At the beginning of the symposium dramatized in Plato’s *Symposium*, the physician Eryximachus makes a proposal to Agathon’s guests:

> I propose that we let the *aulos*-girl who just now came in go and play to herself, or, if she wishes, to the women inside, and that today we spend our time with each other in talk.¹

(176e)

After all of the guests enthusiastically agree to decline the girl’s services, Eryximachus proposes, specifically, that they compete in praising the god Eros (177a–d).

In proposing Eros as a topic for competitive speaking, Eryximachus reports the complaint of Phaedrus that poets have not yet made an encomium of Eros. Prodicus, Phaedrus said, praised Heracles,² and others have praised salt for its usefulness, but no one has adequately praised Eros (177a–c). The salt example suggests that the kind of encomium Phaedrus and Eryximachus have in mind is one that praises something or someone for qualities that are useful to humans. Phaedrus’ complaint, then, while perhaps an exaggeration, is an accurate reflection of much of Greek literature, in which *erôs* is often represented as more to be feared than praised, a destructive force causing sickness and madness.³ There are indeed hymns to Eros in tragedy that represent the god as a powerful force.⁴ In another respect, however, these passages are not encomia, for

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¹ An *aulos* is not a flute but a wind instrument something like a recorder (Dover 1980, on 176e6). Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own, and I follow the text of Burnet (1901).

² Bury (1932), on 177b, notes that Prodicus’ story about Heracles’ choice of Virtue is recounted in Xen. *Mem*. 2.1.21 ff.

³ Numerous examples, especially in archaic poetry, are given by Calame (1999), and Cyrino (1995).

they attribute to Eros a power destructive to human beings. In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Eros is addressed as: ‘You who harm and make unjust the minds of even just people, you have stirred up this quarrel of kindred men’ (*Ant*. 791–794); and in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* the god is called: ‘Eros, the tyrant of men . . . destroying mortals and sending all misfortunes to them when he comes’ (*Hipp*. 538–542). In giving his encomium, then, each speaker is asked to remedy what is presented as a deficiency in the literary tradition, by praising Eros for the good things he gives to humans. One way in which the first five speakers—Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Agathon—do this is to use quotations and allusions to show that, even if the poets have not made formal encomia of Eros, their poems do in fact praise the god for his beneficence.

Thus, even though they have agreed to dispense with the entertainment provided by the *aulos*-girl in order to entertain one another with their own conversation, each of the first five speakers actually invites others to speak for him, by quoting extensively from poets and other literary authorities. Their competitive use of quotations is itself a traditional sympotic game, and an activity at which Plato’s Socrates himself excels, as will be seen at the end of this chapter. In the context of Plato’s *Symposium*, however, the reliance on and selective use of quotations and allusions by the first five speakers reveal not only their own lack of understanding (*amathia*) about *eros*, but also the inadequacies of the poetic tradition itself.

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5 Brandwood (1976), 991–1003 provides a useful ‘Index of Quotations’ in Plato, although it has limitations noted by Halliwell (2000), 95, n. 4. Brownson (1920), 22–73, and ‘Tables’, 159–165 collects and discusses Plato's quotations of and references to the poets. Tarrant (1951) is also helpful.

6 See Halliwell (2000) on ‘the general Greek practice of invoking and citing poetic texts to formulate, illustrate, or reinforce a point of view’ (95), and Plato’s portrayal of and reaction to this practice. Competitive quotation of poetry at symposia is discussed by Lissarrague 1990, esp. 135, and in several of the chapters in Murray (1990): Lukinovich, esp. 264; Pellizer, esp. 179–180, Rösler. Vetta (1983) provides an excellent introduction to the role of poetry in the Greek symposium. Of particular interest is his discussion of *metapoësis*, the correction or transformation of a poem known to an audience (xxx–xxxi).

7 I borrow the translation of *amathia* as ‘lack of understanding’ from LSJ (1996), Supplement, s.v. *ἀμαθία*. On the comic aspects of the speakers’ ‘false conceit of wisdom’ see Patterson (1982), esp. 81–90 (quotation p. 82).