CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A TRANSFER OF ENERGY:
LYRIC EROS IN PHAEDRUS

Elizabeth Pender

Introduction

A fundamental theme runs through the three speeches on love in Plato’s *Phaedrus*: love’s power. In exploring this theme Plato draws on the language of love shaped by the Greek poetic tradition whereby love holds and exercises a dangerous influence upon the lover. The lyric poets in particular offered distinctive portrayals of the overwhelming power of *erôs*, not only in the pain of unfulfilled desire but also in the erotic experience *per se*. Eros is a threatening external force, whose onslaught leaves the lover weakened and disorientated. In *Phaedrus* Plato responds to this vision and through his allusions pays tribute to the lyric poets’ achievement in capturing and expressing so vividly the shock of love. He accepts their insights on the power and energy of love but also reshapes and reconfigures the nature of love and self-control in the context of tripartition. By analysing the power-dynamics within a soul experiencing erotic desire Plato creates an intricate picture of how the force and energy of *erôs* is absorbed, transferred and redirected.¹ In *Phaedrus* Plato explores how mania and reason can be mutually supportive and how love can function as a unique energy source. I shall demonstrate how poetic insights on the force of love, principally from Sappho, Anacreon and Ibycus, are integral to this exploration. Indeed, Plato’s allusions to the poets create an intriguing intertextuality between the dialogue and lyric which challenges the well-established view of Plato as hostile to poetry.

¹ This chapter offers an abbreviated version of the argument set out in ‘Sappho and Anacreon in Plato’s *Phaedrus*’ (Pender 2007b). There I explain how the Ilissus setting, presented as a seduction meadow, sets up a situational allusion to the lyric genre. I explore in full the naming and praise of Sappho and Anacreon at 235c3–4; trace the presence of specific lyric allusions in each of the four main episodes of Socrates’ myth and analyse their contribution to the dialogue.
That lyric poetry is present in the text of *Phaedrus* is not in itself a contentious point. But the interpretation of the poetic echoes and their purpose is more controversial. Further, the extent and details of the allusions have not been sufficiently explored. I shall begin by reviewing lyric language for love’s power (§1) and then show how this serves as a basis for the first approaches to the theme in Lysias’ speech and Socrates’ first speech (§2). Turning to the narrative of Socrates’ second speech, I shall show how specific lyric allusions support the account of tripartition (§3). Finally (§4) I shall explain how Plato in the final episode of the myth breaks with the poetic tradition to reveal the correct way to convert the energy of *erôs*.

1. Lyric Eros: The Subduer

In poem 1 Sappho entreats the goddess of love, as ‘mistress’ (*potnia*), not to ‘overpower’ her heart (3–4 *damna*) and uses the same verb (*damnâô*) for Aphrodite’s power at 102 (*dameisa*). Theognis at 1388–1389 speaks of Aphrodite as ‘overpowering’ the minds of men (*damnâis*) and adds that no one is strong or wise enough to ‘escape’ (*phugein*) her. Anacreon similarly hails Eros as the ‘subduer’ (357 *damalês Erôs*) and again speaks of the lover seeking an escape (346 fr. 4.3–6 *ekphugôn; 400* *pheugôn*). At 505d Anacreon hails Eros’ power over gods and men (*dunastês ... damazei*). Often the poets image love as a hostile, attacking force that invades and through its physical impact destroys the lover. Alcaeus presents himself as felled by Aphrodite’s hand (380); while Ibycus 287.1–5 likens the rush of love to a martial attack, where the lover exclaims: ‘How I tremble at his onset!’ Anacreon uses a Homeric battle term, *kudôimoi* (literally, ‘the roar of battle’),3 to describe the turmoil that Love causes (398). Sappho 47 likens Eros to a violent wind that falls upon trees.4 Ibycus develops this image in 286.6–13, where the love that comes from Aphrodite is likened to the ‘Thracian Boreas’, so powerful is its effect through all the heart. Sappho speaks of love ‘shaking’ her heart

---


3 See e.g. *Iliad* X, 523.

4 Sappho 47: Ἐρως δ’ ἐτίναξέ μοι / ἐφένας, ὡς ἄνεμος κατ ὄρος δρύσαν ἐμπέτων. All texts and translations of Sappho, Anacreon, Ibycus and Alcaeus are from Campbell’s edition. The texts of Theognis are from Edmonds’ edition.