The Women’s Symposium

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The flute girl wandered into the kitchen with the contented air of someone who has already been paid for the night’s work, however light it might be. “They may not need that,” she told a serving girl who was watering a second jug of wine. “They say they’re not drinking very much tonight.”

The cook, a big woman with her hands thrust deep in dirty dishes, snorted. “We’ll see about that. They’ve sent you away this early? What are they doing?”

“Philosophizing,” she said. Indeed, they could all hear the men’s words filtering faintly in from the other room.

“Philosophy,” the cook repeated, ferociously rubbing the inside of a pot. “I’d like to see them do a real day’s work. If they can come up with any deep thoughts then, I’ll be impressed.”

“They’ve been at war,” the serving girl pointed out, and the cook harrumphed.

“But now they laze around on couches and consider that the most important thing in the world. I’d like to see the state of the world if everyone thought the same.”

“I don’t see why we can’t try it,” the flute girl said. “Philosophy, I mean.”

“We’re not educated,” the serving girl said. “How could we speak on such things when we can’t even read?”

“They’re talking about love,” said the flute girl. “How hard can it be?”

“You’d know all about that,” scoffed the serving girl.

“It’s honest work, same as anyone’s,” she said, unperturbed. “I do think I know something, and if you are interested, I will share it.”

No one had any complaints against this, and so she began to speak.

The Flute Girl’s Speech

“From what I have seen and heard of love, I cannot believe it is anything but greed and selfishness. Those men out there speak grandly of it, but even they betray its truth. Phaedrus out there says love is great because it leads to honor and blessedness from the gods. [1] Socrates challenges him and says it is really immortality that lovers crave,
and that no one will die for love unless they are sure they will win fame for it. Is that why men love – in the hopes that their story will be spoken years from now and they will be remembered? Pausanias says it is about gaining wisdom, and that no one would fault a beloved who accepted a lover who he thought would aid him in his maturation. A man is celebrated who chooses someone simply to improve himself! Is this love, or is this greed? Socrates, who claims to know all the arts of love and its secrets, is out there claiming that love is a way to perceive the ultimate beauty and have great happiness, and that we are all pregnant and desire to birth our children or ideas – as if he knew anything about that. He puts these words in the mouth of some imaginary woman, but none of the men out there believe we are worth their time. Love is merely a vehicle for them to attain perfect philosophy, because that is all they care about, so naturally love must exist to confirm that. In my profession, I have seen little of love that impresses me. Aristophanes says that once upon a time, mankind was formed of people fused together as one, and we long to return to that state. But I think there must have been some solitary humans, right from the beginning, who served as lookouts to help direct their roly-poly fellows and reach small places where they could not fit. He claims united humans are content and do not wish for anything else, so how would the human race have accomplished anything if there weren’t some whose vision was not so clouded? And now that everyone is split in two, those lookouts remain watching as everyone else searches for their better halves, retaining the sense to pass judgment on the foolishness of all the rest.”

“I don’t know about all that,” said the cook. “I can see why you’d say it, but it seems gloomy to me.”

“To me as well,” she replied. “I encourage you to lighten our discussion.”

“And so I will,” she said. “In my opinion, love is doing anything well.”

“That’s not the love we’re speaking on,” said the flute girl. “There are many kinds, you see.”

“Oh hush,” said the serving girl. “Now you’re sounding like a philosopher, and we’ll have to send you back out there with them. I want to hear what she has to say.”

So the cook continued.

The Cook’s Speech

“I don’t have much to say, because I’m not used to making speeches, but I’ll do my best. That’s what this speech is about, anyway – my best. I put my heart into every dish I make. Do you think the people I serve thank me? I doubt they even taste it. But I can’t bring myself to do anything but my best. It’s what I do – what I am, my mark on the world. I will never fight valiantly in a battle or speak great philosophic truths. I’m not given the opportunity. So if this is my sphere, I ought to do everything inside of it the best I can, because otherwise what am I? It’s like that ladder Socrates is talking about outside, where you go from loving one thing to Beauty itself. There is one perfect form of everything out there in the world, and all our struggles here are to perceive it. If love is a way to get closer to that perfect form, then my labors are love. I want everything I make to be as close to perfection as it can be in this world, even if some men out there say we can’t grasp it. If I make soup, I want it to get close to being The Soup, the soup-iest idea of soup there ever could be. Putting your all into something, really caring about making it wonderful, that’s love to me. It’s not about wanting anything back. It’s about making a statement for myself and aspiring toward perfection. So that’s where I stand on all this. Love is taking your own two hands and doing something with the world, and doing it well.”

“I like that idea of love,” said the flute girl, and the serving girl agreed. “If only more people thought like you, the world would truly grow closer to Beauty.”
“It's my turn,” said the serving girl, and she took a sip of un-watered wine to prepare herself.

The Serving Girl's Speech

“I agree with Pausanias that there are two kinds of love, that which is noble and that which is not. He believes common love is between men and women and fixated on physical affection, while heavenly love is between men and focused on wisdom. However, I don’t think the distinction between types of love depends on the genders involved or whether it favors the body over the mind. I think it depends on what both of you have spoken on. Bad love is selfish. You wish to possess another person utterly, no matter what they desire for themselves. You want to pursue knowledge to enrich yourself, and your lover is merely a rung on the ladder you climb to get there. Or you love in the hopes that you will win glory and remembrance, like Phaedrus and Socrates said. Is love just a tool? These things may be done in the name of love, but I cannot believe that Love smiles upon them. What he favors is love for love's sake, heedless of what might be lost or gained. As the cook said, you take pride in your work for its own reasons, even if no one else sees. You take pleasure in your lover even if they cannot enrich you and even if no poets will sing your name long after you are dead. All that matters is the love you have. That is the purest, truest way to honor the god of Love – not mixing him with anything else. Through this way, one can find contentment.”

The other two were both pleased by this speech and the serving girl's attention to their own words. Then another serving girl approached, bearing the news that Alcibiades had arrived and wanted more wine. The serving girl grumbled and picked up her jug. “It seems they did need me after all.”

Once she had served them, she returned, and they had more conversations that might have influenced all of Western philosophy if they had been able to write anything down and if anyone had cared to listen, which they didn't.

Reference List


[1] “Love is […] the most powerful in helping men gain virtue and blessedness” (Plato, 1989/385-370, p. 12).

[2] “Do you really think that Alcestis would have died for Admetus […] or that Achilles would have died after Patroclus, or that your Kodros would have died so as to preserve the throne for his sons, if they hadn’t expected the memory of their virtue – which we still hold in honor – to be immortal?” (p. 56).

[3] “It follows, therefore, that giving in to your lover for virtue's sake is honorable” (p. 19).

[4] “It is giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul” (p. 53).

[5] “Love is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete” (p. 29).

[6] “This is Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs” (p. 59).

[7] True beauty and Love “is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that” (p. 59).
“[T]here is a Common as well as a Heavenly Love” (p. 13). Common Love is “felt by the vulgar, who are attached to women no less than to boys to the body more than the soul”. Heavenly lovers “are attracted to the male: they find pleasure in what is by nature stronger and more intelligent” (p. 14).

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