty that he once saw, the following happens:

When he sees a good likeness of beauty – a face or bodily shape like that of a god – the first thing he does is shiver feverishly, and there comes over him something of the awe he felt before. Then, gazing at it, he worships the beauty he sees, as he would a god; only the fear of being thought completely mad stops him sacrificing to his boyfriend as to the statue of a god. When he sees him, a change comes over him – the sweating and high temperature you would expect after the shivering. His temperature rises with the stream of beauty coming to him through his eyes, and his wings grow, like a plant watered by this stream. The area round the shoot, which in the past has locked solid, preventing any growth, is thawed by the rise in temperature. As the nourishment pours in, the quills of the feathers expand, and they start sprouting from their roots all over the soul, below the surface; for the entire soul was once winged (*Phaedrus* 251a-c).

Socrates’ point, the reason why he analyses the human soul in the second speech, is to demonstrate that an *eromenos* is better off if he gratifies an *erastes* who is in love with him than one who is not. He consciously uses the myth of the chariot team to portray the struggle within the tripartite human soul vividly:

When the charioteer first sees the face he loves, warming his whole soul with the sight, he begins to be filled with tickling and the pains of desire. The horse which obeys the charioteer is controlled, now as always, by modesty; it keeps itself in check, and does not leap on the one it loves. But the other stops paying any attention at all to the charioteer’s spur or whip; it starts violently forward, to the great confusion of its fellow and the charioteer. It drives them towards the boy, and forces them to bring up the question of sexual pleasure. At first the other horse and the charioteer resist, annoyed at the horrifying and unnatural thing they are being driven to. But in the end, seeing no end to the evil, they let themselves be carried along, giving in and agreeing to do what they are told. They come up close to him, and see the dazzling face of the boy they love. When the charioteer sees this, his recollection (*mnēmē*) is carried back to the nature of beauty. Again he sees it, standing side by side with self-control (*sophrosune*), on a holy pedestal. The sight fills him with fear; he falls back, overcome with awe, and this makes him drag on the reins with such violence as to bring both horses back on their quarters (*Phaedrus* 254a-d).

Socrates concludes that the lover who behaves in this manner, is of benefit to the *paidika*. The latter should therefore give himself to this kind of lover, rather than to someone who is not in love with him as Lysias advised.

In her *Fragility of goodness* Martha Nussbaum (1986) advanced the controversial thesis that Plato revised his view of love radically in the *Phaedrus*. Not only did Plato, according to Nussbaum, now recognize the validity of passionate, mad love, but also of the unique individual. This, she explained, probably happened after Plato himself had fallen in love with the young Dion of Syracuse. Christopher Rowe (1990) then replied that Nussbaum had misread the content of divine madness in the palinode, and Christopher Gill (1990) argued that she had illegitimately imported modern notions of the individual into her reading of Socrates' second speech. I am basically in agreement with their substantial criticisms, but will for my purposes here not enter this debate in greater detail, since my focus is primarily on Plato's *conscious* use of myth.

As far as this issue of deliberate myth-making in Plato is concerned, Christopher Gill (1980) argued earlier that Atlantis offers an example of deliberate Platonic fiction. He then, in "Plato on falsehood – not fiction" (1993) revised this view, thinking that he himself had been influenced unduly by modern notions of fiction in his earlier assessment. Christopher Rowe (1999:263), however, answers that, although he accepts "many of Christopher Gill's strictures ... against too easy an attribution to Plato of modern concepts of fiction", it still seems to him that the contrast between "what is, or is represented as being ..., invented, constructed, or imagined" and what is not, as "fundamental to Plato's deployment of the notion of *muthos*." My point that Plato self-consciously reflected on the use of myths in society and consciously created and manipulated them to serve his philosophical views on politics and love, is in line not only with Christopher Rowe's contention but also with Luc Brisson's detailed study of myth in Plato, translated as *Plato the myth-maker* (1998), and may benefit further from Myles Burnyeat's subtle reading of Plato in his Tanner lectures (1997). It also acknowledges Julia Annas' methodological suggestion that a reading of Plato may benefit from an analysis of the post-Platonic tradition in antiquity. I will hold that Celsus was a good Platonist when he recognized early Christian myths as fictions similar to those told in his own tradition. Whether he was correct in rejecting the Christian ones, calls for a serious reflection on the ethical content that they embodied in comparison with that of Greco-Roman myths – something I did not debate in this paper, but which surely deserves all our attention if we consider ourselves moral readers for whom our individual and collective well-being is of the utmost importance.

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