This short piece of the text of Plato’s *Symposium* has generated no little discussion. Successive editors, faced with the task of discovering whether what is usually printed is actually what Plato wrote, and what, if that is what he wrote, he could have meant by all of it, have reached diverse conclusions on both these questions. There is no doubt at all about what Plato’s main point is—the context is quite explicit about that. The trouble comes with a distinction that he tries to make between what he is saying and something that he wishes to make clear he is not saying. The difficulty turns on some ambiguity in the way Socrates expresses himself: but there is no general agreement as to the nature of the ambiguity, or exactly why Socrates wants to draw attention to it. It will be argued that none of the explanations so far offered has sufficiently accounted for all that is in the text usually printed. The

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1 This discussion is based on a paper read to a ‘workshop’ arranged by Professor Suzanne Stern-Gillet at the then Bolton Institute in December 1997. I have benefited from the comments offered on that occasion, and from the advice in particular of Dr D. O’Brien, Mr D.B. Robinson, Dr F.G. Herrmann, and Professor C.J. Rowe.

2 I am grateful to Dr W.S.M. Nicoll for making his collations of DTW available to me.
phrase ‘γελοῖον γὰρ ἂν εἶναι τὸ ἐρώτημα εἰ Ἕρως ἐστὶν ἔρως μητρός ἢ πατρός’, though it has often been viewed with suspicion, has generally been retained by editors as the humorous parenthesis it purports to be. The precise nature of the joke, and its value in the context of the discussion, are evidently another matter.

The passage in question comes after Agathon’s elegant and witty encomium on the god of love. Socrates protests that he cannot contribute a comparable eulogy bearing no relation to the truth; but, if anyone is interested, he is prepared to come to grips with the facts in his own way. Before he starts, he wants to clarify one or two points arising from Agathon’s speech. Agathon is, however, commended for recognising that his first task was to show what sort of god Love was and then what his achievements were.

‘Now since you’ve given such a splendidly magnificent account of what he is like in other respects, tell me this too about Love: Is Love such as to be the love of something/someone or nothing/no-one? I am asking not if it is of a [or a particular] mother or father—for absurd would be the question if Love is love of a mother or father—but as if I were asking about the term father, “Is a father the father of someone or not?” You would have told me, I suppose, if you wanted to answer properly, that it is of a son or a daughter that a father is the father, wouldn’t you?’

The point Socrates seeks to establish is whether or not love must always have some object towards which it is directed. But since Socrates’ aim is to make sure that he and his interlocutor are not at cross-purposes, he goes on to make clear the sense in which the genitives ‘of something/someone’ (τινός) and ‘of nothing/no-one’ (οὐδενός) are to be understood. First he eliminates a sense which he does not want. Given that the intent is to clarify, it is perhaps surprising how various have been the attempts of interpreters to account for what, precisely, this sense is, or why it might have bedevilled the discussion. Opinion today remains as divided as ever.

The translation given above tries to preserve, at the cost of English style, the form of Plato’s Greek as Burnet’s Oxford text prints it. What it does not show is that in Socrates’ question ‘Love’ (with a capital L) and ‘love’ (with a small l) appear next to each other in the Greek, as they would if the question had been, ‘Is Love love of something or of nothing?’ In two of our MSS the second ‘love’ is missing, so that what they say is, ‘Is Love such as to be of something/someone or of nothing/no-one?’ In most other respects all the MSS agree, but it makes