PURSUITS of WHOLENESS:

Ἔρως and Story in the Aristophanic Myth

Ellie Gold Laabs

Freshman Annual Essay

Mr. Page & Mr. Pastille

April 1st, 2019

St. John’s College, Annapolis MD

In his encomium on love in the *Symposium*, Plato's Aristophanes proposes that, "for the whole's desire and pursuit, certainly, ἔρως is the name" (193A).[1] The mythic speech containing this conclusion portrays ἔρως as the experience of and remedy for mortal incompleteness. Love is an impetus towards the original state in which human beings were once "whole." In formulating completeness as our first condition, Aristophanes suggests that love is a kind of nostalgia, leading us to who we used to be. We will "become happy," asserts Aristophanes, by "achieving Love's end" (193C), namely: wholeness. Human beings achieve wholeness through two primary means: love and storytelling. In this paper, I intend to explore the nature of wholeness and the connection between the two ways humans, in their fractured state, can again feel full. I will look at how ἔρως and story came about, what kinds of wholeness they lead us to, and the consequences brought about by the acquisition of wholeness. In exploring how love and story function as remedies for man's original affliction, I will scrutinize what it means for the human being to become whole and if such a thing is even possible. Finally, I will assess how we best might look towards wholeness, given that the Aristophanic myth begins--significantly--with its loss.

There are two implicit kinds of wholeness in Aristophanes' account: the original whole (spherical beings threatening to the gods) and the inexact whole (achieved by the reunion of halves). In the initial state, the human being was "wholly round, with its back and sides in a circle, and it used to have four hands, and legs equal in number to the hands, and two faces, alike in every way, on a cylindrical neck" and it moved "carried round in a circle, fast" (189E). The primary wholeness is markedly circular, symmetrical, and even. There is a perfection to the

[1] This translation is my own. All subsequent quotations are taken from the cited edition of the text.

entire human; in this condition, everything is visually balanced. Because entirety is what ἔρως compels us to return to, it follows that this original state must appear to man as the τέλος[2] of our existence. What accounts for the perfection of the original human? Most obviously, the circular beings are self-complete entities with a physicality conducive to effortless motion. Their aesthetic symmetry is desirable, surely, but what more so contributes to their excellence is the way the physical universe supports their movement. The world was designed to perpetuate the motion of round things; a circle will continue to roll until obstructed. The circular humans did not need to exert much effort on their own; the universe, in a sense, "carried" them. It is this lack of impediment and inhibition which was lost to us when the circular human was cut in two by the gods and to which we aspire to return.

The wholeness achieved by the cut human who unites with his severed half, on the other hand, is inexact and the synthesis, incomplete. The ephemerality of the embrace of two halves precludes their unity from exactly resembling that of the inseparable whole. However long the literal, physical concord of broken men may hold, it will never compare to the eternal unity of man's original form. As a result, wholeness necessarily means something different when approached from a lesser state. When the circular whole is broken, motion becomes fragmented and finite. In this way, all successive incarnations of wholeness following the original state are, and will remain, approximate. While we may achieve something resembling the whole in occasional union, we never attain the constant wholeness we so desire.

When evaluating Aristophanic wholeness, we must consider the whole not simply as a physical state, but a feeling as well. The original sensation of wholeness aimed at by ἔρως

[2] "Perfection, fulfillment" (Liddell & Scott)

predominantly manifests in the activity enabled by the whole. Human beings began in a state wherein "they and their travel were both spherical" (190B). Wholeness, by this definition, is an experience of motion and direction. What exactly has been lost to the split human who cannot move in such a way? When Zeus cut the human being, man ceased to be a circular creature and became a linear creature. The broken human is "upright" (190D) rather than round. The physical universe does not naturally support "upright" motion in the same way it does circular motion. Lines, unlike round things, must energize and perpetuate their own journey. Furthermore, linear beings can fall down while spherical beings cannot. Despite the inhibition of the linear man who is apt to fall and whose motion requires effort, we are compelled to acknowledge that there is something about the human being which was equipped to become upright. The original humans were born in excess with more limbs, eyes etc. than proved necessary to sustain life. We might even go so far as to say that their symmetry invited the possibility of bisection. Because human beings continued to thrive even after being split, it is obvious that man was somehow prepared to be cut in two and to move newly.

Aristophanes appears unconcerned with what happens to his conception of wholeness in generations following the one immediately successive to the primordial state. While the first human beings cut by the gods sought to unite with their actual missing half, subsequent men were not similarly split and, thus, do not have similar halves to seek. While human beings still partake in the longing born of losing part of the original self, the literal missing half can no longer be rightly looked for. Why is it that Aristophanes only speaks to the early state, yet is confident that it still applies to us? Is it possible that ἔρως never leaves the primordial condition somehow? Perhaps it is for the same reasons that we refer to love as "primal" or claim to feel

"reborn" when falling in love. In a way, love cannot help but take us back to the beginning; ἔρως is caught in a perpetual genesis.

In order to return to wholeness once the original breakage has taken place, the Aristophanic myth hypothetically invokes Hephaestus to "weld" the humans back together. The god's language emphasizes the choice of unity, stressing "*if* that's what you desire," "see *if* this is what you love, and *if* obtaining it would be enough for you" (192E). With the call to deliberation and strong implication of doubt evident in the persistent "if," we are left to wonder about the desirability of wholeness. Even as Aristophanes claims no one would refuse Hephaestus' assistance, the conditional language of his offering puts into question whether we might be better off doing so. Once we have been split, is it possible that wholeness, even when attained, will not feel as perfect as it once did? Presumably, within this wholeness, there will always be a history of halfness which taints the character of the whole.

As the initial breakage turned man into a linear creature, it also brought about man's capacity for storytelling. Narrative is the primary human incarnation of linear motion; stories, like human lives, move in lines. There is a reason "storyline" is the appropriate term for the shape of a narrative; stories are temporal and move accordingly from cause to effect. It follows, therefore, that when humans became linear, upright creatures, storytelling became relevant to man. The linear man sees himself in the linearity of a story. Aristophanes' concern for narrative manifests at the beginning of his tale when he stresses his intent to "speak somewhat differently" (189C). What he means by this different speech is elucidated in the form of his account. Rather than state simply and dialectically that love makes us feel whole, Aristophanes tells us a story. In this, he reveals that there is something about wholeness which cannot properly be stated in

traditional λόγος.[3] We need stories to understand and bring us to wholeness in the same way we need ἔρως. Stories are a means to communicate shared experience, to counsel us, and to inform us that we are not alone. On the one hand, stories allow men to progress forward through time, to continue to travel in a straight line. On the other hand, stories allow us to circle back to our origins, to examine ourselves.

When a human finds his other half through ἔρως, the two upright lines curve in on each other, making a round whole once more. Our ability to tell and retell the same narratives endows a story with its own propensity towards circularity. Stories maintain two kinds of circles: the circle of reexamination and the circle of repetition. In the former case, stories serve as a conduit for man to turn back on himself, allowing human beings to recall the origin through contemplation. In the latter case, the retelling of a story turns the story itself into a circle. Even as narrative is a linear thing, when told again, stories become a linear motion which loops back on itself. Retelling a story asks the end of the storyline to unite with the beginning. When we reiterate a narrative or use a story to return to our origins in service of self-understanding, we make a linear thing circular, just as the linear man becomes circular when he finds his other half. In this way, telling a story is like falling in love: both allow us to access the original roundness. In asking us to "be the teachers of everyone else" (189D) once we have heard Aristophanes' tale, he is essentially entreating us to repeat his myth. If we are prepared to follow the mandates of his speech, then Aristophanes compels us to become storytellers ourselves. He is setting us up to prove, personally, how the communication of narrative can allow one to feel whole.

[3] "the word or that by which the inward thought is expressed" (Liddell & Scott)

But what makes this wholeness so desirable? What exactly is the τέλος of the original man? After all, human beings were not intended to crave wholeness. Not only does the approximate nature of the whole make our incompleteness insatiable, we are also confronted with the reality that ἔρως (the thing which makes us desire the whole in the first place) is not native to man. Love is not present in the original state - it is rather the result of the initial separation of human beings. Ἔρως was born of accident. Because ἔρως is incidental and thereby not beholden to any greater divine structure, it is no surprise that the wholeness it aspires to has consequences. Even if we come to know an approximate wholeness through love or through storytelling, the whole we attain may not be as idyllic as imagined.

The most obvious consequence of wholeness is that which caused the gods to split the circular beings in the first place: pride. Original wholeness gave human beings a sense of implicit superiority, "lofty thoughts" (190B) which instilled in them the audacity to believe they could overthrow the gods. The prideful tendency of the original human reveals that even the initial, consummate whole is unsustainable. The circle may have been too perfect, a foretaste of something higher which tempted the circular man to arrogance. The original wholeness gave way to a desire for unvirtuous[4] action. The seductiveness of the perfect whole seems to be responsible for the human inclination to leave their assigned plane and assert themselves upward.

Given that the original wholeness appears perfect to man, it is necessary to ascertain where, within this perfect model, hubris resides. It seems that man's pridefulness is not resultant of his circular nature itself, but rather of what occurs when this circularity is set in motion. The initial human being possessed remarkable autonomy and fortitude: "it traveled in whatever

[4] Virtue, here, simply on the basis of divine judgement (ie. what the Gods consider to be "good").

direction it might wish" (190A) with "terrific...strength and might" (190B). The symmetry and perfection of the circular human, when given direction and momentum, gave way to a hubristic arrogance. Pride is a side-effect of the motion of the initial man. Therefore, it was not the wholeness of the original man itself which posed a divine threat, but rather what human beings were apt to do with such wholeness. In this way, our original perfection was like a natural gift or privilege that we abused. Pride, for Aristophanes, is perhaps the misuse of our minds, which were meant for pious thoughts.

But what exactly provoked the misuse of the human mind, encouraging the upward motion of the circular human? The significant difference between the original movement of human beings and the movement enabled by ἔρως are the φρονήματα μεγάλα ("lofty thoughts") which incited the motion of the original man, but are absent in the broken man. While Aristophanes does not illustrate for us the precise nature of such thoughts, mention of them each time is followed closely by "ascension" or making an "attempt upon the gods" (190B). If we are meant to connect these things by their proximity, then it would seem that lofty thoughts are those which elevate human beings above themselves. Perhaps φρονήματα μεγάλα are something like "imagination;" through such thoughts, the original humans were able to consider a reality not immediately tangible to them. Lofty thoughts gave man the power to disregard what he was intended for and instead go after his every wish. Should man become similarly powerful even from his newly broken state, Aristophanes warns that human beings will be cut again by the gods. In view of this warning the prominent dilemma of man becomes clear: we want original wholeness, but if we attain such wholeness we risk becoming more incomplete than we already are.

Incompleteness is a state man is most afraid of. Human beings can endure many hardships, but we bristle at the thought of becoming in any way insufficient. When elucidating what further incompleteness would entail, Zeus proclaimed of the human beings: "if they still believe they can be wild and don't want to keep quiet,..I'll cut them once again in two, so that they'll travel upon one leg, hopping" (190D). Zeus' focus is the limitation of mortal mobility. His aim is not to hinder human beings aesthetically, but to limit their "travel." The gods' primary concern is the activity of man, not his physical state. From this we can ascertain that human incompleteness, to the gods, is not simply a partiality of form, but a kind of paralysis. Thus, in replicating our original wholeness, we risk losing our motion (some of which we have lost already in the initial split) and becoming static.

If ἔρως brings us back to our original form, then love not only recalls our visual wholeness, it also restores the motion of the body and soul to their respective initial states. This time, however, the movement of the whole man is not ascension, but motion towards his kin. The change in the direction of human motion is protective against the threat of further separation. From the perspective of the divine, the attempt by the circle people to usurp the gods was the "original sin" of Aristophanes' mythic universe. Human motion itself did not displease the gods, human motion *upward* did. If the fatal flaw of early man was his hunger to overtake the gods, then man's great failure was a failure to be appropriately pious. The consequence of man's pride, therefore, is corrective of his will to transcend the power structures in place. Ἔρως forces human beings to turn toward each other in lieu of rebellion against the gods. Love, thusly, serves as a means of protecting the primordial hierarchy by keeping man in his place.

Aristophanes' concern for the preservation of order between gods and men is made clear in Apollo's construction of man such that he cannot help but see the consequence of disorder by "turn[ing] [the human's] face and half-neck towards the cut side, so that by beholding the cut the human would be more orderly" (190E). When man looks outside the self to seek the other, he necessarily considers his place within the divine and mortal order. Because ἔρως compels man to look outward in search of his missing half, he is compelled to survey many other human beings through his quest. In this way, ἔρως enables a heightened awareness of society, of the many human beings (potential lovers and otherwise) surrounding the individual man. In imploring us to expand our view, ἔρως allows for the contemplation of mankind. As the individual goes from one prospective beloved to the next, ἔρως invites us to consider what all human beings have in common and to revel in this commonality. Love educates man about himself. While this education strikes one as a virtuous quality for man to inherit, it is, moreover, an asset to the gods. Love protects the gods against the potential power of men by obligating human beings to look after and towards one another.

Left alone in the human consciousness, lofty thoughts resulted in instances of human breakage and a rift between man and god. Ἔρως, being the desire to return to this state, carries with it the threat of further separation. In our desire to become whole, we must first understand what it means to achieve wholeness "correctly" or else we risk a second split. If stories, like ἔρως, allow us to circle back to our original wholeness, do they similarly expose us to greater incompletion? More simply put: is there a risk to storytelling? The same risk as love? The perfection of the original circle was too great; it tempted man to commit impious actions. If love and the stories we tell of love empower us to taste the original circle again, we risk becoming

similarly enticed by things which are not good for us. The primary difference between ἔρως and narrative here is that narrative allows the lone man to grasp the whole without need for a human counterpart. Stories enable human beings to attain wholeness absent the ravages of erotic love. In the case of storytelling, man is not literally part of a whole, rather he grasps the whole through images. Arguably, man is more dangerous to the gods in this formulation when he, a mere half of the original self, is able to nonetheless approach something resembling wholeness. Storytelling allows man to feel complete while he is broken, to access whole from half. Expressed thusly, storytelling seems to be a near god-like ability.

Socrates implicitly champions man's ability to make stories at the end of the text, "compelling [Aristophanes and Agathon] to agree that one and the same man should know how to make comedy and tragedy…" (223D). Formulating narrative as something man "*should* know how to make" reveals storytelling not just as a capacity, but an *expectation* of man. Through the stories we tell and those we consume, we can return to something resembling the initial whole which the gods found so alarming. It is necessary for humans to access wholeness through narrative even as storytelling may lead us to the "wild" action Zeus warned us would result in a second split.

What, then, does Aristophanes advise to protect against further injury? His speech commences with the claim that "humans don't at all perceive the power of love, since if they did perceive it, they'd build him the greatest holy places and altars and make the greatest sacrifices" (189C). The explicit call to reverence here dictates Aristophanes' primary counsel: piety. This is strange considering the accidental birth of ἔρως. Should we still worship a god, a feeling, that is not native to us? One born of experiment or mistake? And, further, a god that does not even

necessarily lead us to the very thing which it compels us to desire? The kind of piety directed at ἔρως seems to be little more than an expression of the fear that we will become further separated if due reverence is not given.

When considering the task of the pious man, however, we are compelled to acknowledge that piety, by nature, involves a significant retelling of tales. The activity of the pious man is constituted by many forms of storytelling (prayer and sermon being the foremost examples). Piety is not just a fear of the gods, it is, more importantly, a new way to tell stories. Perhaps, in advising piety, Aristophanes is not recommending that we shirk from the power given to us by ἔρως or story, but rather that we use it in such a way that it is congenial to the gods. In this, he implies that it is possible to tell stories which allow us to feel whole without opening ourselves up to the temptation of higher aims. Thus, the content of the story which we retell in acquisition of the whole matters; telling a pious narrative is preferable to an impious one.

In promulgating the pious tale, Aristophanes counsels that we should "become friends with the god" in order that we might "come upon our very own darlings" and, eventually, "become happy" (193 B/C). The language of "φιλία" (friendship) is crucial here. Φιλία connotes kinship, being "of one's own;"[5] there is a necessary equality and belonging among friends. If narratives of piety allow us to "become friends with the god," then such stories do, in a way, lift man up towards the divine. But friendship also entails that we will never surpass the gods, thereby ensuring man's protection from a second split. Somehow, in storytelling, we circumvent the motion of man towards other man and begin to look safely upward again.

[5] (Liddell & Scott)

Stories, unlike ἔρως, appear to allow human beings to be self-sufficient in this quest. Where love compels us to believe in a need for the other half, stories allow man to feel whole absent the constant embrace of another. Aristophanes himself partakes in this solitary means of accessing the whole. Throughout the *Symposium*, he is single, yet surrounded by couples (Pausanias and Agathon, Socrates and Alcibiades, etc.). The communication of his myth, then, allows him to access the whole not presently available to him through ἔρως. Is this independence, exemplified by Aristophanes, the τέλος of the original man to which we have been desiring to return? In storytelling, have we accessed the autonomy, mobility, and lack of inhibition attributed to the original circular being? Or is there still a vacancy which storytelling cannot fill?

While it seems that stories could be a viable alternative to love, allowing us to access the wholeness we crave without the pains of seeking another half, this formulation is complicated by the fact that storytelling and ἔρως are somewhat intertwined. Our personal impressions of love resemble all the old stories (Aristophanes' myth included), stories of love which we then tell anew through our own experiences. Heartbreak is, perhaps, the most obvious way in which the experience of love is itself a story. Love, when it fails, reminds us of the initial breakage. Ἔρως makes us believe we have found our exact other half, only to become broken again if this belief proves false or temporary (this time, with a heightened awareness of our fractured state). In this way, ἔρως retells the Aristophanic myth for us; experiences of heartbreak are reiterations of the story of original human separation. Perhaps when Aristophanes mandated that we "be the teachers of everyone else" (189D) and repeat his myth, he was actually asking us to fall in love, to animate his story through our own.

Stories cannot replace love if they are themselves a part of love, or love a part of them. Absurdly, the only palliative for love may be love itself. Ἔρως brings about its own circle: love craves the whole, attains wholeness, the wholeness breaks, and the breakage is patched up only by love, which brings us again to wholeness, which again breaks and again asks for love etc. etc. etc. Ultimately, the difficult thing is not finding wholeness, but sustaining the wholeness once it has been found. Unless he can hold onto his wholeness, the human being is constantly falling and routinely breaking. Instead of "tumbl[ing]" (190A) on eight limbs, the story of heartbreak portrays the circle of man as a perpetual fall. In a certain sense, human beings in love are clowns, continually slipping on their banana peels. There is a distinct humor to the infinite fall of man, even as Aristophanes implores us: "don't treat it as a comedy" (193D).

Through the cycle of ἔρως Aristophanes professes that "our kind would become happy" (193C). An obedience to the circles drawn out for us by love and a willingness to tell and retell our pious stories "offers the greatest hopes in time to come" (193D). This seems bizarre given the characterization of love as constant motion in and out of brokenness. Is Aristophanes telling the truth about our happiness? Ἔρως seems, logically, to have little to do with εὐδαιμονία.[6] In the cycle of wholeness and brokenness engendered by ἔρως, there is no apparent place for happiness. Aristophanes makes the logical leap that ἔρως brings us to εὐδαιμονία on the basis of a desperate question: if wholeness does not make us happy, what will? Wholeness must be a part of happiness, he seems to say. But the wholeness Aristophanes sets out for us is composed of breakage and achieved through fall. The whole itself is bruised (and has been--irreparably, it seems--since the initial split). We are able to come out of our feeling of incompleteness, briefly,

[6] "Happiness, prosperity, good fortune" (Liddell & Scott)

when we revel in the discovery of the other half or when stories allow us to recollect and reimagine our wholes anew. The occasional wholeness of split men does bring us joy, of a kind, but it is not μεγίστη εὐδαιμονία; it is not our highest happiness. Wholeness, as it stands, is too fleeting and too approximate to be surpassingly happy.

The goal of ἔρως is the happiness of only image. Since the breakage of man, we are no longer capable of the kind of wholeness ἔρως desires, the kind which incites true εὐδαιμονία. The happiness of the initial whole is unachievable by human beings in our current state. Love and story may reach for the original wholeness, but settle somewhere lower. Thus, the wholenesses we are brought to through love and through storytelling are wholes of a different sort. The wholeness realized through stories is a wholeness of communion. Narratives inform man, abstractly, that he is not alone in his condition. Storytelling attains wholeness through solace. Ἔρως allows for the same kind of enlightenment in another being. The beloved brings man out of his solitude and supplies solace through mutual understanding. Wholeness, in both these cases, represents the assurance that the human experience is shared. While ἔρως and narrative cannot bring us to original wholeness, they can ameliorate our halfness. Through the presence of love and story, we come to feel less broken.

Works Cited

Brann, Eva, et al. *Symposium, or, Drinking Party*. Focus, 2017.

Liddell, Henry G, and Robert Scott. *Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896. Print.

Cover Image: Woodcut after the reverse of a portrait medal by Giovanni da Cavino (1500–1570) of Marcantonio Passeri. After Jacopo Tomasini, *Iacobi Philippi Tomasini Patavini illustrium elogio* (Padua, 1630), p. 104. {336|337}, with the caption "with philosophy leading, we retrace our steps."