

The Symposium

Xenophon 431 – 354 B.C.

Then Socrates: The question would seem at any rate to be debatable. Suppose we defer it till another time, and for the present not interrupt the programme of proceedings. I see, the dancing-girl is standing ready; they are handing her some hoops.

And at the instant her fellow with the flute commenced a tune to keep her company, whilst some one posted at her side kept handing her the hoops till she had twelve in all. With these in her hands she fell to dancing, and the while she danced she flung the hoops into the air--overhead she sent them twirling--judging the height they must be thrown to catch them, as they fell, in perfect time.[]*

[] "In time with the music and the measure of the dance."*

.....

At this stage of the proceedings the boy danced.

The dance being over, Socrates exclaimed: Pray, did you notice how the beauty of the child, so lovely in repose, became enhanced with every movement of his supple body?

To which Charmides replied: How like a flatterer you are! one would think you had set yourself to puff the dancing-master..

.....

To be sure (he answered solemnly); and there's another point I could not help observing: how while he danced no portion of his body remained idle; neck and legs and hands together, one and all were exercised. That is how a man should dance, who wants to keep his body light and healthy. (Then turning to the Syracusan, he added): I cannot say how much obliged I should be to you, O man of Syracuse, for lessons in deportment. Pray teach me my steps.[]*

[] "Gestures," "postures," "figures." See Eur. "Cycl." 221; Aristoph. "Peace," 323; Isocr. "Antid." 183.*

And what use will you make of them? (the other asked).

God bless me! I shall dance, of course (he answered).

The remark was greeted with a peal of merriment.

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*Then Socrates, with a most serious expression of countenance:
You are pleased to laugh at me. Pray, do you find it so ridiculous my
wishing to improve my health by exercise? or to enjoy my victuals
better? to sleep better? or is it the sort of exercise I set my heart
on? Not like those runners of the long race,[*] to have my legs grow
muscular and my shoulders leaner in proportion; nor like a boxer,
thickening chest and shoulders at expense of legs; but by distribution
of the toil throughout my limbs[**] I seek to give an even balance to
my body. Or are you laughing to think that I shall not in future have
to seek a partner in the training school,[***] whereby it will not be
necessary for an old man like myself to strip in public?[****] All I
shall need will be a seven-sofa'd chamber,[*****] where I can warm to
work,[*****] just like the lad here who has found this room quite ample
for the purpose. And in winter I shall do gymnastics under cover,
or when the weather is broiling under shade. . . . But what is it you
keep on laughing at--the wish on my part to reduce to moderate size a
paunch a trifle too rotund? Is that the source of merriment?
Perhaps you are not aware, my friends, that Charmides--yes! he there--
caught me only the other morning in the act of dancing?*

[] Cf. Plat. "Prot." 335 E.*

*[**] Or, "resolute exercise of the whole body." See Aristot. "Pol."
viii. 4. 9; "Rhet." i. 5. 14.*

*[***] Or, "be dependent on a fellow-gymnast." "Pol. Lac." ix. 5; Plat.
"Soph." 218 B; "Laws," 830 B; "Symp." 217 B, C.*

*[****] Or, "to strip in public when my hair turns gray." Socrates was
(421 B.C.) about 50, but is pictured, I think, as an oldish man.*

*[*****] See Aristot. "H. A." ix. 45. 1; "Econ." viii. 13.*

*[*****] Passage referred to by Diog. Laert. ii. 5. 15; Lucian, "de Salt."*

25; Plut. "Praec. San." 496.

Yes, that I will swear to (the other answered), and at first I stood aghast, I feared me you had parted with your senses; but when I heard your explanation, pretty much what you have just now told us, I went home and--I will not say, began to dance myself (it is an accomplishment I have not been taught as yet), but I fell to sparring, an art of which I have a very pretty knowledge.

.....
Then Callias: O Socrates, do please invite me when you begin your dancing lessons. I will be your vis-a-vis,[] and take lessons with you.*

[*] Cf. "Anab." V. iv. 12.

Come on (the jester shouted), give us a tune upon the pipe, and let me show you how to dance.

So saying up he got, and mimicked the dances of the boy and girl in burlesque fashion, and inasmuch as the spectators had been pleased to think the natural beauty of the boy enhanced by every gesture of his body in the dance, so the jester must give a counter-representation,[] in which each twist and movement of his body was a comical exaggeration of nature.*

[*] Reading {antepedeizen}. Cf. Plat. "Theaet." 162 B; "Ages." i. 12; if vulg. {antapedeizen}, transl. "would prove per contra each bend," etc. Cf. Aristot. "Rhet." ii. 26. 3.

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But on the instant those who had not assisted in the fray gave tongue, the one part urging the jester to proceed with his comparisons, and the other part dissuading.

The voice of Socrates was heard above the tumult: Since we are all so eager to be heard at once, what fitter time than now to sing a song, in chorus.

And suiting the action to the words, he commenced a stave.

*The song was barely finished, when a potter's wheel was brought in, on
which the dancing-girl was to perform more wonders.*

Translation by H. G. Dakyns-January, 1998