

The Origin of Love: Hedwig and the Angry Inch as a critical engagement with Platonic philosophy.

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The philosophical origins of love, which have arguably defined how we interpret it in the modern age, can be traced back to the works of Plato, particularly the array of speeches within his seminal work *The Symposium* (Plato, 1999). Through the style of dialectic conversation, Plato contemplates the true nature of love through different voices of key philosophers of Ancient Greece and uses the character of Socrates to proclaim his concluding message of love - as a vessel for self-enlightenment with the good. However, the speech of Aristophanes has had a significant impact on how human nature and love have become intertwined and ingrained within society; through his speculation of love coming from the separation of human's true form- where we were once spherical beings made from two who were divided by the gods to punish our ambition- Aristophanes' account imparts a message that humanity should strive to the goal of completion and unity. The legacy of this myth has manifested in modern day ideologies about the existence of 'soulmates' and experiencing true love through finding your 'other half.' This concept is explored and debated in John Cameron Mitchell's hit musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Trask and Mitchell, 1998), which explores the Platonic conception of love through the lens of the modern world and affects it with themes of individuality, gender and sexuality. The character of Hedwig as a gender-queer performer is constructed by Mitchell as an imperfect being who exists divided beyond and between the constraints of society to debate Plato's rigid philosophies and ideal forms. *Hedwig* addresses the notion that the Ancient Greeks suggested, that "love makes us whole again" (Plato, 1999), and arguably destabilises it by critiquing the generalised viewpoint that love is the only force which can solve the discontents of human life. The story of *Hedwig* concludes by disproving Aristophanes' myth as a compatible resolution in the modern world, interpreting Socrates' proclamation through a modern lens by suggesting that wholeness comes from within and self-acceptance can overcome the external and internal divisions that restrict humankind. Overall, the story of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* can be analysed as a piece which addresses the dangers of misinterpreting classical messages and parallels the argumentative dialogue of *The Symposium*.

In this essay I will explore how the purpose of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* 's creation was as an act of classical reconstruction, where the character of Hedwig simultaneously inhabits Platonic notions and contradicts the binaries of archaic classical conceptions which are incompatible within a progressive modern society. I will evaluate how themes of identity, division, and the perception of love in *Hedwig* both stem from and divert from the

philosophies of Plato. I will trace the synthesis of Plato and the story of *Hedwig* by analysing the lyrics and narrative which parallel the dialectic conversation of *The Symposium*, concentrating primarily on the characters of Aristophanes and Socrates and the complementary messages they impart on the story of *Hedwig*.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes' presentation of love - or Eros as the Ancient Greeks understood it - was as an all-consuming passionate force of divine orientation which worked to unite the binaries of humanity to reconcile our separated original nature. Plato's construction of this myth proposed our original spherical forms, configured of two unified beings, where we possessed exceedingly powerful and ambitious flaws of human pride, leading to our demise where the gods separated us as punishment. However, the reception of the myth attributed to Aristophanes is unreliable as the entire configuration of *The Symposium* was designed by Plato as fiction to contest his own true philosophies, to diminish the pertinence of other philosophical theories, and do not accurately represent the voice of Aristophanes. This myth led to the supposed 'origin of love', where love was the name for the intense yearning for reconciliation and completion which would result in fulfilment and unity, or as Plato puts it, "love makes us whole, again" (Plato, 1999). Through this profound yet mythical presentation, love is synthesised as both a cosmic and transcendent force which provides a philosophical purpose, as well as a universal feeling recognised by all, uniting humanity. This revolutionises the accessibility and understanding of love as an abstract concept, which was previously only acknowledged by elite philosophers, and provides an emotive and romantic explanation of love which surpasses the logical and rational theories of his peers. The modern reception of this myth which is centralised around soulmate ideology, and overlooks the pertinent vices addressed in human nature, strengthens the suggested idealised tendencies of modern audiences which distort the holistic message of a work of literature. Arguably, Aristophanes' ideal that "love is the name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness" (Plato, 1999) would be largely interpreted by the ancient audience as a profound philosophical message which provides an explanation for the nature of human meaning, perhaps overlooking the romantic notions. In my opinion, I argue that modern audiences differently interpret the intended message of Plato through their tendencies to seek out as a romanticised explanation of the world, therefore finding the ideals of a 'one true love' or 'soulmates' particularly appealing. This is transferred to the modern age where entire belief systems around love are resolute around the ideology of 'soulmates' and having an 'other half', therefore showcasing the pertinence of the myth and how it has been adapted to suit our idealistic tendencies. This is rivalled by the prevalent classical interpretation in Plato's age of love as a philosophical force which unites the binaries of humanity and provides a clear path to completion, harmony, and greater understanding which transcends the comic facade of the myth.

The concept of an idealised projection of love was initially indulged in Mitchell's musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* which follows the fictional and figurative story of Hedwig- a queer punk rock star who was coerced into a botched sex change operation, is separated from his/her origins, and grapples with the search for identity and love as an extension of his/her divided nature. The musical prominently embodies and explores Platonic concepts through the song 'The Origin of Love' (Trask, 1998d) which relays Aristophanes' myth and is thematically embodied in the narrative, intertwining the story with ancient customs and ideals and acting as a refrain which unites and divides the story. The purpose of this song is, much like how the classics resound in real life, to provide an origin of understanding which sets a groundwork for theories to evolve and return to, establishing a baseline of archaic archetypes. By being introduced in the storyline as a memorable bedtime tale, its symbolism holds the stature of a palimpsest, where Hedwig reinterprets and remembers as he/she goes through life, constantly connected to the foundations of his/her limited understanding. In this song, Hedwig's character relays the myth where we became "lonely two-legged creatures" and how love can be recognised as "the pain down in your soul" that is "the same as the one down in mine" which "cuts a straight line down through the heart; we called it love" (Trask, 1998d). The synthesis of Plato's storytelling and this modern understanding of love arguably encapsulate how audiences have emphasized the most poetic aspects – love and pain as synonymous - and immortalised it by elevating an already heartfelt account into an elegiac song rich in ancient and modern imagery, omitting the precision of the philosophical discourse. The parallels between the character of Hedwig and the symbolism within Aristophanes' myth mean that figuratively, he/she embodies a reconfiguration of Platonic philosophies; for example, writer and director Mitchell declares that she was designed to be a "walking metaphor for this myth" (Whether you like it or not: The story of Hedwig, 2003), reinforcing the classical origins within her character.



Figure 1- the presentation of two separated souls as portrayed in the song "The Origin of Love" in the 2001 film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, drawn and animated by Emily Hubley

Additionally, the contradictions within Hedwig's character which deviate from Plato's philosophies further exemplify the effect of classical reception, where Hedwig is not only a modern projection of these origins, but acts as a vessel of classical criticism and misalignment. For example, Plato's key philosophy of 'Forms' are the metaphysical ideals which parallel concepts of the physical world and provide a blueprint for guidance and fulfilment (PLATO ON: The Forms, 2016); Hedwig through this lens could be evaluated as dichotomous to the infinitely perfect and abstract 'Form' of Platonic projection. For example, Mitchell's construction of her character is presented as somewhat unlikable through actions such as repressing her husband Yitzak's freedom by tearing up his passport and being emotionally volatile towards others. Perhaps Mitchell's presentation of Hedwig in this

nuanced way may be purposeful to disprove Plato's ideal notions which simply cannot apply to the paradoxical lives of humans, to encourage the audiences to criticise the oppressive societal ideals around gender which influence his/her grapple with identity, and to present him/her in a realistic human plane with imperfections the audience can sympathise with. This is observed through her arguably contradictory character construction, where, as critical writer Sypniewski suggests, he/she "both defies and concurrently enables traditional constructs of gender" (Sypniewski, 2008). This concept is strengthened by examples of her dichotomous nature, which include progressively subverting her preassigned sex yet aligning to the stereotypes of a traditional wife submitting to the wishes of her husband Luther, including the coerced sex change operation and relocation to America, away from everything she once knew. This reinforces the symbol of division within his/her character, acting as a "barrier and a bridge" (Sypniewski, 2008) with the self-imposed role of an "intermediary force" (Sypniewski, 2008), which arguably solidifies her as a deviant of Platonic binaries around gender and morality, existing outside of social constructs. The pertinence of societal demands is portrayed through the illustrations in the film adaptation of *Hedwig* (Hedwig and the Angry Inch, 2001) during the song "The Origin of Love" (Trask, 1998d) where the words "deny me and be doomed" appear on screen under the watchful eye of the gods. Perhaps Mitchell has included these as a modern distortion of social commentary, where the authority of the gods is replaced by the demands of society, which are all-powerful and have the capacity to punish and oppress individuals who do not conform. Perhaps this imparts the pertinent message of *Hedwig*, that the idealistic notions of Plato are quixotic and not fully compatible in the modern world, and instead director Mitchell advocates for an individual search for identity and self-fulfilment instead of attempting to coincide with repressive social constructs around gender, sex, and entire belief systems which seek to repress true expression of individuality.

Following the proposal of soulmates, Plato arguably uses the mouthpiece of Socrates to diverge and contrast Aristophanes' account, and through the narrative form of dialectic conversation, Plato elevates his own analysis as unequivocally the most meaningful conclusion of love. Most poignantly, Socrates' conversation with Diotima addresses the ladder of love theory, wherein love is a force which enables individuals to surpass meaningless relationships; by focusing on mind and body they can become enlightened with the beauty within their self and all around, instead of through the attachment to one other person, and achieve greater understanding of their purpose. Aristophanes is also rivalled by Socrates' declaration that "love is neither directed at their half nor their whole unless that turns out to be good" (Plato, 1999), therefore directly combatting the myth and favouring a holistic approach to love as a virtue which progresses into a metaphysical journey of appreciation where love can be found anywhere and is positioned as a vessel for greater understanding, purpose and betterment. This positions love as less of a spiritual and personal desire of unification, but rather as a virtuous pursuit of true beauty and knowledge which, for the Ancient Greeks, would have been a resolute answer which they would have concluded as the resounding message of *The Symposium*. The reception of Aristophanes' myth holding

more prevalence than the philosophical notions of Socrates within modern society (where the belief in ‘soulmates’ is more common than the ‘ladder of love’) addresses the potential misinterpretation of ancient texts by modern audiences, where they favour a malleable and romanticised account which can be adapted into the complex fields of modern life. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* could therefore be examined as a work parallel to *The Symposium* as the opening message – that “love makes us whole, again” (Plato, 1999) - advocates a romanticised view of soulmate ideals which is later combatted by the concluding message in ‘Wicked Little Town – Reprise’: that “there's no mystical design, no cosmic lover preassigned” (Trask, 1998e). Similarly, the concluding message of Plato’s *Symposium* being that love is as pathway which advocates a better understanding of oneself, as well as finding wholeness and unity through individual virtues is paralleled through the concluding message of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, where Hedwig accepts him/herself after all they have been through and acknowledges that he/she are whole with or without a partner. This is emphasised through the concluding song “Midnight Radio” where it is declared that he/she should “Know in your soul, like your blood knows the way, from your heart to your brain, know that you're whole” (Trask, 1998b), which serves as a direct reversal of Aristophanes’ construction of humans being fundamentally divided. Furthermore, the final scene of the 2001 film (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, 2001), which attributes a new symbol for love, divulges from Aristophanes’ notion of love coming from two halves and instead reinterprets the Platonic conception through a modern lens that love goes beyond the attachment of two people and must be found within one’s intrinsically whole self.

The thematic and narrative parallels of Plato in *Hedwig* arguably transcend the poignant philosophical messages by implementing modern distortions which humanise and ground ideas in a favourable lens. Through resolving *Hedwig* around classical origins, Mitchell has arguably formulated a realm of timeless meaning which synthesises the poignancy of Ancient Greek philosophers with the compelling emotional death attributed by contextual modern details which further engage the audiences’

connection with the narrative. For example, the concluding idea in *Hedwig* of love as being something that can be found within - a modern message of self-acceptance - and not as resolution for unity and completion, or the virtuous pursuit of philosophical enlightenment, develops Socrates’ message of love as a virtue to a promotion of individuality. This is symbolically illustrated by the symbol in figure two, where the original conception of love having two halves is reconfigured as being a singular whole where love is found within ourselves- a figurative rejection of the myth and adaptation of Plato’s concluding message.



Figure 2- The ending scene of the 2001 film (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, 2001) which displays Hedwig’s new tattoo on his/her naked body, a reconfiguration of the original divided souls into one whole individual, a symbol of liberation.

Additionally, the story of Hedwig as a diversion from classical archetypes - through implementing modernist techniques such as complex narratives and nuanced messages – arguably inspires human relatability and provides more depth which increase audience engagement. This may act as a criticism of the timeless yet unambiguous message of Plato which may create distance or lack of connection with readers as they are united by an absolute understanding without room for individual interpretation. For example, segmentation as an extension of love is transcended beyond the explicit division of humans and is instead portrayed through Hedwig’s separation from society as a genderqueer outcast, separated from love, his/her country, and the Berlin Wall which is repeatedly used as a symbol of his/her divided sense of self. This metaphor is directly explored in the opening song ‘Tear Me Down’ (Trask, 1998c) where “Hedwig is like that wall, standing before you in the divide between East and West, Slavery and Freedom, Man and Woman,” (Trask, 1998c) immediately situating him/her as an outcasted ‘other’ who exists only in the gaps between the confines of a divided society, never quite belonging or feeling ‘whole’ within a sector. The recurring theme of Hedwig feeling a lack of wholeness through a root of classical influence is also symbolically addressed through his/her unreliable storytelling of the myth in ‘The Origin of Love’ (Trask, 1998d) where names of gods are misconstrued, for example integrating distinctive pantheons from different cultures to describe the same god, such as the Greek “Zeus”, Roman “Jove” and Norse “Thor”. Figuratively, this suggests that Hedwig is a character constructed in fragments from a life of inconsistencies and misinformation, who is defined by overwhelmingly contradictory societal demands which alter his/her perception of truth and myth, further exploring the theme of incompleteness. However, this may also attribute to the theme of classical reception where Hedwig acts as a contradictory projection of Greek mythology as arguably, writers Mitchell and Trask purposefully disregarded classical accuracy and favoured a more emotionally rich style of storytelling, where personal experience and sincere vulnerability overpower philosophical absolutes. Thematically, this also alludes to the contextual factors which have limited his/her cognition as by manipulating his/her understanding of the world, where the audience are forced to question the state of society which has endorsed his/her struggle for survival without sufficient education, leading him/her to grapple with fragments of information and never feeling ‘whole’ in his/her knowledge, life, or love. This incompleteness and outcasted nature subsequently cause a world of pain and punishment, most notably the botched sex change operation he/she is coerced into as the only socially acceptable way to express his/her queer identity, leaving him/her with an unsatisfying “angry inch” (Trask, 1998a) which further traps him/her in the space between “man and woman” (Trask, 1998c).

The symbolism of the pursuit of wholeness as a product of punishment and division is also prevalent within Plato’s *Symposium*, particularly through the declaration that love is “the innate desire of human beings” which “draws the two halves of our original nature back together and tries to make one out of two and heal the wound in human nature” (Plato, 1999) and examines the idea that love comes from pain, and all humanity are united and divided by love and anguish. The simultaneous nature of these two forces is additionally extended by the

threat to humankind where “if we don't behave, they'll cut us down again” (Trask, 1998d), which reinforces the existence of love as a byproduct of punishment and vindication and attributes a fear tactic for humans to conform with the status quo represented by the elite authority of the gods. This may have been transferred to the modern age where the expectation to find love and become whole is a seemingly universal goal, without which causes punishment of further separation, not by the gods, but by archaic elements of society who condemn those who do not conform to the status quo. This is solidified by feminist philosopher Judith Butler who argues that gender binaries are not a natural or intrinsic essence but instead are performative labels inflicted by socially regulated actions and norms. This is particularly explored in her seminal text “Gender Trouble” (Butler, 1990) which discusses how the norms of the binary gender system oppress minority groups, and through subversive acts of identity expression, such as drag, allows space for progression and deconstructing the divisions which affect individuality. Through this lens, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* may serve as a progressive act of defiance against the restrictive norms of society and, as critical writer Hsu suggests, “Hedwig serves as a symbolic queering agent in the oppressive, constructed binary gender and sexuality categories” (Hsu, 2011). These interpretations align with the presentation of Hedwig, who acts as a non-conforming entity existing beyond and between the constraints of society. This is also poignantly explored in the ending of the movie (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, 2001), where Hedwig, having relinquished his/her feminine appearance symbolically hands over the wig to his/her ex-husband Yitzak, a figurative gesture symbolising a rejection of social norms and relinquishing the oppressive ideals that divided his/her identity.

In conclusion, the story of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* arguably serves as a critical engagement with the philosophies of Plato through engaging with *The Symposium* through the myth of Aristophanes, which propose an idealised yet impossible ideal of love as a uniting force for divided individuals, and adapting the message of Socrates by reinterpreting his understanding of love as a vessel for self-enlightenment and suggesting that the most important lessons humans can learn is to find the love within our self which intrinsically makes us whole.

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