

**To: Faculty of Philology
School of Philosophy
University of Athens**

Athens, March 4, 2019

Subject: *“Eros in 5th century Tragedy and in Platonic Dialogues”*

Dear members of the Department Board,

With this letter I request your approval to start the dissertation project entitled *“Eros in 5th century Tragedy and in Platonic Dialogues”* under the supervision of professor Dimitrios Karadimas. I believe that the relationship between the concept, nature and role of eros in tragedy and in Platonic dialogues forms a very interesting research topic for the Classics.

Introduction

Eros is an essential element of human life and can lead to the most amazing and creative experience, but also to the most destructive and negative one. This study will attempt to comparatively examine how eros was encountered, as a phenomenon, by the tragedy of the classical period and by Platonic philosophy, which had a strong impact on Athenian thought of the 5th and 4th century BCE.

The theater of the 5th century was, among others, a dominant unifying element influencing and influenced by public speaking and affecting the development of young people. On the other hand, Plato's philosophy came as a "negative" response to some of the basic components of Athenian life, such as oratory, politics, and tragedy. Moreover, few people were reading philosophy at the time of Plato, but this situation would gradually change with the establishment of his philosophical academy, which also influenced the development of young people. Therefore, in this research, which aims to study and understand some aspect of eros in the classical period, tragedy will be contrasted with Platonic philosophy and not with the “5th century philosophy”, since Plato is the prime philosopher of eros.

Research project

Although there is extensive research about eros -separately in platonic dialogues and in tragedies (see bibliography)- it is not common to examine this issue jointly from the perspective of both Platonic philosophy and tragedy. The first explanation for this, which easily comes to our minds, is that there is a traditional understanding that there is a big chasm between them, and that drama and philosophy more diverge than converge. This view is quite justifiable, as Plato himself defines theater -namely poetry-, as opposed to philosophy (*Gorgias* 502b-c, *Republic* 607b-c, *Laws* 967c-d). However, if ancient drama and Platonic philosophy, as well as their relationship, are examined more closely and with regard to the topic of eros, we will probably find that there is room to redefine their

relationship, and that despite their differences, they share much in common about eros and specifically in terms of expressive means, content and targeting.

Although there has been no thorough and systematic research on the proposed topic of this dissertation, one can find in the bibliography either studies that seek to bridge somewhat the chasm between drama and Platonic philosophy (see Puchner 2010 and Charalabopoulos 2012) or studies that examine eros separately in tragedy and Platonic philosophy, making in some cases intersecting references between the two cases (see LaCourse Munteanu 2012 and Wright 2017). Obviously, this material will be a key source of my bibliographic research. Therefore, given the absence of studies on eros in tragedy and Platonic philosophy comparatively, and since the tragic poets and Plato have extensively referred to eros and its impact on humans, it becomes clear that this topic needs to be investigated. The gap, that this research will attempt to fill in, is whether and to what extent tragedy and Platonic philosophy share common perceptions about the concept, nature and role of eros, what are the points of divergence and what conclusions result from a thorough study of them.

This study will focus exclusively on the tragedy of the classical period and on the Platonic dialogues in order to comprehend comparatively, wherever possible, the notion, nature and role of eros. The analysis will take into account the socio-cultural context of these texts, which clearly differs both in terms of time and in terms of the themes and approaches they adopt. The main objective is to explore whether they share common perceptions about eros, but also whether their divergent perceptions can work complementarily.

With regard to the tragedies, the research will not focus on all the plays where eros is encountered even to a small extent, but on those plays where it is clear that eros affects decisively the actions of the heroes. Consequently, the plays selected to be extensively analyzed are *Agamemnon*, *Suppliants*, *Trachiniae*, *Antigone*, *Hippolytus* and *Medea*, creating in this way a representative analysis of two plays from each of the three tragic poets. In *Agamemnon* we see that eros and *mania* are interrelated, and that the plot is based on three peculiar-problematic types of eros (Paris-Helen, Agamemnon-Clytemnestra and Clytemnestra-Aegisthus), and as a result eros obtains a catalytic role in the action, and particularly in the provocation of *mania*, injustice and crimes. In the *Suppliants*, eros is presented as an aggressive force towards its subjects, which are Danaids, while also the chorus makes a particular reference to eros with a devotional hymn to Aphrodite and her associates, namely Pothos, Peitho, Harmonia and Eros (1034-42). In the *Trachiniae*, eros assumes the form of illness and constitutes an irrational and uncontrollable force that determines the actions of the heroes and ends up being destructive. In *Antigone*, although there is not an obvious erotic scene, the element of eros dominates the plot and is presented as a very powerful force that can lead to irrationality, while also the famous "Hymn to Eros" in the third stasimon (781-800) looks like a jewel in the body of the play. In *Hippolytus*, Phaedra's erotic passion dominates as a result of the rage of the "despised" goddess Aphrodite. Finally, in *Medea*, eros is interwoven with two other powerful emotions—jealousy and the craving for vengeance. For Platonic philosophy the main source will be the dialogues *Symposium* and

Phaedrus, in which Plato makes extensive reference to the nature of eros, and how it affects the human soul.

In tragedy eros is one of the most complex elements and is often associated with *mania* and destruction, but it is precisely the devastating consequences of *mania* that make eros important in tragedy. In most cases eros is not related with the sexual element, but it may designate a passion for a beloved person (e.g. Haemon's eros for Antigone, which does not suggest any sexual dimension) or a metaphorical eros of an ideology, an attitude, or of a broader desire (e.g. Medea's "eros" to receive the good news from her children that the bride is dead, *Medea*, 974). It is therefore a powerful force with broad content, which becomes clear when we understand it as a force that can be explained either as a deity or as a psychological experience or as a metaphor often associated with the irrational.

There is more extensive reference to the nature and content of eros in Plato than in tragedy where eros as a component of the plot is not thoroughly analyzed as is the case of the Platonic dialogues *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Both these dialogues agree that beauty is the object of eros; the view of beauty is the trigger for erotic experience. Plato presents eros as the desire of the Good, which is essentially a desire for the Form, aiming at being in an everlasting contact with it (*Symposium* 205a, 206a, 207a). Thus, eros here acts as a bridge between the world of senses and the world of Forms. A central point for this research is the definition of eros in the *Phaedrus* as a kind of madness (249d-e), as this is one of the key points of convergence between tragedy and Platonic philosophy with regard to eros. Also, the difference between the largely negative perception of eros in tragedy and its positive evaluation in Platonic dialogues shows an intensity that almost explicitly appears in the *Phaedrus* between the two first speeches (namely Lycia's speech and Socrates' first speech) and Socrates' palinode. Therefore, it will be interesting to examine to what extent the first two speeches in the *Phaedrus* are comparable to the perception of eros in tragedy.

Nevertheless, beyond the points of convergence, there are points of divergence. An example of such difference is the perception of eros as *mania*, which in the tragic poetry acts disastrously, and in the Platonic philosophy can be transformed into a divine momentum for the union of the soul with the Form. The detailed and systematic identification of these differences can illuminate important aspects of eros. By contrasting the different aspects, we may better understand the broader synchronic and diachronic conceptual framework of eros.

Project assumption

In this dissertation project entitled "*Eros in 5th century Tragedy and in Platonic Dialogues*" the basic assumption is summarized as follows:

a) If common elements about the nature, role and notion of eros are found in the 5th century tragedy and Platonic dialogues,

b) and if we consider that the concept of eros, as reflected in tragedy and Platonic philosophy, contains a well-documented perception of eros,

then we can:

i) draw conclusions about whether there was a common understanding of eros between the three greatest tragic poets of classical Greece and one of the two main representatives of classical philosophy, Plato, or clarify to what extent Plato opposes these great dramatists with regard to the topic of eros.

ii) look at what an Athenian of the 5th and 4th century might have understood watching a theater performance and listening to philosophical discussions about this issue.

iii) further understand the power and effect of eros on human nature according to what is written in classical literature.

Moreover, although the role of eros in tragedy has been extensively examined (see Thumiger 2013, Wright 2017), it is not yet clear whether eros is emerging as a powerful cosmic power, corresponding, for example, to the concept of justice, with a decisive role in the plot. An additional working assumption could therefore be that eros has indeed this decisive role in tragedy, as this would contribute to the correlation with Platonic philosophy, where eros has a prime role, in the sense that erotic experience enables the human soul to reconnect with the true world, the world of the Forms.

Dissertation structure

The dissertation will be structured into four parts, as follows:

Part one: introduction in which the objectives of the research will be pointed out and the originality of this approach will be highlighted. Also, in this part there will be a general introduction to the topic of the research, and the basic concepts -foremost that of eros- will be presented and defined.

Part two: a) first section with an extensive reference to how eros is presented through tragedies, b) second section presenting the transition from the 5th century tragedies to the 4th century Platonic dialogues and how Plato perceived the tragic poetry, c) third section showing eros through the Platonic perspective.

Part three: Having separately presented eros in tragedy and in platonic dialogues, I will provide an extensive comparison between them. The comparison will relate to the following three categories:

a) convergence / divergence of the perception and content of eros: For example, eros as a kind of *mania* or where *hubris* is found in the erotic experience in tragedy and philosophy, or the idea of “*ἔτερον ἡμίσεος*” (see *Antigone* 570 and Aristophanes’ myth in the *Symposium*). Also, in this section there will be an extensive reference to “the language of eros” which tragedy and philosophy use, and to what kind of meaning some words and concepts encompass, such as *soul-eros*, *phothos*, *hedone* and *philia*.

b) convergence / divergence of the expressive means used by tragedy and philosophy with regard to eros: For example, the use of myth and dialogues are two basic expressive means in both tragedy and Platonic philosophy. Also, the way in which *Symposium* is structured evokes the dramatic competition (see Patterson 1982 and Rowe 1998), which may offer some grounds for a correlation to be made at this level as well.

c) convergence / divergence of the targeting of tragedy and philosophy in relation to eros: For example, although both tragedy and philosophy aim to educate and teach, tragedy aims at representing mental passions and mostly how these passions are shaped by the human actions, while platonic philosophy aims at seeking the truth considering that this can only be done mentally with our soul.

Part four: assessment of the research data and conclusions. The conclusions will refer mostly to the degree of convergence and divergence of tragedy and Platonic philosophy with regard to eros.

Methodology

The basic method which will be used to examine this topic is a text-based approach with both an intratextual and an intertextual dimension. More specifically, there will be a careful study and interpretation of the ancient texts, while the translations will be used to the extent they offer interpretations of the ancient texts.

Then, there will be a long period of study of the relevant bibliography, which mostly refers either separately to tragedies and Platonic dialogues as regards themes about eros, or to the relationship between tragedy and philosophy, even beyond the topic of eros, or finally to the broader concept of eros in Ancient Greece and to its reception. At this stage, primary sources of later antiquity will also be studied, such as the *Enneads* of Plotinus, where there are quite useful comments about the platonic philosophy of eros.

Finally, based on the data from the primary sources and the interpretative bibliography, there will be an intertextual approach between passages from tragedies and Platonic dialogues, as well as their interpretative analysis. It should be mentioned that this research will refer only to what is associated with eros and with how eros is presented in tragedy and platonic dialogues.

Conclusion

Eros has a dominant role throughout the ages in human cultures. This proves that it has a major importance and is an integral part of human life embedded throughout the spectrum of human action and even expanded into the functioning of the universe and nature.

With this proposal I have tried to show that this doctoral research will cover a current gap in the field of Classics. I believe that the topic "*Eros in 5th century Tragedy and in Platonic Dialogues*" falls within the research interests of the Department of Classics and of Prof. Karadimas, and I therefore ask the Department to accept me as a PhD candidate, to authorize Prof. Karadimas with the responsibility of my supervisor throughout the Ph.D. thesis and appoint the three-member committee.

Sincerely,

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