

SPIRITUAL PREGNANCY IN PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

Although Plato's notion of spiritual pregnancy has received a great deal of critical attention in recent years,¹ the development of the metaphor in the *Symposium* has not been fully analysed. Close attention to the details of the image reveals two important points which have so far been overlooked:

(1) There are two quite different types of spiritual pregnancy in the *Symposium*: a 'male' type, which is analogous to the build-up to physical ejaculation, and a 'female' type, which is analogous to the physical experience of pregnancy as normally understood.

(2) It is the Form of Beauty, rather than the lover of beauty, that is pregnant at 212a, which means that in the course of Diotima's speech the role of 'beauty' changes from that of presiding deity in childbirth to that of sexual partner and mother.

I maintain that these points have escaped notice precisely because they have been effectively obscured – for very good reasons – by Plato himself.²

In 1964 J. S. Morrison offered a new approach to the idea of spiritual pregnancy in the *Symposium* when he connected spiritual with physical 'male pregnancy', as outlined in the *Timaeus* (73bff., 86c and 91cf.), and concluded (pp. 53–4) that:

it appears that Plato took the view that the divine seed derives from the brain and marrow of the man and that both the male and female sexual organs have a similar function as receptacle and in due course outlet for this seed.... If Plato subscribed to this view of the process of human generation, it is not surprising that he could describe the bringing forth of the child by male and female in similar terms. Both are births and both are accompanied (though in varying degrees) by pangs.

On this analysis male 'pregnancy' is the condition whereby a man is ready to ejaculate his seed, and the subsequent 'childbirth' is the ejaculation itself.

Plass (1978) rejects this thesis (p. 48), preferring to view 'male pregnancy' as a term arising from 'the confusion of sexual roles in a homosexual relationship'. He suggests that the term may have been part of a 'homosexual argot': 'a distinctive vocabulary which... would naturally consist in large measure of words ordinarily used of heterosexual relationships transferred to pederasty' (p. 50). The main problem with Plass' account is that he does not explain what the term may have been used to refer to. He ignores the actual use and development of the idea in the *Symposium* and so fails to grasp its basic message. Plass believes that the *Symposium* is 'a sophisticated plea for pederasty' (p. 48); but a careful assessment of the spiritual childbirth metaphor in Diotima's speech shows that the dialogue cannot be read in this way.

¹ J. S. Morrison, 'Four Notes on Plato's *Symposium*', *Classical Quarterly* 14 (1964), 43–55, pp. 51–5 on κτείν; M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 24 (1977), 7–16; K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (London, 1978), pp. 153–65, *Plato, Symposium* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 146–59; P. C. Plass, 'Plato's "Pregnant" Lover', *Symbolae Osloenses* 53 (1978), 47–55; G. R. Lambert, 'Plato's Household Topos: A Formative Influence on Ancient Educational and Social Theory', *Prudentia* 16 (1984), 17–32; M. C. Stokes, *Plato's Socratic Conversations* (London, 1986), pp. 146–82; J. Tomin, 'Socratic Midwifery', *Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987), 97–102; E. F. Kittay, *Metaphor – Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 278–87; H. Tarrant, 'Midwifery and the Clouds', *Classical Quarterly* 38 (1988), 116–22.

² I am very grateful to Professors M. C. Stokes and A. J. Woodman, Dr J. L. Moles, the Editors and the anonymous *CQ* referee for their careful scrutiny of earlier versions of this article.

Dover (1980, p. 147) and Stokes (1986, pp. 161–3) accept Morrison's thesis and, I believe, are right to do so. But all three critics fail to see the significance of the fact that a male pregnancy of the type outlined in the *Timaeus* would not, on its own, result in the birth of a child. To use Plato's terms, childbirth requires both a male and female type of pregnancy. Therefore, if the metaphor of spiritual childbirth is to be consistent, a female type of spiritual pregnancy must follow the male type. Commentators have not acknowledged the 'female' contribution to spiritual childbirth, but it is as logically necessary in the creation of spiritual children as it is physically necessary in the creation of human ones. A close examination reveals that, although Plato does not mention it specifically, a female type of pregnancy is present in the *Symposium*, that physical intercourse, ejaculation, pregnancy and childbirth are mirrored at the spiritual level, and that, despite a certain awkwardness arising from the desire to obscure the female role in childbirth, the metaphor of spiritual pregnancy is developed in a logical way. My reading of Diotima's comments on spiritual pregnancy will focus on the different types of pregnancy that are spoken of and will attempt to establish exactly who or what is presented as being 'pregnant' at each stage.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE METAPHOR

(I) *Seed-pregnancy* (206b–e)

In the *Symposium* the metaphor of spiritual pregnancy is introduced by Diotima, the woman from Mantinea who, Socrates claims, taught him all he knows about *τὰ ἐρωτικά* (201d1–5). The innuendo and humour here are obvious, as is the fact that Diotima is used as a mouthpiece for Socrates.³ The metaphor first appears at 206b when, after posing the question: 'What is the function of Love?', Diotima gives the puzzling reply (206b7):

ἐστι γὰρ τοῦτο τόκος ἐν καλῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν.

It is a childbirth in something beautiful, both in respect of body and of soul.

When Socrates says he does not understand, Diotima replies that she will explain more clearly and makes the rather startling announcement (206c1):

κυοῦσιν γάρ... ὦ Σώκρατες, πάντες ἄνθρωποι καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν, καὶ ἐπειδὴν ἐν τινὶ ἡλικίᾳ γένωνται, τίκτειν ἐπιθυμεῖ ἡμῶν ἡ φύσις.

All humans, Socrates, are pregnant both in body and soul, and when they come to maturity, our nature desires to give birth.

As Dover observes (*ad loc.*), the verb *τίκτειν* can be used both of the male 'begetting' of a child and the female 'bearing', whereas the verb *κυεῖν*, which means 'to be pregnant', is normally used only of the female. Since *πάντες ἄνθρωποι* must include men, we find the first reference to the type of male pregnancy identified by Morrison, i.e. the condition whereby man is ready to ejaculate his seed. It is of course

³ See Dover (1980), pp. 137–8, and Stokes (1986), pp. 146–7. As well as the humour inherent (for Plato) in the idea of a female teacher, a number of other reasons have been suggested as to why Plato introduces Diotima at this point (see Dover, 1980, pp. 137–8); one that has not been mentioned, so far as I know, is that by bringing in a woman he can raise the subject of pregnancy in a more plausible way. At a gathering of Athenian men the matter of pregnancy was hardly likely to crop up spontaneously, and the subject is even more out of place at Agathon's party where most of the guests are involved in homosexual affairs.

true that women are here included in this experience, but after this initial generalisation Diotima focuses on male arousal before intercourse. I therefore follow Morrison⁴ in defining the first type of pregnancy as the male desire for sexual intercourse and procreation.

These are difficult ideas, and at 206c5 Diotima tries to clarify her statement about male 'pregnancy' (206c5):

ἡ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν.

For intercourse of man and woman is a childbirth.

This sentence has been viewed as problematic by many critics. Bury⁵ comments: 'Most editors (except Hommel and Stallbaum) agree in excising this clause as a meaningless intrusion.' The sentence is also omitted by Groden and Hamilton in their respective translations. In contrast, Dover and Stokes recognise it as crucial to the sense of the passage. Here Diotima explains that intercourse is a childbirth, i.e. that during sex a child is born. What does she mean? Burnyeat⁶ has spoken of a 'strange reversal' of pregnancy and birth in this section of the speech (206c–e) and has concluded that: 'pregnancy precedes intercourse because birth and intercourse are imaginatively equated. So striking a reversal could only be contrived in a realm of imagination and metaphor...'

The judgement that 'birth and intercourse are imaginatively equated' must be based on Diotima's statement *συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν*, but in my view Burnyeat has misunderstood Plato's use of the ideas of 'pregnancy' and 'birth' at 206b–c. First, 'pregnancy' at 206c1 (*κυοῦσιν*) refers to a state of arousal which logically precedes intercourse. Second, the term 'birth' (*τόκος*) at 206c5 would seem to be a reference to male ejaculation, since it is the 'birth' of the seed with which the male had been pregnant. There is an obvious sense in which intercourse and ejaculation can be equated, and so again there is no reversal. Even if *τόκος* is regarded also as a reference to female emission of semen at the moment of orgasm,⁷ then again there is a natural progression from arousal to orgasm, and no reversal. Although the female experience is not explicitly excluded, Plato is concerned here with male ejaculation. His idea of intercourse as a childbirth follows a view widely attested in Greek literature, namely that male ejaculation represents the actual birth of a child and the father is therefore the true parent. Stokes (p. 162) points out that:

in some Greek thinking the female was merely the receptacle for the child, which grew from the father's seed

and Willink,⁸ commenting on Euripides, *Orestes* 551–6, observes:

The genetic argument for the primacy of the father is offensive to present-day ideas, but it was traditional ... and in accordance with a widely-held view of procreation (e.g. Anaxagoras A107 *ap. Arist. gen. anim.* 4. 1. 763b. and the Egyptians according to Diod. I. 80; ...) ... in tragedy, cf. A. *Sept.* 754 ..., S. *OT* 1211, 1257, E. *Ph.* 18, but above all the direct precedent in A. *Eum.* 658–9, where the same argument had been put forward by Apollo.

This view is also expressed elsewhere in Plato (see Morrison). A final point against Burnyeat is that when Plato uses metaphors, he is at pains to keep them logical and consistent, so far as his own use of them allows. Close attention to metaphorical

⁴ Morrison, pp. 52–5. See also Stokes, pp. 162–4.

⁵ R. G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato* (Cambridge, 1909), p. 111.

⁶ Art. cit., p. 8.

⁷ See Dover (1980), p. 147.

⁸ C. W. Willink, *Euripides – Orestes* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 174–5.

passages in the dialogues often reveals that the images employed are far more consistent than a casual reading first suggests. While the image of spiritual procreation in the *Symposium* can often seem obscure, it does follow the same sequence as physical procreation, as I will attempt to show. I am not claiming that spiritual pregnancy is a precise mirror-image of its physical counterpart; since the soul has a very different nature from that of the body, point to point correspondence is impossible. But I do maintain that spiritual procreation broadly corresponds to the physical experience – as indeed it must if we are to make any sense of the metaphor.

At 206c5, then, Diotima, following a standard view of procreation, uses the term *τόκος* to speak of male ejaculation. This is a very important point, as it lays the foundation for the subsequent account of spiritual pregnancy and procreation.

In the passages that follow Diotima argues that human beings achieve immortality through procreation which produces children to continue the family line. The link between childbirth and immortality is important for Plato's argument and will be developed later in the speech.

The next section of Diotima's account deals with the role of beauty in this seed-birth. At 206c4 it was stated plainly that 'our nature'

τίκτειν δὲ ἐν μὲν αἰσχρῷ οὐ δύναται, ἐν δὲ τῷ καλῷ.

cannot give birth in something ugly, only in something beautiful.

The use of *ἐν* in this sentence confirms that Diotima is focusing on the *male* sexual experience, since the idea of 'giving birth' or ejaculating *in* something can only apply to men.⁹ This 'something' is usually the female, and so it is rather curious that Plato uses the neuter forms of the adjectives 'ugly' and 'beautiful'. For Stokes, Plato's use of the neuter results from (p. 163) 'a desire to appear to be talking about all sexual love without actually talking about the female's love of the male'. However, it also has another function, that is, by giving the discussion an abstract quality, to prepare for the switch from human sexual relations to intercourse of a quite different order.¹⁰

The idea that male ejaculation is only possible in something beautiful is continued at 206c8, where Diotima says that childbirth cannot take place 'in the disharmonious'. The role of beauty in the act of ejaculation is then summed up by Diotima at 206d1: 'Beauty is therefore Fate and Eileithyia at the birth.' The birth of the male seed requires sexual stimulation which in turn requires attraction to something beautiful. Diotima therefore personifies beauty as the goddess Kallone, who can be seen as the deity presiding over the male seed-birth, just as Eileithyia and one of the Moirai preside over female childbirth.¹¹ We are witnessing a male pregnancy, and Diotima is not here concerned with the female type of pregnancy which results from intercourse.

In the next section of the speech Diotima, continuing her argument about the role of beauty, describes what happens when the pregnant person approaches beauty and ugliness. In the first case we are told (206d3–5):

ὅταν μὲν καλῷ προσπελάζῃ τὸ κυοῦν, ἡλεών τε γίγνεται καὶ εὐφραινόμενον διαχεῖται καὶ τίκτει τε καὶ γεννᾷ.

When whatever is pregnant approaches beauty, it becomes gracious and, feeling happy, it melts, gives birth and begets.

⁹ See Stokes, p. 163.

¹⁰ The neuter form is used on occasion by Plato for the soul (e.g. *Crito* 47d) and is used for the Form of Beauty later in the speech (211eff.).

¹¹ See Dover (1980), p. 148.

At the level of male physical pregnancy, this passage tells how the male is aroused by contact with beauty and as a result ejaculates. In contrast, when 'whatever is pregnant' approaches ugliness, we find a quite different reaction (206d5–7):

σκυθρωπόν τε καὶ λυπούμενον συσπειράται καὶ ἀποτρέπεται καὶ ἀνείλλεται καὶ οὐ γεννᾷ, ἀλλὰ ἴσχον τὸ κύημα χαλεπῶς φέρει.

... because it is sad and grieved, it contracts, turns away, shrinks up and does not give birth, but holding back what it has conceived, it bears it with difficulty.

Ejaculation is now impossible. The male is no longer aroused, he shrinks up (literally) and must bear inside himself the seed to which he wanted to give birth. From these different reactions to beauty and ugliness Diotima concludes that beauty attracts the pregnant man since this alone can 'release the man who has it from his great birthpangs' (μεγάλης ὠδίνος ἀπολύειν τὸν ἔχοντα, 206e1). The use of ὠδίνος, while maintaining the language of childbirth, graphically suggests the discomfort of sexual tension as the male seeks to be delivered of his burden.¹² The participle ἔχοντα, as well as meaning simply 'having', also contributes to the sexual imagery through the senses of 'have as wife, husband, lover' and 'be pregnant'.

In this first section pregnancy and childbirth refer to the male production and ejaculation of seed in intercourse. At this stage Diotima is speaking in general terms about all seed pregnancies, but in the next section she will distinguish between seed pregnancies at the physical and at the spiritual level.

(II) *Spiritual sex* (208e–209e)

The distinction between physical and spiritual pregnancy is drawn at 208e1. Linking physical procreation with the desire for immortality, Diotima says (208e1):

So those who are pregnant in their bodies [ἐγκύμονες ... κατὰ τὰ σώματα] turn rather to women [γυναῖκας] and are lovers in this way, believing that by means of the begetting of children [παιδογονίας] they can secure for themselves immortality and memory and happiness hereafter for ever.

As in the previous section, 'those who are pregnant in their bodies' are the people who have conceived seed inside themselves and are ready to give birth to it via intercourse. With the reference to γυναῖκας we see that Diotima is specifically concerned with pregnant men. Similarly, παιδογονία refers to the male experience of begetting children rather than the female experience of bearing them. Diotima's assumption of an exclusively male perspective is more evident here than at 206c–d.

We now turn to the analogous situation at the spiritual level (208e5):

οἱ δὲ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν – εἰσὶ γὰρ οὖν, ... οἱ ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς κυοῦσιν ἔτι μᾶλλον ἢ ἐν τοῖς σώμασιν, ἃ ψυχῇ προσήκει καὶ κηθεῖν καὶ τεκεῖν.

But other men are pregnant in their soul – for there are men who conceive in their souls even more than in their bodies – with the things which it is fitting for soul both to conceive and to give birth to.

These men are spiritually pregnant just as the men at 208e1 ff. were physically pregnant: that is, pregnant with seed. We are still at the stage of production and ejaculation of seed and have not yet approached the birth of soul-children, which, just

¹² See Stokes, p. 162.

as on the physical level, requires intercourse. Thus the 'things which it is fitting for soul to conceive and give birth to' are to be understood as soul-seed. But what exactly is this seed? Diotima spells it out (209a3–5): 'Intelligence and the rest of virtue.' She goes on to say that all poets and inventors are 'begetters' – *γεννήτορες* – of these (209a4–5).

As poets and inventors have produced and ejaculated seed, it seems we are to think of them both as pregnant in their soul and as fathering their offspring by ejaculating. Although the poets and inventors are not directly spoken of as 'pregnant', Diotima's image of pregnancy and birth does apply to them, as we see from 209a2–3 and the use of *τούτων* at 209a8 (see below). There now follows a key passage in which Diotima develops the images of pregnancy and intercourse in some detail. This begins with the description of spiritual puberty (209a8–b2):

τούτων δ' αὖ ὅταν τις ἐκ νέου ἐγκύμων ᾗ τὴν ψυχὴν, ἥθεος ὢν καὶ ἡκούσης τῆς ἡλικίας τίττειν τε καὶ γεννᾶν ἤδη ἐπιθυμεῖ.

Whenever one of these people is pregnant in his soul from his youth onwards, then, when he is an eligible bachelor¹³ and has come of age, he desires to give birth and procreate.

So we are presented with a picture of the young man experiencing a spiritual puberty and reaching the age at which he is ready to procreate. At this point he desires to give birth to the soul-seed he has long been pregnant with, i.e. he desires to ejaculate.

Following her earlier argument about the role of beauty in ejaculation (206d1–2), Diotima now tells us (209b2–4):

ζητεῖ δὴ οἶμαι καὶ οὗτος περιῶν τὸ καλὸν ἐν ᾧ ἂν γεννήσειεν· ἐν τῷ γὰρ αἰσχροῦ οὐδέποτε γεννήσει.

This man too goes around, I suppose, in search of the beautiful in which to beget. For he will never beget in what is ugly.

So we again find the man pregnant in soul mirroring the action of the man pregnant in body. The latter on reaching maturity searches for a desirable or beautiful woman in whom to ejaculate his physical seed. But what is 'the beautiful' in which the spiritually pregnant man desires to ejaculate? We might expect it to be a beautiful soul, but, as the passage continues, we find Diotima still talking about bodies (209b4–c2):

τά τε οὖν σώματα τὰ καλὰ μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ αἰσchrὰ ἀσπάζεται ἅτε κυῶν, καὶ ἂν ἐντύχῃ ψυχῇ καλῇ καὶ γενναίᾳ καὶ εὐφυεῖ, πάντῃ δὴ ἀσπάζεται τὸ συναμφοτέρων.

So since he is pregnant he embraces beautiful bodies rather than ugly ones and if he finds a beautiful and noble soul of good disposition, he especially embraces the combination of both...

The pregnant man embraces beautiful bodies rather than ugly ones, because, as Diotima has continually told us, without beauty there can be no birth, i.e. without arousal there can be no ejaculation. Therefore since our pregnant male wants to 'give birth', he is very pleased to find beauty which will help him to do so.

This may be Diotima's argument, but the real reasons for the emphasis on beauty and the desire for beauty lie elsewhere. First, beauty is included at every stage of Diotima's speech on love because Plato is paving the way for his final revelation of the Form of Beauty. Beauty thus provides a much needed link between human experience and emotion on the one hand and the distant realm of the Forms on the

¹³ See Dover (1980), p. 153. The use of *ἥθεος* (unmarried youth) again underlines that Plato is interested in male rather than female arousal before intercourse.

other.¹⁴ Second, at a more mundane level, Socrates/Diotima (and hence Plato) dwells on the attractions of beauty for rhetorical purposes. If all the conception, pregnancy and desire for ejaculation are happening at a spiritual level, then there is no need at all for our pregnant man to go in search of a physically beautiful partner. If another man or boy has a beautiful soul, then surely this will be all the beauty required for a spiritual ejaculation and childbirth. But beautiful bodies are still present because Socrates (through Diotima) is trying to speak to his audience in terms which they will understand and which will appeal to them. Earlier in the dialogue we have heard the speech of Pausanias, the lover of Agathon, and it is clear that although he praises the beauty of a boy's soul, it is still the boy's physical beauty that holds the greatest attraction for him. Socrates, it seems, is directing his argument towards men such as Pausanias who pay lip-service to 'spiritual beauty', but in fact are far more attracted by physical attributes. So then, using language of sexual desire and intercourse and playing on fantasies of beautiful partners, Socrates seeks to draw Agathon's guests (and Plato to draw his readers) more deeply into his discourse on the soul. This section of the dialogue can be seen as an attempt to wean the lover from physical and onto spiritual delights.

To return to the text: having found a partner, our friend, pregnant with virtue and intelligence, engages in speeches about virtue (209b8 *λόγων περὶ ἀρετῆς*) and sets about educating his partner (*ἐπιχειρεῖ παιδεύειν*).¹⁵ This is an interesting passage, as, although it can be read as part of the soul-courtship which will lead to intercourse and the birth of soul-children, it is also exactly what goes on at the literal level. For it is by means of such conversations that homosexuals such as Pausanias and Eryximachus set about wooing their beloveds. The role of the lover as educator of his *παιδικά* is well known.¹⁶ Plato is thus skilfully presenting his soul-courtship in terms which accord with the conventions of homosexual relations at Athens. After the courtship we come, as is natural, to the spiritual intercourse (209c2–4):

ἀπτόμενος γὰρ οἶμαι τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ὁμιλῶν αὐτῷ ἃ πάσαι ἐκείνῃ τίκτει καὶ γεννᾷ, καὶ παρὼν καὶ ἀπὼν μεμνημένος

touching/having sexual intercourse with the beautiful young man, I imagine, and being in company with/talking with/having sexual intercourse with him, he gives birth and begets those things which he has long been pregnant with, both in his presence and remembering him in absence

The male has spiritual sex with his partner, that is, he has conversations with him, and finally ejaculates the seed (intelligence and the rest of virtue) with which he has been pregnant for so long. It is a nice touch that, in contrast to the physical level, the spiritually pregnant man can have sex with his partner both in his presence (live discussion) and in his absence (remembering discussions, mulling over ideas etc.).

This passage works very neatly on different levels. The verb *ὁμιλῶν* suggests physical intercourse (attractive to the audience) and can also simply refer to being in company and having conversations with another. The homosexuals among the audience (both Socrates' and Plato's) at this point may be pleasantly surprised to learn that all the time they were courting their beloveds with a view to physical

¹⁴ Cf. Dover's comment on *Phaedrus* 250d (1978, p. 164): 'beauty is the only one of those things which are *erastos* ("attracting eros") which can be directly perceived by the senses, so that the sight of something beautiful affords by far the most powerful and immediate access we have to the world of Being.'

¹⁵ The verb *παιδεύειν* is presumably to be understood as having a double sense here: first referring to intellectual advancement and second to sexual initiation.

¹⁶ See Pausanias' speech 184d–e and Dover (1978), pp. 212ff.

intercourse at a later stage, their souls during these conversations were already having sexual intercourse!¹⁷ The giving birth here (τίκτει καὶ γεννᾷ) is the ejaculation of seed, not the birth of a child, which, as on the physical level, comes later.

But in this case not much later. In fact, almost at once. There is no break in the sentence and Diotima continues (209c4–7):

καὶ τὸ γεννηθὲν συνεκτρέφει κοινῇ μετ' ἐκείνου, ὥστε πολὺ μείζω κοινωνίαν τῆς τῶν παίδων πρὸς ἀλλήλους οἱ τοιοῦτοι ἴσχουσι καὶ φιλίαν βεβαιωτέραν, ἅτε καλλιόνων καὶ ἀθανατωτέρων παίδων κεκοινωνηκότες.

He rears the child/that which has been produced in common with him, so that such men enjoy a much greater shared intimacy than that which comes from (human) children and maintain a stronger friendship, since the children they share are more beautiful and more immortal (than human ones).

This is the first occurrence in Diotima's speech of a 'female' type of spiritual pregnancy. But female pregnancy is an 'absent presence' here – absent, as there is no direct mention of it but a presence, nevertheless, as it must be understood for the phrase τὸ γεννηθὲν συνεκτρέφει to make sense. In the previous clause the lovers were enjoying intercourse and now they are rearing the child that has been born. There is an obvious ellipsis here, as the whole of the 'female' experience of pregnancy and giving birth to a child has been suppressed. After spending a great deal of time on the so-called 'pregnancy' of the lover, Diotima has nothing to say about the pregnancy of the beloved, his partner. It is this second spiritual pregnancy that is analogous to female pregnancy at the physical level. For this results in the birth of a child rather than the birth of seed, which, as we have seen, is simply a metaphor for ejaculation.

This second type of soul pregnancy – the female type – is presented at great length in the *Theaetetus*. When we meet the young Theaetetus he is already pregnant with soul-child and we are told in some detail of his labour pains and of the whole process of birth. The metaphor is even extended to include a notorious 'midwife' and a ceremony of parading the newly-born child around a hearth. But in the *Symposium* Plato makes no explicit reference to the female experience of childbirth, even though this process is of crucial importance in bringing the soul-child into the light and although it is clearly implicit in the imagery itself. Why?

I believe that the answer lies in the interests of the audience for whom he is writing. Plato's audience was composed of well-educated, upper-class men, who were likely to have only a limited interest in the subject of female childbearing. But further, the *Symposium* addresses a very particular aspect of this male audience's experience, their experience of love and erotic desire. As Dover has pointed out,¹⁸ 'there can be little doubt that homosexual response was the most powerful emotional experience known to most of the people for whom [Plato] was writing' and so it is natural that in his dialogue on love Plato concentrates largely on homosexual relations; apart from Aristophanes all the speakers at the *Symposium* are involved (to differing extents) in homosexual affairs and in the speeches far more is said of homosexual than of heterosexual *eros*. Female pregnancy is out of place in the homosexual ambience of the dialogue, and it is therefore not surprising that when Diotima speaks of the male lovers procreating spiritual children, all reference to the female role is avoided. Plato is seeking to impress on his readers the pleasures of spiritual procreation and so concentrates on those aspects most familiar and most appealing to them, i.e. desire, sexual arousal and union with a beautiful partner. What happens after intercourse

¹⁷ The use of ἀπτόμενος earlier in the dialogue at 175c8 foreshadows the use of the verb here.

¹⁸ Dover (1986), p. 5.

– pregnancy and labour – is suppressed, and thus at 209c we move from ejaculation to childbirth in the space of one line. In terms of the spiritual procreation metaphor it is the beloved who assumes the female role, and the suppression of his experience suggests that this part of Diotima's speech is addressed to those men who are or have been the older, active partners in homosexual affairs. So Plato manipulates the female image of pregnancy to fit the requirements of his male audience. His success is shown by the fact that, centuries later, critics continue to overlook the presence of the female type of pregnancy in Diotima's speech.

The soul-child, then, has been born and the proud fathers now 'share its upbringing' (συνεκτρέφει). We are not told that the actual nature of the soul-child, but we learn that it is more beautiful and more immortal than a human child. The reference to immortality picks up Diotima's earlier argument that human desire to procreate stems from the desire for immortality. The reason why soul-children are more immortal than human ones is presumably that ideas, poetry etc. can outlive people. The reason why soul-children are more beautiful, however, is less clear. But this is an appropriate idea, given that these praises of soul-children are undoubtedly addressed to Agathon, the unmarried poet, and are intended to flatter him by extolling the offspring of his art.¹⁹

In the next section (209c7–e4) we hear that poets, such as Homer and Hesiod, and lawgivers, such as Lycurgus and Solon, have all fathered spiritual children. The logic of the metaphor would suggest that these men father their soul-children (poems and laws) in the way that men usually father children, i.e. by ejaculating in another person (cf. 209a8–209c7). Here, however, Diotima does not talk of spiritual intercourse and says nothing explicit about the spiritual partners of the poets and lawgivers.²⁰ There can be no doubt that Plato is playing down the idea of spiritual intercourse at this stage. For this idea would lead to very awkward questions about creativity, e.g. 'who was Homer's partner when he fathered the *Iliad*?' or 'could a change of partner account for the differences between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*?'

Instead of confronting the problem, Plato prefers to fudge a little here and uses terms which are normally used of male 'begetting' and 'fathering' – γεννήτορες (209a4), ἔκγονα ... καταλείπουσιν (209d2–3), παῖδας κατελίπετο (209d5), γέννησιν (209d7) and γεννήσαντες (209e2). When speaking of particular poets and lawgivers, then, Plato avoids the images of spiritual pregnancy and ejaculation and instead focuses attention on a much more straightforward idea: namely that a man, as well as fathering real children, can also beget children of the spirit or intellect. The idea of poetry and discourse as children is also used in a number of passages in the *Phaedrus* (242b, 257b, 261a, 275e, 276a, 278a–b), and appears earlier in the *Symposium* itself at 177d5, where Phaedrus is referred to as πατήρ τοῦ λόγου.

In the account of spiritual sex between lovers and the subsequent birth of their soul-child Plato emphasises the father's contribution of ejaculating seed and ignores the mother's role of receiving the seed and bringing the child to birth. Turning now to the third and final section of the metaphor's development in the *Symposium*, we shall see that Plato continues to obscure the female contribution to childbirth – this time for even better reasons.

¹⁹ Stokes (1986), p. 172.

²⁰ Dover suggests (1980, p. 152) that 'the beautiful medium' 'in' which Homer and Solon created their offspring 'can only be the virtuous character of the societies for which Homer sang and Solon legislated', but nothing is said in the text of the virtuous (or otherwise) character of the societies in which these men lived and it is clear from 209b4–c7 that Diotima at this stage is speaking of the lover who is inspired by a beautiful human being (see also 209e5–210a6).

(III) *From phantoms to the Form* (210a, d, 211e–212a)

Before we examine the main passage (at 212a) we must set out briefly what our pregnant lover has been experiencing since 209e.

In this section of her speech Diotima explains to Socrates what a spiritually pregnant man must do, if he is to attain the final revelation in the love mysteries: that is, to achieve a vision of the Form of Beauty. First our man should fall in love with one body and should there ‘beget’ fine speeches or arguments (*γεννᾶν λόγους καλοὺς*, 210a7–8). Next he should recognise that the physical beauty of different bodies is ‘one and the same’ (*ἐν τε καὶ ταὐτόν*, 210b3) and should become a lover not of individuals but of all beautiful bodies. The next stage is to value spiritual beauty more highly than physical. Moving then through the beauty of activities, institutions, morals and sciences, he should ultimately become a lover of beauty in the widest or most abstract sense.

At 210d we come to a significant and rather surprising development of the metaphor. As the lover gazes on the ‘vast sea of beauty’ we are told that he (210d4–6):

πολλοὺς καὶ καλοὺς λόγους καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεῖς τίκτη καὶ διανοήματα ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ.
gives birth to/begets many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts in bounteous philosophy.

The phrase *ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ* has been understood by translators as referring to the man’s own love of wisdom or philosophical theories:

Lamb:²¹ ‘[he] may ... bring forth in all their splendour many fair fruits of discourse and meditation in a plenteous crop of philosophy’;

Hamilton:²² ‘[he] may bring forth in the abundance of his love of wisdom many beautiful and magnificent sentiments and ideas’;

Groden:²³ ‘one brings forth many beautiful and magnificent theories and thoughts in a fruitful philosophy.’

However, if we consider the phrase *τίκτη... ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ* in the light of the preceding passages, it must be taken to mean, I believe, that the lover is giving birth to his soul-seed in philosophy, which takes the place of the beloved in intercourse and assumes the female role. The image of a person having intercourse with philosophy may seem strange, but it is similar both to an idea in the *Gorgias* (481d–482a) where Socrates speaks of philosophy as his *παιδικά* and to a very vivid metaphorical passage in the *Republic* (495e–496b),²⁴ where philosophy is likened to a woman forced by hard times to marry an inferior suitor. Once the marriage has taken place, the matter of children arises and we find the following exchange between Socrates and Adeimantus (496a2):

What kind of children, then, are such parents likely to produce [*γεννᾶν*]? Will they not be bastards [*νόθα*] and of inferior nature [*φαῦλα*]? – Quite unavoidably.

So when those unfit for education approach [*πλησιάζοντες*] philosophy and consort [*ὁμιλῶσι*] with her unworthily, what kind of thoughts and opinions are we to say they produce [*γεννᾶν*]? Will they not be such as truly to deserve to be called sophistry, that is, nothing legitimate [*γνήσιον*] or partaking in wisdom? – That is altogether certain.

This is very similar to our passage at *Symposium* 210d, although the offspring of the union with philosophy is quite different. In contrast to the *Republic*, the intercourse

²¹ W. R. M. Lamb, *Plato – Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias* (London, 1925), pp. 203–5.

²² W. Hamilton, *Plato, The Symposium* (London, 1951), p. 93.

²³ S. Q. Groden (ed. J. A. Brentlinger), *The Symposium of Plato* (Massachusetts, 1970), p. 92.

²⁴ See A. E. Taylor, *Plato* (London, 1926), p. 231 n. 1.

between the lover and philosophy in the *Symposium* produces 'fine speech and thought' (which in the terms of the *Republic* must mean that our lover is a man 'fit for education'). In both passages the nature of the parents determines the nature of the children, an idea with obvious parallels in physical union and a consideration of the utmost importance for a philosopher concerned with the principles of eugenics (see e.g. *Republic* 459a ff.). This idea will appear again at 212a ff.

Now that the lover has discovered the pleasures of philosophy, he is ready to experience the greatest delight of all. As he philosophises and contemplates beauty in its most abstract sense, he suddenly achieves a vision of the Form of Beauty. After describing this Form and praising its perfection, Diotima says at 211e4–212a2:

Do you think ... that the life of a man who could look in that direction, who could contemplate that entity with the appropriate faculty and be in union with it [*συνόντος αὐτῷ*], would be of an inferior nature [*φαῦλον*]?²⁵

The lover here is contemplating the Form of Beauty (which is spoken of as neuter throughout).²⁶ He is, it seems, somehow 'in union' (*συνόντος*) with it as a result of his contemplation. What kind of union is this? On a literal level, Plato has no answer for us in this passage. However, we are given a metaphor which offers a vivid picture of what kind of contact this is. For, as the passage progresses, the union of the lover and the Form is presented as sexual union leading to procreation. In the preceding sections of the speech (210e–211e) the themes of love and sex are ever-present and the metaphor of spiritual sex is still at work (see 211b5 and 211d6). Now the metaphor is given its final development as the lover has spiritual intercourse with the Form. The participle *συνόντος* means simply 'be with', 'be in contact with' but it also sustains the sexual imagery through its sense of 'having intercourse with' (compare the use of *συνουσία* at 206c6).

Are we really to understand that the lover of beauty is having sex (albeit metaphorically) with the Form of Beauty? Stokes (p. 178) comments on the idea of 'contact' in this passage: 'one is tempted to suppose this a sexual metaphor for spiritual intercourse' and observes in a footnote (p. 471 n. 98):

Diotima's *ἐφάπτεσθαι* is not, so far as I can discover, used elsewhere for the sexual act; but (1) the simple verb *ἄπτεσθαι* is so used, and (2) so are other words for 'touch' such as *θιγγάνω*, and (3) the closely related compound *ἐπαφάω* is connected by Aeschylus (?), *Prometheus*, 849–51, with Zeus' begetting of *Ἐπαφος* on Io...

Yet *ἐφάπτεσθαι* is used elsewhere in Plato in a sexual context and moreover it appears in a passage which provides an important parallel with *Symposium* 212a2–7, as Taylor observes.²⁷ This is *Republic* 490b, where the lover of knowledge is presented as having intercourse with reality or true being:

As he goes his way, his passion [*τοῦ ἔρωτος*] will not be blunted nor will he cease from it before he touches [*ἄψασθαι*] the nature of true reality in each case with that part of his soul which is fitted to touch it [*ἐφάπτεσθαι*] because of its kinship with it; approaching [*πλησιιάσας*] it with this and having intercourse [*μικτεῖς*] with true reality, he begets [*γεννήσας*] intelligence and truth. He would then, but not before, have knowledge, truly live, be nourished and so delivered from his birthpangs [*λήγαι ὠδίνος*].

This passage clearly presents an image of the lover of knowledge having sexual intercourse with true reality – a point observed by Taylor (see above) and Burnyeat

²⁵ The man who lives a *φαῦλον βίον* can be identified with the man who produces mere phantoms – the *φαῦλα* of *Republic* 496a.

²⁶ This, as I have already suggested, goes some way to explain the use of the neuter forms at 206c and d. See p. 75 above.

²⁷ Taylor (1926), p. 231 n. 1.

(p. 13). However, Burnyeat overlooks the fact that *Republic* 490b offers the same image as *Symposium* 212a.²⁸ Stokes is surely right, then, to detect a sexual metaphor here, for how else are we to understand the lover's progression from loving his *παιδικά* to loving souls and finally to loving the Form of Beauty itself?

In the *Republic* childbirth results from intercourse with Being and this is also the case in the *Symposium*, as we discover at 212a2–5:

ἢ οὐκ ἐνθυμῇ... ὅτι ἐνταῦθα αὐτῷ μοναχοῦ γενήσεται, ὁρῶντι ᾧ ὁρατὸν τὸ καλόν, τίκτειν οὐκ εἰδῶλα ἀρετῆς, ἀτε οὐκ εἰδῶλου ἐφαπτομένῳ, ἀλλὰ ἀληθῇ, ἀτε τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἐφαπτομένῳ.

Don't you realise ... that only there, seeing in the way that the Beautiful can be seen, can one stop begetting images of virtue, since one no longer touches an image, but truth, because one now touches the truth?²⁹

Here we learn that, as a result of being in contact with the Form, the lover is able to *τίκτειν* true virtue rather than an image of it. What precisely does *τίκτειν* refer to here? Up to this point of Diotima's speech this verb has denoted male ejaculation – the 'bringing forth' or 'giving birth' to seed during intercourse. However, it cannot mean this here. For it makes no sense to say that a man, by having intercourse with an image, ejaculates images, whereas a man, by having intercourse with the truth, ejaculates truth. There is no logical connection between the kind of partner a man has and the kind of seed he produces.

But there is a connection between the kind of partner a man has and the kind of *child* their union produces, a point I noted above in my discussion on *Republic* 496a (p. 11). The nature of the parents determines the nature of the child that is created, and thus, when our lover has intercourse with images, he produces images of virtue, whereas when he has intercourse with truth, he produces true virtue.³⁰ Images and true virtue, then, are soul-*children*, not merely soul-seed, and so the verb *τίκτειν* is used here in the sense of 'begetting children'. We must remember Dover's point above (p. 2) that *τίκτειν*, as well as being used to refer to ejaculation, can be used in Greek both of the female 'bearing' and the male 'begetting' of a child.

Plato presents, then, the male lover as having intercourse with the Form of Beauty and fathering true virtue. As at 209c a child has been procreated by means of intercourse between two partners and so, following the analogy of physical procreation, we expect both a male and female type of pregnancy to have taken place.

²⁸ See Burnyeat, p. 13. The comment 'The *Republic* comes closer to what we are seeking when it describes an intercourse with the Forms which begets understanding and truth' gives the impression that this image does not appear in the *Symposium*, which, I argue, is not the case.

²⁹ Taylor comments on this passage (op. cit., p. 230 n. 1): 'The allusion is to the tale of Ixion and the cloud which was imposed on him in the place of Hera, and from which the Centaurs sprang.' (The idea was actually Zeller's (1857), see Bury (1973), p. 132 *ad loc.*). But surely a more appropriate parallel is to be found in the story of the *εἰδῶλον* of Helen, see Euripides, *Helen* 27–36. *Republic* 586b7–c5, a passage in which Socrates is speaking of real and unreal pleasures, shows that the story of Helen's *εἰδῶλον* provided Plato with a useful mythical parallel for the contrast between illusion and reality. In this passage we also find references to 'desires' and 'begetting in souls': 'Ἀρ' οὖν οὐκ ἀνάγκη καὶ ἡδοναῖς συνεῖναι μεμειγμέναις λύπαις, εἰδῶλοις τῆς ἀληθοῦς ἡδονῆς καὶ ἐσκιαγραφημέναις, ὑπὸ τῆς παρ' ἀλλήλας θέσεως ἀποχρανομέναις, ὥστε σφοδροὺς ἐκατέρας φαίνεσθαι, καὶ ἔρωτας ἐαυτῶν λυττῶντας τοῖς ἀφροσιν ἐντίκτειν καὶ περιμαχῆτους εἶναι, ὥσπερ τὸ τῆς Ἑλένης εἰδῶλον ὑπὸ τῶν ἐν Τροίᾳ Στήσιχορος φησι γενέσθαι περιμάχῃτον ἀγνοίᾳ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς;

³⁰ I support Stokes' suggestion (p. 179) that at 212a2–5 'the necessary argument is concealed in the metaphor' and am convinced of a point he makes rather tentatively (p. 179): 'Perhaps Diotima means, even if she does not say, that intercourse with a mere image cannot produce real progeny, and it needs a real union with a real partner to procreate real offspring.'

The lover experiences a 'male' pregnancy leading to ejaculation as he 'has intercourse with the truth' (τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἐφαπτομένῳ) and so 'fathers' (τίκτειν) the spiritual children. After intercourse a mother must nurture and bring to birth the male seed and in this passage the Form of Beauty, the lover's sexual partner, clearly must perform the mother's role. Thus it is the Form that experiences the pregnancy, labour and birth of the soul-child, with the lover taking the role of proud father. However, as at 209c there is an ellipsis as Plato carefully avoids mentioning this 'female' type of pregnancy. Why? Apart from catering to the interests of his male audience, Plato now has even more pressing reasons for not wanting to dwell on the female contribution to the birth. For the idea of a pregnant Form leads to all sorts of very uncomfortable questions, e.g. 'How can a Form be pregnant at one time, but not at another?' – a Form which is supposed to be fixed in its nature, free from change and, as Diotima herself has just told us (at 211b), 'does not experience anything' (μηδέ πάσχειν μηδέν).

Even within the realm of spiritual pregnancy, it is logically impossible for a Form to be pregnant and so the metaphor completely breaks down at this point. A further awkward problem arises in that, whereas earlier in the speech Beauty was cast as a goddess presiding over male-childbirth, now perfect Beauty has become involved in the act of procreation itself and so can no longer be a third party. For these very good reasons Plato avoids all mention of the Form as pregnant and focuses attention instead on the experience of the lover and his triumph of finally fathering real instead of phantom children.

The mention of these phantoms, εἰδωλα, obviously introduces a new element into the metaphor, and it is an element which is used to make an important philosophical point. In the earlier passages, when the lover and his beloved had spiritual intercourse they gave birth to virtue (see 209a and e) as their spiritual children. Now we learn from Diotima that in fact these children are not real, but phantoms, mere images of virtue. The only true spiritual children are those procreated by contact with the Form of Beauty. Thus, although they are 'more beautiful' and 'more immortal' than human ones, these earlier spiritual children (poems and laws) cannot match the products of union with the Form of Beauty.

We see here a progression from the physical to the spiritual and a further progression from spiritual contact between two souls in the realm of Becoming to spiritual contact between a human soul and true reality in the realm of Being. On the physical level the result of union is human children. On the first spiritual level phantom soul-children are produced and it is only on the second spiritual level that the lover begets true or real soul-children. This is a subtle way of saying that all poetry is inferior to the products of the philosopher's contemplation, a point which Plato makes in different ways on a number of occasions, but has to make very tactfully in an account of Agathon's party.

The idea of phantoms of virtue is introduced, then, to raise us to a higher plane where we learn that all the things of this world, even spiritual children, are in fact phantoms when compared to what is truly real, i.e. the Forms.

Now that our lover has enjoyed union with the Form of Beauty, what happens to him next? The happy ending of this love affair comes at 212a5–7:

τεκόντι δὲ ἀρετὴν ἀληθῆ καὶ θρεψαμένῳ ὑπάρχει θεοφιλεῖ γενέσθαι, καὶ εἴπερ τῷ ἄλλῳ ἀνθρώπων ἀθανάτῳ καὶ ἐκείνῳ.

He is able to beget true virtue and to nourish it, and hence to be a divine favourite, so that if any man can be immortal, it will be him.

As I said earlier, Plato in this passage focuses attention on the experience of the lover and avoids describing the Form as pregnant. Thus he speaks only of the lover 'begetting' (τεκόντι) true virtue, using the verb (as at 212a3) to refer to the masculine act of fathering, and tells us nothing of the female role in this birth.

As the lover nourishes (θρεψαμένω) the child, we find the same progression of union, childbirth and rearing as at 209c. But whereas earlier the verb for rearing was *συνεκτρέφει*, as the two lovers shared the task, now, of course, Plato wants the role of the Form to drop out of sight, so he removes the prefix *συν-* and presents the lover as bringing up the child on his own.

My final point on this passage concerns the matter of immortality. After begetting a true soul-child, the lover will become a divine favourite (*θεοφιλεῖ*) and, if any man will become immortal, he will. Why is this? The answer, it seems, works on two levels.

First, within the metaphor, he has consorted with a Form and with it has fathered a child, which he now takes care of. Since the Form is divine (211e), the lover is now the father of a semi-divine child. Through this special relationship with the Form, which, I argue, has to be regarded as the soul-child's mother, the lover has a closer link with the realm of divine beings. Also, as Diotima has suggested earlier (206c), there is a sense in which the production of any child immortalises and so, according to Platonic thought, the production of a true soul-child must surely immortalise most of all!³¹

Second, outside of the metaphor, the lover of beauty becomes immortal because he achieves a vision of true reality which leads him to an understanding of true virtue. This understanding will help him (in the language of the *Phaedo*) to free his soul and (in the *Republic's* terms) to achieve his escape from the realm of becoming to the eternal realm of Being.

The way that the lover achieves immortality through spiritual children is clearly different from the way in which parents achieve immortality through their human offspring. In the latter case the parents 'live on' through the children they leave behind. But in the case of the lover of Beauty, the 'children' he begets – intelligence and the rest of virtue – cannot exist independently of him, for they are new virtues present in his soul. Thus he cannot be said to 'leave behind' these children after death.³² Both the physically and spiritually pregnant men achieve immortality by means of procreation, but the relationship between parent and child and the type of immortality in each case are quite different. Here the metaphor has reached another of its limits.

CONCLUSIONS

To understand Diotima's speech the reader must grasp that Plato employs four different types of pregnancy, two physical and two spiritual. First, although it is never spoken of directly, the whole image is obviously based on the literal, physical state of pregnancy experienced by the female after intercourse. Second, as Morrison, Dover and Stokes have shown, Plato uses the idea of a male type of 'pregnancy and childbirth' to refer to the act of ejaculation during physical intercourse. Next we find these male and female types of physical pregnancy mirrored at the spiritual level.

³¹ See Stokes, pp. 180–1: 'By means of *this* offspring a man will enjoy a higher degree of immortality than by any other. No ordinary child, and no ordinary intellectual masterpiece, will confer such immortality as the production of true goodness.'

³² Stokes (p. 181) comments that 'it is left vague in what sense one leaves behind one the true goodness to which one has given birth'. I would argue that the metaphor ends here and that the lover of Beauty cannot be regarded as leaving behind his 'children' in any sense. For these 'children' must be seen as aspects of his own soul.

Thus the third type of pregnancy and birth is the male pregnancy with seed, which the male lover ejaculates during spiritual sexual intercourse; and finally the fourth type – which has eluded critics – is that experienced by his partner who, taking the female role, becomes pregnant and gives birth to the soul-child. Although the image is often difficult to follow, I think that it does have a logical progression. I reject Burnyeat's view (see above) that there is a strange reversal in the sequence of intercourse and birth, since at each level the different births are the result of the corresponding type of pregnancy.

My first conclusion, therefore, is that there are two types of spiritual pregnancy in the *Symposium*, a 'male' type, as has been observed by Morrison, Dover and Stokes, and a 'female' type, which has been overlooked.

My second conclusion develops from the first, as I argue that at the end of the section on spiritual pregnancy the lover of beauty has a pregnancy of the 'male' type and that this requires a 'female' type if children are to be produced. As spiritual children are procreated in this passage, then someone or something must have given birth to them. If we follow the analogy of physical pregnancy and birth, as I feel we must, then this someone or something must be their father's sexual partner, which at this stage is nothing other than the Form of Beauty. As a Form cannot be 'pregnant', Plato has steered himself into an awkward corner. He manages, however, to manoeuvre himself out of this difficulty by directing all attention to the experience of the lover. This ploy has remained undetected, as critics have allowed their attention to be diverted from the female contribution to childbirth. That Plato has used the overtly female image of pregnancy and at the same time has obscured the female role in procreation is no small achievement.

University of Durham

E. E. PENDER