“Divine Madness and Its Relation to Love”

The condition of madness is generally thought of as being undesirable. It can be alternately described as being a state of rage, of frenzy, and of extreme folly. On the other hand, it can also be defined as a state of ecstasy or enthusiasm. The passage I have chosen from the *Phaedrus* recognizes both sides of the definition, and that in the end, it’s all about where your intentions lie. This particular passage is important to the overall purpose of the *Phaedrus* in that it acts as a bridge between Lysias’ and Socrates’ arguments, and also that it breaches the question of madness, and whether it is a wholly evil thing, which is the point that both Socrates and Lysias base their respective arguments on.

The author of the *Phaedrus*, Plato, could be considered the cornerstone of much of Western thought. His real name was Aristocles, and his nickname, Plato, is thought to be derived from either the scope of his knowledge, or the breadth of his shoulders or possibly his forehead (“Plato” 1). He was born the son of an aristocratic family in Athens around 429 B.C.E., and as a young man, met and subsequently became a devout follower of Socrates. After Socrates’ execution in 399 B.C.E., Plato, as well as several others of Socrates’ disciples, retired to the city-state of Megara, and it is here that Plato began to author his dialogues. The dialogues are generally divided into three sections according to style and content. His first works are primarily concerned with the methods and teachings of Socrates himself, possibly as an attempt to memorialize or defend his mentor, and
seem to be an accurate portrayal of the historical Socrates and his beliefs. Plato’s middle dialogues shift to focus less on the historical character of Socrates, and Plato begins to use him as a kind of mouthpiece to express his own theories and ideas, particularly those concerned with his Theory of Forms. His later or third period of dialogues again shifts focus to more general subjects, such as knowledge, science and happiness, and also to the revision and criticism of the ideas and theories associated with the Forms ("Plato" 469-470).

*Phaedrus* generally falls into the second or middle category of dialogues. Love is certainly the more obvious focus of the work, but Socrates claims that to be able to understand the nature of love, and the true and most commendable kind of love, one must first understand the nature of the soul and its relation to divinity and the Forms.

Previously in the text, Socrates and Phaedrus had taken part in playing with the ideas presented in Lysias’ speech, that a beloved should only accept the advances of a non-lover rather than those of a lover. Socrates having expressed his horror at the style of Lysias’ speech, Phaedrus managed to cajole him into giving one of his own on the same subject and, having finished, Socrates realized his profound error in having professed such ideas and vows to repent of sinning against the god Eros by giving another speech recanting the ideas of the first two. “It is not true, this story’ that urges the beloved to accept the non-lover, when he might have the lover, on the grounds that the former is sane, and the latter mad. It might be so if madness were straightforwardly an evil, but in fact the greatest of goods come to us through madness, at least through madness that is given through divine dispensation” (Plato 244a). This particular passage is significant in that it not only acts as a bridge between the first two speeches and the third, but that it
also opens up the possibility of “madness” being a potential agent for good, rather than
strictly being evil. However, the condition of such a state lies in the origin of the madness
itself. Socrates’ claim that “the greatest of goods” come from madness is followed by the
stipulation that said madness must be “given through divine dispensation,” or in other
words, come from the gods. Since the gods are believed to be divine and wholly good, it
follows that any gift that comes from the gods must also be good and can only be of
benefit to mankind. Before beginning his second speech, Socrates makes the comment
“For if Eros is, as he surely is, a divinity, or something divine, then he cannot be evil”
(Plato 242e), so it follows that any sort of madness that might be bestowed upon a man
by Eros cannot, by its very nature, be evil. He further makes mention of the prophetess at
Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona, saying that when “out of their senses [they] have
conferred great benefits on Greece… but when in their senses few or, rather, none at all”
(Plato 244b). Their madness, being divine in nature, and inspired in them by the gods,
brought great good not just to themselves, but to the whole of Greece, but while sane they
do not possess the same divine insight and thus are incapable of benefiting anyone.

The passage makes a very clear distinction between the two kinds of madness.
According to Socrates, there is divine madness—that madness that is inspired in some by
the gods, which can only be of benefit to those connected with it—and simple animal
madness, which can be attributed to base physical instincts or passions. The first two
speeches focus in on this second madness in order to condemn it in the form of a lover
seeking to satisfy himself with a beautiful young man, and just as quickly leaving him for
the next one that catches his eyes, or perhaps worse, staying with the young man only to
isolate and degrade him and ruin any chances of his succeeding in society out of pettiness
and jealousy, and at the same time, inadvertently teaching the young man these same bad qualities. Socrates seeks to separate the two kinds of madness at the first of his recantation to make it quite clear that he is not condoning the behaviors of animal madness in any man, but instead is speaking out in favor of the madness that comes over the more noble man, whose soul, when he sees his beloved, is reminded of true Beauty, that is, the Form of Beauty, which he may have glimpsed over the edges of reality while following after the gods in their circuit of heaven.

There is also the obvious distinction being made between both kinds of madness and sanity. Where Lysias completely ignores divine madness and condemns animal madness, he praises the virtues of human sanity and reason, claiming that the man who is self-controlled and restrains his physical passions and desires makes for the most beneficial kind of lover, completely disregarding the emotional aspect of such a relationship. Socrates, however, scorns such “worldly” sanity in favor of divine madness, for it is only through such madness that our souls’ wings will grow and be able to draw us closer to the highest levels of reality to see past Becoming and into Being.

In making such distinctions, the passage simultaneously draws relationships between these same things, such as the new connection between madness and divinity. To this point in the text, the two had always seemed diametrically opposed; divinity, of course, being all that was good, and madness being of human origin and therefore harmful. But divine madness, being unlike human madness, inspires only good in those who experience it. It compares to a sort of ecstasy in that it overwhelms the soul with desire, but rather than being a desire for physical gratification, the noble soul desires to look once more upon the Forms that the object of love resembles. Madness, dependent on
its origin, becomes simultaneously connected with good and evil; again, madness of human origin being evil and hurtful, and the madness of divine inspiration being only to
the souls benefit.

A decent fictional illustration of the lover and non-lover might be found in the characters of St. John Rivers and Mr. Rochester, two of Jane Eyre’s suitors in the novel of the same name. St. John Rivers is the personification of the non-lover in that he is impassionate, unduly restrained, and entirely rational in a worldly sense. He several times offers Jane the opportunity for a relationship based on mutual benefit and nothing more, giving life to Socrates’ words, “… the attachment of the non-lover, which is alloyed with worldly prudence and has alloyed and stingy ways of doling out benefits” (Plato 257a). Mr. Rochester, on the other hand, may not precisely be the archetype of the noble soul, but his emotions and attitudes towards Jane bear a striking resemblance to that of the divinely inspired lover: passionate but restrained, desiring nothing but that which would benefit her, and desiring to follow her everywhere just to be in her presence.

The idea and nature of love is ultimately the theme that gets the most attention in *Phaedrus*, but the concept of madness, of being influenced by forces greater than oneself, is so essential to the basic argument that the two are rather inseparable. The chosen passage is the point at which madness is introduced as a possible positive companion to love, rather than a detriment, and sets up the entirety of Socrates’ argument for his second speech. It also introduces his examination of the nature of the soul, and the effects of the divine upon the soul, which help give love a bit more definition.
Works Cited

