

PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM (190d7-e2)

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MIDWAY THROUGH a problematic speech Plato's Aristophanes presents a puzzling simile in an attempt to describe how Zeus split the bodies of our human ancestors. The current Oxford text, edited by John Burnet, reads thus:

ἔτεμε τοὺς ἀνθρώπους δίχα, ὥσπερ οἱ ὄα τέμνοντες
καὶ μέλλοντες ταριχεύειν, ἥ ὥσπερ οἱ τὰ φά ταῖς θριξίν.

As Burnet points out in his *apparatus criticus*, all manuscripts as well as Stobaeus (*Anthologium* 20.1) read ὄα (or φά) where our modern Oxford Classical Text reads ὄα, an emendation David Ruhnken had proposed based on a gloss from a lexicon attributed to the sophist Timaeus. As Robin cautiously points out in his Budé edition,¹ with or without an emendation this is a "*passage obscur*," one that needs to be further investigated. I will argue that both emendation and manuscript readings are corrupt, and will provide a more cogent emendation.

The above quoted emendation is ingenious but unconvincing. Its defense could best be summed up like this: first David Ruhnken, while editing a newly discovered lexicon of Plato ascribed to a Timaeus the Sophist, found the word ὄα glossed as ἀκροδρύων εἶδος μήλοις μικροῖς ἐμπερές; in Ruhnken's note *sub voce* in his edition of the Timaeus, he explained that the word does not appear in any of Plato's extant texts; the only place he found suitable was at our spot in the *Symposium*, and thus he amassed citations from various texts all of which support the possibility that Greeks split and dried sorb apples;² some seventy years later Rueckert added Ruhnken's

¹L. Robin, *Le Banquet* (Paris 1970) *ad loc.*: "Longtemps on a cru qu'il s'agissait, d'abord, d'oeufs (φά), coupés en deux et conservés dans le sel. Mais par une allusion expresse, chez le grammairien Pollux (fin du II^e s. ap. J.-C.) et dans le *Lexique* platonicien de Timée (IV^e s. début), on voit que ce qui était ainsi conservé, et par dessiccation, ce sont des fruits (ὄα): les cormes? ce n'est pas sur."

²See D. Ruhnken, *Timaei Sophistae Lexicon Vocum Platoniarum* (Leipzig 1757) 157-158. This learned critic succeeded in teaching more about sorb apples than any other before or after. He collected an impressive array of testimonia on the splitting and drying of this small fruit, which preservative process was apparently a widespread practice in antiquity. If a critic, however, is drawn into a discussion concerning the drying of fruit and convenient methods of slicing eggs (hard-boiled, I assume), she will

emendation to his text³—with some reservation which apparently was not shared by subsequent editors, since all modern texts follow Ruhnken's reading.⁴

But why should we uphold the competence of this dubious late sophist, or the integrity of his one surviving manuscript?⁵ Ruhnken himself asks: "quis huius Lexici auctoritate *Platonem* refingere audeat?"⁶ He answers his own question by assuring his readers that he never suggests an emendation unless supported by other ancient grammarians. Yet the testimonia of his ancient grammarians are scant and less than forceful. Besides the above-cited Timaeus the Sophist, only Pollux (6.80) mentions sorb apples in Plato: μέσπιλα, ἃ καὶ ὅα καλεῖται· καὶ τοῦτο τοῦνομά ἐστι παρὰ Πλάτωνι, ὡς παρὰ Ἀρχιλόχῳ ἐκεῖνο. When this citation is added to that of Timaeus the Sophist it amounts to two late grammarians who assert that the word for sorb apples exists somewhere in the entire corpus of Plato as it existed in the second century A.D. Our confidence in Pollux is diminished by his erroneous belief that μέσπιλα and ὅα are the same fruit.⁷ But I repeat Ruhnken's own question: can we confidently emend the text of Plato using these two vague testimonia?

The prudent and candid answer is no. Though it is admirable that Ruhnken remembered a corrupt passage in the *Symposium* while editing a strange gloss in Timaeus' lexicon, it is unfortunate that later editors followed Ruhnken blindly. Ruhnken's reading, clever as it is, nevertheless does not answer the true essence of the corruption: this passage presents the only double comparison in the whole Platonic corpus, or to be more precise, the only place where one thing is compared to two different things, using ὡς ... ἢ ὡς or ὥσπερ ... ἢ ὥσπερ in a single sentence.⁸ This lack of

have to conclude that the learned Ruhnken was correct in his emendation. I do not believe that this is a fruitful area of discussion.

³See L. I. Rueckert, *Platonis Convivium* (Leipzig 1829) 102–103.

⁴See J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera* (Oxford 1901), Robin's Budé edition, and K. Dover, *Plato: Symposium* (Cambridge 1980).

⁵The "Sangermanensis."

⁶Ruhnken (above, n. 3) ix.

⁷Theophrastus (*Historia plantarum* 3.12.5) goes into great detail on the μέσπιλα, defining it as three possible trees, none of which could be confused with the sorb apple tree except by an uninformed botanist. Pollux clearly never consulted a botanical reference in making the above statement.

⁸Based on a search in the TLG computer database looking for any combination of ὡς, ὥσπερ with ἢ or καὶ within four lines of each other. In addition, I searched for combinations involving οὖν, or οἷα, and found no compound similes. The closest parallel is found at *Protagoras* 329d4–8: πότερον, ἔφη, ὥσπερ προσώπου τὰ μόρια μόριά ἐστιν, στόμα τε καὶ ῥίς καὶ ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ἄτα, ἢ ὥσπερ τὰ τοῦ χρυσοῦ μόρια οὐδὲν διαφέρει τὰ ἕτερα τῶν ἑτέρων, ἀλλήλων καὶ τοῦ ἔλου, ἀλλ' ἢ μεγέθει καὶ μικρότητι; This question does not introduce a double comparison with something, but rather proposes a choice between two distinct and exclusive models for the vague concept of virtue Protagoras had expounded. Plato's

a parallel in an author as given to simile⁹ as Plato casts suspicion on the original reading and its clever emendation simultaneously, for if Plato never used double comparisons, he never wrote either the original corrupt version or Ruhnken's emended version. What Ruhnken has done is to strengthen the corruption by making it feasible. Therefore it is unacceptable to retain Ruhnken's reading.

If Ruhnken's reading is abandoned, how are we to explain the nature of this corrupt comparison? The most satisfying explanation is this: since the distinction between omicron and omega was blurred by the first century, *δα* slipped into some manuscripts where Plato had written *ώα*; thus the passage in some manuscripts read *ώπερ οἱ τὰ δα ταῖς θριξίν* and in others *ώπερ οἱ τὰ ώα ταῖς θριξίν*; at this stage a glossator, sensing confusion with the former (*δα*), added in the margin [*δηλαδῆ*] *ώπερ οἱ τὰ δα τέμνοντες καὶ μέλλοντες ταριχεύειν*; this gloss crept into the text ahead of the original reading and left this: *ώπερ οἱ τὰ δα τέμνοντες καὶ μέλλοντες ταριχεύειν ώπερ οἱ τὰ δα ταῖς θριξίν* (with any combination of *δα* or *ώα*); finally it was a simple matter for any scribe to add an *ῆ* and leave us with the reading in the fifth-century Stobaeus—the reading of all extant manuscripts: *ἔτεμνε τοὺς ἀνθρώπους δίχα, ώπερ οἱ τὰ ώα τέμνοντες καὶ μέλλοντες ταριχεύειν, ῆ ώπερ οἱ τὰ ώα ταῖς θριξίν*.

In order to bolster the assertion that an early critic added the sorb apples, two further lines of reasoning can be applied, each of which demonstrates that the eggs were part of the *Symposium's* speech: Plutarch's apparent use of the line in his dialogue on love, the *Amator*, and the actual Aristophanic context of the Platonic dialogue. First Plutarch (*Moralia* 770b): *οἶσθα τοὺς παιδικούς ἔρωτας ὡς εἰς ἀβεβαιότατα πολλὰ ψέγουσι καὶ σκώπτουσι λέγοντες ώπερ φὸν αὐτῶν τριχὶ διαιρεῖσθαι τὴν φιλίαν*. I assert that Plutarch was alluding to Plato's simile¹⁰—an obvious conclusion considering the immense influence the *Symposium* enjoyed, and that Plutarch's work is in the same genre as Plato's dialogue. Though Ruhnken and his followers quote this parallel to prove that Greeks split their hard-boiled eggs with hairs, it shows in this context that Plutarch's text of Plato's *Symposium* discussed egg-splitting.

Another perspective can be gained in this passage by inspecting its context in Plato's dialogue, and the degree of Aristophanic *ethopoiea* intended

Socrates will often propose two possibilities in this way (and here alone he did so with two similes), but according to the TLG, none of Plato's characters used a declarative double simile (outside of this single passage under consideration).

⁹According to the TLG, Plato used the word *ώπερ* over 1,000 times, the word *οἶον* 800 times, and the word *ὡς* 4,000 times, these being his chief introductions to similes. Even if only a fifth of these words actually introduce a simile, we are left with well over 1,000 similes in the Platonic corpus, only one of which is compound.

¹⁰Ruhnken ([above, n. 3] 158) himself asserts that Plutarch was quoting Plato: "Platonis locum ob oculos habuit Plutarchus *Amator*."

by Plato. A simple assessment of Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* discovers seven similes in all:

1. original four-legged human beings moved like tumblers (κυβιστώντες, 190a6);
2. "hermaphrodites" were split like sorb apples (?) and eggs (190d7);
3. Apollo sewed the stomach up like a drawn-together purse (σύσπαστα βαλλάντια, 190e7-8);
4. before Zeus rearranged the genitals, the split humans had sex with the ground like cicadas (τέτιγγες, 191c1-2);
5. each human is a tally (σύμβολον) of another, split like a flatfish (ψήτταν, 191d4);
6. now because of human injustice mortals are separated from God like the Arcadians from the Lacedaemonians (193a3);
7. humans are afraid that if they are not good they will be split again like those who are molded on stelae in outline (193a5-7).

None of these similes is immediately clear, as is witnessed by the huge number of scholia and notes amassed on them throughout the ages. What is clear is that they all are simple single comparisons except for Ruhnken's emended text; and that Plato intended all to inspire laughter in the context of a serious philosophical debate.¹¹ It comes as no surprise that Plato depicts an Aristophanes full of humorous satire,¹² nor are we surprised that in such a dialogue Plato has taken care that the language of each character is fitting. Therefore, if Plato has attempted a certain level of accuracy in depicting his Aristophanes, there is justification for research into the actual work of the comic poet to see if it might shed light on this textual problem.

A first inspection of the comedies reveals that there are some grounds to believe that Plato was alluding to the actual comedies of Aristophanes. See, for instance, *Lysistrata* 115-116, where Calonice says: ἐγὼ δέ γ' ἂν κἄν ὥσπερ ψήτταν δοκῶ / δοῦναι ἂν ἐμαυτῆς παρατεμοῦσα θῆμισιν. Given the extreme rarity of references to splitting flatfish in Greek literature (or any literature for that matter), it is probable that Plato borrowed an image from comedy to enliven his philosophical Aristophanes.

Another strikingly unusual image comes from a simile at *Birds* 671-673 in which Euelpides displays his interest in kissing a beaked Procne:

Εὐ. ἐγὼ μὲν αὐτὴν κἄν φιλήσαι μοι δοκῶ.
 Πι. ἀλλ' ὦ κακόδαιμον ῥύγχος ὀβελίσκοιν ἔχει.
 Εὐ. ἀλλ' ὥσπερ φὸν νῆ Δί' ἀπολέωντα χρὴ
 ἀπὸ τῆς κεφαλῆς τὸ λέμμα κᾶθ' οὕτω φιλεῖν.

¹¹See Aristophanes' comment in response to Eryximachus at 189b5: . . . ἐγὼ φοβοῦμαι περὶ τῶν μελλόντων ῥηθῆσθαι, οὗ τι μὴ γελοῖα εἶπω--τοῦτο μὲν γὰρ ἂν κέρδος εἴη καὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας μούσης ἐπιχώριον--ἀλλὰ μὴ κατογέλαστα.

¹²Obviously, the historical Aristophanes' treatment of serious philosophy can be found in his *Clouds*.

Note that the egg simile is used in an amatory context, and though the egg is not split with hairs, it is used to describe a similarly humorous procedure.¹³ Since the historical Aristophanes included an amorous egg simile in his extant work, it is reasonable to assume that Plato borrowed it to create his own Aristophanes.

It may be helpful here to summarize the preceding points:

1. Ruhnken's conjecture is suspect for three reasons: first, the word ὄα appears nowhere in the Platonic corpus; second, Ruhnken's source for his emendation is, as he himself admits, suspect; and third, Plato used a double comparison nowhere else.
2. The corruption represents an interpolation.
3. The text of the *Symposium* that Plutarch read apparently discussed split eggs.
4. Plato's Aristophanes approximated the extant Aristophanes who referred in a simile to eggs (but never to sorb apples).

Thus, by reasoning that Plato never would have used a double comparison, that therefore one of the two comparanda must be excised, and that the extant evidence supports the eggs over the sorb apples, the text ought to be emended to a simple simile such as the following: ταῦτα εἰπὼν ἔτεμνε τοὺς ἀνθρώπους δίχα, ὥσπερ οἱ τὰ ὠὰ ταῖς θριξίν. This reading is more suited to Plato's style, fits the evidence, is consistent with the character of Aristophanes, and is clear and readable.¹⁴

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¹³See O. Taplin, *Comic Angels* (Oxford 1993) 107, n. 6, for an explanation of this joke.

¹⁴I owe special thanks to my anonymous readers for their sagacious editing and useful suggestions, also to my former students Tanya "Jack" Toivonen and Chris Walker, who first brought this problematic passage to my attention, and to Anna Kim, Georgia Nugent, Alex Sens, Dean Simpson, and Bill Wyatt for their help.