Flute-Girls, Sovereignty, and Plurality:

The Eroticism of Arendt's Political Action

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‘It’s settled, then,’ said Eryximachus. ‘We are resolved to force no one to drink more than he wants. I would like now to make a further motion: let us dispense with the flute-girl who just made her entrance; let her play for herself or, if she prefers, for the women in the house. Let us instead spend our evening in conversation. If you are so minded, I would like to propose a subject.

Plato, *Symposium* 176e

Just as she enters the scene of her employment, the little remarked upon flute-girl (*auletride*) from the ‘Introduction’ to Plato’s *Symposium* is told to leave. She is dismissed at the prescription of the restrained medical doctor, Eryximachus,[[1]](#footnote-1) for tonight’s symposium, contrary to the norm, will not require her ‘flautistic services,’ neither musical nor felletic,[[2]](#footnote-2) as the men have decided to treat their hangovers with sober, philosophical discussion. Her vulgar erotic talents will certainly not be necessary, as, in the presence of the surprisingly bathed and well-dressed Heavenly Socrates, the men have decided to discuss the nature of love. Likely a foreigner slave of the house of Agathon,[[3]](#footnote-3) this young flute girl is instead given the option to play either for herself or with the other women of the household. What a relief! One might speculate that indeed she would prefer to perform for the women of the house, for then she might perform *with* her equals, rather than perform *for* her male oppressors.

Hannah Arendt observes in her essay, “What is Freedom?,” that, despite the cultural rejection of flute-players:

[T]he Greeks always used such metaphors as flute-playing […] to distinguish political from other activities, that is, that they draw their analogies from those arts in which virtuosity of performance is decisive.

Performing arts differ from creative arts (i.e. painting) temporally and spatially. It is the time enduring final product perfected in solitude and over time that matters for the creative artist, whereas the performance artist must excel as their process unfolds in the fleeting moment in the presence of an audience. Artwork endures time on their own, performances are fleeting and require others to survive. The performing artist and their creative process must *appear*, whereas this “element of freedom […] remains hidden” for the creative artist. It is in this way that performance art, such as flute-playing has “indeed a strong affinity with politics.” For the performance artists:

[N]eed an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their ‘work,’ and both depend upon others for the performance itself.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The performance is free insofar as it *appears* in public, *with* others.

When re-reading the *Symposium* with Arendt, it is important to recall the cultural significance of the flute in Ancient Athens. The performance of the flute (*aulos*) was derided by Ancient Greek culture. As Aristotle retells the myth, Athena, having invented the flute, abhorred the ugly distortion it caused her face. It’s play also prevented her from participating in *logos*, or rational speech. So the goddess of wisdom abjected it. “Besides, the flute is not an instrument which is expressive of moral character; it is too exciting.” Intrigued by the excited plurality of the flute’s voicing, the Dionysian satyr, Marsyas, readily took up the instrument, thus associating it with Dionysian erotica and deeming its play unacceptable for civilized free Athenians. The flute was thought to “contribute nothing to the mind” or virtue, therefore “the execution of such music is not the part of a freeman but of a paid performer, and the result is that the performers are vulgarized, for the end at which they aim is bad.”[[5]](#footnote-5) It is here that Aristotle’s comparison reaches its limit. The paid flute-player must play *for* the pleasure of others, and is thus ‘instrumental’ in rationality, whereas politics must be an end-in-itself. Politics is a performance *with* others, not a performance *for* others.

But what Arendt, and the Western tradition, has ignored is the robust role of the flute-player in Greek society. The presence of the flute-player was ubiquitous, as their presence was required at sacrifices, ceremonies, and tragedies. They also kept tempo for harvesting, weaving, and military trireme rowing. The Greeks also invoked it to distinguish them from barbarians, such as the Persians. Vital for society, yet unacceptable for freemen, the flute was relegated to the underclass of society: foreigners, slaves, and women. The flute-player bore the mark of their importance in their dress, distinguished them from other underclass members of society as well as other musicians.[[6]](#footnote-6) So non-citizens and the abject Dionysian flute came to occupy an important position at the very heart of Athenian society. They were the limit, the limit of civility, culture, politics, and rationality.

Perhaps most forgotten in the history of philosophy is the *erotic* element of the Dionysian flute. The dual purpose of the flute-player, usually female, at *symposia* as the player of both musical *and* skin flutes was well known in ancient Greek society.[[7]](#footnote-7) Our *Symposium* flute-girl was undoubtedly also a sex worker. And Aristotle’s contemporaries would have associated the Dionysian when he invoked the flute-player as an example of politics and actuality.[[8]](#footnote-8)

So what would it mean to re-read the *Symposium* and Arendt’s utilization of the figure of the flute-player in thinking about political action? It would mean that erotics, or passion, is always already present in her conception of political action, positioning her contrary to Plato, whom she critiques for holding rationality over passion.[[9]](#footnote-9) Though she may not have been so fully aware of it, one can trace remnants of the eroticism of political action throughout her text. Especially as she critiques the metaphysics of contemporary sovereign politics as instituted by Parmenides and Plato. For they, like Athena, rejected the uncontrollable eroticism of politics and laid the foundation for Augustinian free will, an “intercourse between me and myself, and outside of the intercourse between men.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Here the life of the philosopher, a life of solitude aiming for certainty, displaces the life of the citizen. Unable to tolerate the fact that men, rather than Man, live in this world.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Plato’s battle between reason and passion hence became internalized in medieval philosophy as a battle between the will of the spirit and the will of the flesh. And it is *paralyzing* for the will both wills to and not to at the very same time.[[12]](#footnote-12) This will-power has “*emasculated* not only our reasoning and cognitive faculties but other more ‘practical’ faculties as well.”[[13]](#footnote-13) She continues, “Historically, men first discovered the will when they experienced its *impotence* and not its power. […] Hence, the will is both powerful and *impotent*, free and unfree.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The language Arendt invokes cannot be mere accident, as characterizing sovereign politics as *paralyzing, emasculated,* and *impotent* resonates with sovereign politics’ very rejection of eroticism. Contemporary (mis)understandings of masculinity conflate it with our vision of sovereignty: complete control, domination, violent power, etc. Yet, this very view of masculinity (i.e., sovereignty) is, according to Arendt, *emasculating* and *impotent*.

Returning to our now sequestered flute-girl, though perhaps less a sequestering than a relief from the homosocial sovereignty of Man, we can imagine her demonstrating her excellence among the women of the house. She individuates herself from her peers, all equal in their gendered inequality, as she musically interacts with them. She had been dreading performing yet another symposium, as the night prior had been so exhausting. The men had drunk on and on, requiring more vigorous flautistic services. But the women of the house relieved her of her exhaustion. Feeling her needs attended to, she felt an energy overcome her. Indeed, she *desired* to perform. New improvised melodies sprang from her, as her audience seemed truly to be in dialogue. And, just as Aristophanes told of the people of the Moon, she found herself enjoying the feminine body. This was their own space, despite the disparaging things Pausanias and the other men might have said about their vulgarity.

Though not quite the political space of the *agora*, might this feminine space also be a place of action? Might we, contra Adrienne Rich and Mary O’Brien, read Arendt with Mary Dietz and emphasize the “Arendtian triplet” labor/work/action rather than the problematic dichotomy of private/public?[[15]](#footnote-15) Judith Butler would say no:

[T]o work within these two forms of power, we have to think about bodies in a way that Arendt does not do, and we have to think about space as acting on us, even as we act within it, or even when sometimes our actions, considered plural or collective, bring it into being.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Re-reading the eroticism of the flute-girl brings the body into Arendtian action in a way that makes Butler’s amendment to Arendt unnecessary. Action already carries the body with it. Butler’s concern is that Arendt ignores the way in which power acts upon us. Upon our bodies. But, if we remember our Foucault, we know that we are never without power.

Bonnie Honig articulates a reading of Arendt that treats her public/private distinction as “an illicit constative, a constituting mark or text, calling out agonistically to be contested, augmented and amended.” We might read Arendt’s public not necessarily as a solidified place, such as the Greek *agora*, but rather “as a metaphor for a variety of (agonistic) spaces, both topographical and conceptual, that might occasion action.” Action could be thought of as “an event, an agonistic disruption of the ordinary […] that makes way for novelty and distinction, a site of resistance of the irresistible, a challenge to the normalizing rules that seek to constitute, govern, and control various behaviors.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Not to be confused with the hegemony of the social, where everything, and thus nothing, is political, Honig wants to say that nothing is *not* political. Action might happen anywhere, including ‘private’ spaces, and involve anything, including the body and its identity.

We might even enact a performative politics that treats identity performatively. Honig suggests a reading of Aredntian excellence not as “theatrical self-display” but “the quest for individuation and distinction against backgrounds of homogenization and normalization.”[[18]](#footnote-18) So our flute-girl might perform “not *for* an audience” but rather, despite her being sequestered away from the topography of the sovereign’s public, she might *perform* “for the self who in concert with others like herself gains individuation, and for others who are enabled to do the same by way of these shared, if also always conflicted, practices of support and struggle.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Is this not a counter-public?

Though Aristophanes was the comedian in residence, Socrates’ speech may have been the most humorous as he reappropriated the wisdom of Diotima, a foreign woman like our flute-girl. Socrates, in his hubris, thought he might be like a midwife. But instead of aiding in the birth of a new spontaneous life, he gave birth to what? Ideas? What escapism! Socrates, who was thought to be so wise, compared the sterility of philosophical discourse to the embodied and emotional anguish of a midwife? What did he know of the pain? The blood? The excrement? What did he know of consoling a soon to be mother under the guise of patriarchy?

Adriana Cavarero remarks that in the speech of Diotima, Socrates performs an originary matricide motivated by womb envy. By appropriating the image of the mother and her mid-wife, and abstracting it away from its female embodied form, Man is able to relegate women to a human sub-species and lay claim to patriarchal universality.[[20]](#footnote-20) The confluence of the security of *being* over feminine *appearing*, Augustine’s sovereign free will, and his anxiety over eroticism is best demonstrated by the politics of contemporary liberalism. [[21]](#footnote-21) Concerned with *being*, with security, the liberal state “must be concerned almost exclusively with the maintenance of life and the safeguarding of its interests.” Politics becomes household administration, motherhood becomes a duty for the preservation of the state, and sex is reduced to reproduction. Eroticism exits out the backdoor, along with the midwives as birth becomes medicalized. It is too bad that Socrates would only be a mid-wife for ideas, as women would come to need all the midwives they can get, only to get epidurals and C-sections.[[22]](#footnote-22)

But birth is our very savior. For “even when political life has become petrified and political action *impotent* to interrupt automatic processes” freedom enters as our “sheer capacity to begin.” Our freedom is related to our natality, the spontaneous miracle of our coming into this world. But this will remain forever in its nascent stage unless “action has created its own worldly space where it can come out of hiding, as it were, and make its appearance.”[[23]](#footnote-23) So we must not hold dear to the security and certainty offered us by Plato’s sovereignty, but must

[…] enter the public realm, not because of particular dangers which may lie in wait for us, but because we have arrived in a realm where the concern for life has lost its validity. Courage liberates men from their worry about life for the freedom of the world. Courage is indispensible because in politics not life but the world is at stake.[[24]](#footnote-24)

As the flute girl and her female friends laughed, and perhaps cried, at the appropriation and matricide of their own beloved Diotima, they heard the approaching of a drunken ruckus. The cries of a familiar voice resounded—another flute girl, perhaps even from the same village as the slave of the house of Agathon. Only this woman was slave to the house of Alcibiades, coerced to stay in the care of beautiful drunk. And with his calls for more wine, the enjoyable evening of our flute-girl is brought to a halt.[[25]](#footnote-25) Her services are, again, required.

But before that, the doctor prescribes Alicibiades to provide a speech on love.

Compelled only to sing the praises of the god-like Socrates, drunken Alcibiades brings the reddened cheeked Socrates to instruct him to “Hold your tongue.” Alcibiades retorts, “By god, don’t you dare deny it! I would never—*never*—praise anyone else with you around.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Eryximachus, desperate to save the sober evening from the blitzed newcomer, is quick to take advantage of the willingness of Alcibiades to talk on the subject of Socrates, hoping that the excitement and adrenaline will have a sobering effect. Grasping at what to say, Alcibiades perhaps catches the glimpse of the flutes. Under their influence, Alcibiades recalls the familiar myth of Athena and Marsyas. Ah-ha! Socrates appears as a satyr, enrapturing young men with his erotic, flute-like speech.

One can imagine the women’s eye’s rolling. Wasn’t this just like the appropriation and matricide of the midwife? Another abstraction of women’s ‘vulgar’ existence? One might picture the two flute-girls laughing with one another when Alcibiades explains:

Whether they are played by the greatest flautist or the meanest flute-girl, his melodies have in themselves the power to possess and so reveal those people who are ready for the god and his mysteries. That’s because his melodies are themselves divine.[[27]](#footnote-27)

For how could any *human* performance be divine? Even the most excellent flute-player, or speaker for that matter, is bound to make mistakes—they don’t have sovereign control! An audience is required, and some are better than others. Here we have another cooption of the embodied feminine and flight from the human. And from the very problems that sovereign politics creates—the forcing of these flute-girls to travel from one male-dominated symposium to another. Unable to freely perform *with* others, but instead forced to perform *for*—and yet scorned for their instrumental action. But as soon as Alcibiades had finished his sublimation of the flute-girl to the level of Socrates, another drunken group was at the gates and the sober symposium soon became a fully-fledged bacchanalia. Our flute-girl ceases to be judging spectator, and resumes her position as coerced entertainer.

This oppression is an inevitability of sovereign politics. It’s emphasis on the I-will, as opposed to the I-can, is the root of tyranny. Because of the I-will’s constant internal struggle, its paralyzing impotence, “the will-to-power turned at once into a will-to-oppression. […] It is why even today we almost automatically equate power with oppression or, at least, with rule over others.”[[28]](#footnote-28) With the transition from action to will-power, freedom ceased to be a freedom to do and became a freedom from constraint. [[29]](#footnote-29) But this, as figures such as Simone de Beauvoir have observed, is a freedom that is inherently unfree for it eliminates the freedom of others. Freedom from constraint is an attempt to control *everything*, which is to control nothing.[[30]](#footnote-30)

It is sovereign politics that produced the disdain for the flute-player. Coerced into inequality. Oppressed. Unable to act. And so it is to the ‘sequestered’ realm that our flute-girl might act. But this erotic element is always present within conventionally ‘public’ action. Action is uncontrolled. It is erotic. Current notions of politics repress this erotic element. But “If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Though this creative, albeit speculative, Arendtian re-reading of the *Symposium* has perhaps raised more questions than it has answered, I hope what has emerged is that renouncing sovereignty would entail more than Arendt was willing to admit. It would be to renounce our current notions of violent dominating masculinity. It would to be to reenable and facilitate possibilities for eroticism other than its reproductive role. Women would no longer be *expected* to be mothers for the sake of the state, but would be able to choose to bring forth new life. It would allow for possibilities of erotic pleasure, perhaps in a Foucaultian direction. So, what would it look like to “renounce sovereignty”? What would it look like to give up our view of masculinity and femininity? It seems that Arendt, with this rereading of our flute-girl, can be seen to offer resources to a heterosocial world of plurality and action. One with eroticism and “sequestered life” built into our very understanding of the political. This is a view that must be resuscitated, even if Arendt did not know it.

1. Who, ironically, would prove to be an underwhelming orator anyway. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See especially Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1991; Martin F. Kilmer, *Greek Erotica*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1993; Peter Wilson, “The *Aulos* in Athens,” *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*, Eds. Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999): 58-95. Also Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985; Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, 3rd ed., Balitmore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005; Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, New York: Schocken Books, 1975; Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Lisa Auanger, *Among Women: From the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002; and Amy Richlin, *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*, New York: Oxford UP, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Perhaps of the same origin as the foolish Thracian girl that once laughed at Thales. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?,” *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin, 2000): 446. She makes this point as well in *The Human Condition*, “It was precisely these occupations—healing, flute-playing, play-acting—which furnished ancient thinking with examples for the highest and greatest activities of man” (HC 207); “The point is that Plato and, to a lesser degree, Aristotle, who thought craftsmen not even worthy of full-fledge citizenship, were the first to propose handling political matters and ruling political bodies in the mode of fabrication. This seeming contradiction clearly indicates the depth of the authentic perplexities inherent in the human capacity for action and the strength of the temptation to eliminate its risks and dangers by introducing into the web of human relationships the much more reliable and solid categories inherent in activities with which we confront nature and build the world of the human artifice” (HC 230). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Aristotle, *Politics* viii.6 1341a18-1341b19 in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, New York: Random House, 1941. There was also thought to be an inverse relation between being an excellent flute-player and being an excellent man. See Wilson, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Wilson. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is confirmed by a variety of art history sources as well as Aristophanes’ comedies. See especially Peter Wilson, Martin Kilmer, and Jeffrey Henderson. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As Arendt explains in *The Human Condition*, “It is this insistence on the living deed and the spoken word as the greatest achievements of which human beings are capable that was conceptualized in Aristotle’s notion of *energia* (‘actuality’), with which he designated all activities that do not pursue an end (are *ateleis*) and leave no work behind (no *par’autas erga*), but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself.” The footnote of this passage is also illuminating: “For the concept of *energeia*  see *Nicomachean Ethics*  1094a1-5; *Physics* 201b31;  *On the Soul* 417a16, 431a6. The examples most frequently used are seeing and flute playing]” (HC 206). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Arendt, 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Arendt, 449. Also see *The Human Condition*, “The Platonic wish to substitute making for acting in order to bestow upon the realm of human affairs the solidity inherent in work and fabrication becomes most apparent where it touches the very center of his philosophy, the doctrine of ideas. When Plato was not concerned with political philosophy (as in the *Symposium* and elsewhere), he describes the ideas as what ‘shines forth most’ (*ekphanestaton*) and therefore as variation of the beautiful. Only in the *Republic* were the ideas transformed into standards, measurements, and rules of behavior, all of which are variations or derivations of the idea of the ‘good’ in the Greek sense of the word, that is, of the ‘good for’ or of fitness. This transformation was necessary to apply the doctrine of ideas to politics, and it is essentially for a political purpose, the purpose of eliminating the character of frailty from human affairs, that Plato found it necessary to declare the good, and not the beautiful, to be the highest idea” (HC 225-26). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Arendt, 455. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Arendt, 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Arendt, 451. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Arendt, 452. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mary Dietz, “Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt,” *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” *Transversal, europäisches institut für progressive kulturpolitik*, (Sept., 2011) <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en> accessed 27 May 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Bonnie Honig, “Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity,” *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): 146-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Honig, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Honig, 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, Trans. Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio and Áine O’Healy (New York: Routledge, 1995): 94 and 103. I should also say Cavarero inspired the style of this present paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Arendt, 448. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Rebecca Kukla, *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005; and Amy Mullin, *Reconceiving Pregnancy and Childcare: Ethics, Experience, and Reproductive Labor*, New York: Cambridge UP 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Arendt, 458-459. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Arendt, 448. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Or so we might speculate, though it was well-known that Alcibiades disdained the flute since his childhood. See Wilson, 90 and 91. Also, the text is ambiguous on where the second flute-girl goes after the entrance of Alcibiades, but given the final inebriated trajectory of the text it may be assumed that she and the rest of his party remain with him for the duration of the speech and the rest of the evening. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Plato, *Symposium* 214D. Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Arendt, 453. My emphasis [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Arendt, 454. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. “Where men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the ‘general will’ of an organized group” (Arendt, 455). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Arendt, 455. Also see *The Human Condition*, “If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth—and not, as the tradition since Plato holds, because of man’s limited strength, which makes him depend upon the help of others” (HC 234). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)