



Melody and Rhythm at Plato's *Symposium* 187d2

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NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

MELODY AND RHYTHM AT PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM* 187D2

Eryximachus' speech in Plato's *Symposium* introduces a principle of interaction between opposites, governed by a dual-natured force of attraction, Eros, which can be both noble (καλόν) and shameful (αἰσχρόν, 186d1). Eryximachus uses this principle to explain a variety of phenomena, from medicine to meteorology to music. When discussing music he makes the following claim (*Symp.* 187c5–d3):

καὶ ἐν μὲν γε αὐτῇ τῇ συστάσει ἁρμονίας τε καὶ ῥυθμοῦ οὐδὲν χαλεπὸν τὰ ἐρωτικά διαγιγνώσκειν, οὐδὲ ὁ διπλοῦς ἔρωσ ἐνταῦθα πῶ ἔστιν· ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴν δέη πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καταχρῆσθαι ῥυθμῶ τε καὶ ἁρμονίᾳ ἢ ποιούντα, ὃ δὴ μελοποιίαν καλοῦσιν, ἢ χρώμενον ὀρθῶς τοῖς πεποιημένοις μέλεσσι τε καὶ μέτροις, ὃ δὴ παιδεία ἐκλήθη, ἐνταῦθα δὴ καὶ χαλεπὸν καὶ ἀγαθοῦ δημιουργοῦ δεῖ.

In the constitution of harmony and rhythm as such it is not difficult to diagnose love-matters; the double Eros is not present at all there. But when it is necessary to apply rhythm and harmony to human matters, whether in production, which they call “music-making,” or in the correct use of the melodies and meters already produced, which is called “education,” here it is difficult and we are in need of a good craftsman.¹

While the gist of this passage is reasonably clear, the manuscripts are, shall we say, unharmonious. Manuscripts B and T record “μέλεσσι τε καὶ μέτροις” at 187d2; this reading is followed by the OCT, Schanz, and Budé texts as well as most translations.² But manuscript W has a different wording, “μέλεσσι τε καὶ ῥυθμοῖς.” Despite the countervailing consensus in favor of the μέτροις reading, I believe the ῥυθμοῖς reading is the correct one.

There are three types of evidence we may use to test which of our two readings is preferable: the authority of the manuscripts, Plato's style and diction, and the logic of the passage. The manuscripts, however, can tell us very little, primarily because the relationship between B, T, and W is controversial and the relative authority of each manuscript largely speculative.³ Hence I will focus here exclusively on the style and substance of the passage. Both, I argue, favor reading ῥυθμοῖς over μέτροις.

Let us begin with the patterns of usage found in Plato's works. When Plato demonstrates a preference for using one word over another, this gives us some reason to think

1. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

2. Burnet 1901; Lamb 1925; Robin 1966; Vicaire 2002. These readings are followed in the translations of Allen 1993; Dover 1980; Jowett 1982; Howatson and Sheffield 2008; Nehamas and Woodruff 1989; Rosen 1987; Rowe 1998; Vicaire 1989. Rowe, however, notes that “The argument so far has referred to music without words, and that is how d1–4 must primarily be taken” (1998, 150).

3. On which see Bluck 1964; Burnet 1914; 1920; Dodds 1959; Duke et al. 1995; Greene 1937; Nicoll 1966; and Rijksbaron 2007.

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that his preferred term is correct in a particular passage. Such is the case here: both the *Symposium* and the broader Platonic corpus show that Plato is much more likely to write ῥυθμοῖς than μέτροις. ῥυθμός and its cognates occur four times in Eryximachus' speech outside of 187d2 (187b7, c5, c6, d1), but μέτρον does not occur anywhere else in his speech, and only once elsewhere in the *Symposium*. In fact, it appears that Plato very rarely uses the word "μέτρον" in the context of discussing music or poetry. Plato typically reserves this word to refer to "measurement"⁴ or "measure/mean,"⁵ and most of this discussion occurs in a decidedly nonmusical context.⁶ When Plato does use the word "μέτρον" in a musical or poetic context, it is almost always used simply to differentiate poetry from prose: the phrases "ἐν μέτρῳ" and "ἄνευ μέτρον" occur repeatedly in the Platonic corpus, often together.⁷ Two other uses (*Grg.* 502c6; *Resp.* 601a) specify that prose is what is left over when meter, rhythm, and melody or harmony are removed. Moreover, variations of the phrase μέλεσι τε καὶ ῥυθμοῖς are much more common than μέλεσι τε καὶ μέτροις, even when we take into account that rhythm itself is mentioned more frequently. Μέλος and ῥυθμός are grouped together, on my account, at least eleven times.⁸ There are also repeating pairings of ῥυθμός and ἄρμονία or μουσική.⁹ But as far as I can tell, μέτρον is almost always grouped with μέλος only when it is included in a larger list including ῥυθμός or ἄρμονία.¹⁰ The one exception is *Republic* 607d4, where the line reads "in lyric or in some other meter" (ἐν μέλει ἢ τινι ἄλλῳ μέτρῳ). But here it is obvious that μέλος refers to a specific kind of meter, not "melody," so this passage is not a counterexample to Plato's tendency to pair μέλος and ῥυθμός but not μέλος and μέτρον. Of course, the *Symposium* could be the exception to this trend, but it is more likely that Plato would follow his usual habit of pairing μέλος and ῥυθμός here as well.

The line from *Republic* just quoted above is one of the few examples of Plato using μέτρον to refer to meter. The second use occurs at *Laws* 810e7–10, where the Athenian Stranger says that the poets have "many verses of hexameter and trimeter and of all other meters discussed" (ἑξαμέτρων πάμπολλοι καὶ τριμέτρων καὶ πάντων δὴ τῶν λεγομένων μέτρων). To see how anomalous these uses are in Plato, compare them to *Republic* 399e8–400e4, where Socrates discusses the metrical theory of Damon. Though Plato refers to specific meters in this passage (enoplion, dactylic, heroic, as well as specific kinds of feet like iambs and trochees), he never uses the word μέτρον to refer to them. Instead, he uses words such as ποῦς and βᾶσις instead, or ῥῆμα and λόγος, or indeed ῥυθμός itself (399e8, 400c3, 400d2).¹¹ Hence Plato would be more likely to use ῥυθμός even if he were writing what we would translate as "meter." This does not

4. *Phlb.* 25b1, 56a5, 56b4; *Plt.* 269c6; *Resp.* 621a6, 8; *Leg.* 643c7, 819d1, 848c4, 947b2; *Prm.* 140b6–d8; *Tht.* passim.

5. E.g., *Resp.* 450b6, 504c1–3; *Cra.* 386a1; *Leg.* 691c1–92c9, 747d10; *Plt.* 284b1; *Phlb.* 66a6; *Ti.* 38b2, 68b6.

6. Another use, *Phlb.* 56a5, is in the context of music but refers to the measurement of pitch rather than meter.

7. *Leg.* 886c1; *Phdr.* 258d11, 277e7; *Resp.* 380c2, 393d8, 607d.

8. *Grg.* 502c6; *Ion* 534a3; *Leg.* 655a5, 656c4, 669c3–11, 669e1, 670d4, 673d2–4; *Resp.* 398d2.

9. *Hp. mi.* 368d4; *Ion* 534a3; *Leg.* 653e5–a4, 655a1–5, 661c7, 664e9–65a4, 669e3, 670b2, 8–10, 670d4–7, 670e1–6, 672d2, 798d9–10, 800d2, 802e2–3, 810b7, 812c1, 835a8; *Prt.* 326b1; *Resp.* 397b7, 397c1, 397c4, 398d2, 398d8, 399e9–10, 400d3, 401d7, 442a2, 522a6, 601a8; *Ti.* 47d7.

10. *Grg.* 502c6; *Leg.* 669d7.

11. See also *Leg.* 656c3–6, 800d2–3; *Resp.* 601a8. Barker (1984, 134 n. 36) discusses in some detail what the different rhythms Plato mentions in this passage amount to.

quite entail that *ῥυθμός* means “meter” in Eryximachus’ speech, but it does show that it is likelier for the word *ῥυθμοῖς* to appear at 187d2.¹²

Finally, we may turn to the only other occurrence of the term *μέτρον* in the *Symposium*. At 205c6 Diotima notes that the kind of creation concerning music and meters (*τὸ περὶ τὴν μουσικὴν καὶ τὰ μέτρα*) shares a name, *ποίησις*, with creation in the arts generally.¹³ At first sight, this line may appear to corroborate reading *μέτροις* at 187d, since Diotima’s claim jointly mentions music and meter. But this is not so, for two reasons. First, Eryximachus’ claim at 187d2 is about education, not composition. When he discusses *ποίησις*, he uses the phrase *ῥυθμῶ τε καὶ ἁρμονίᾳ*. So even if Diotima uses *τὰ μέτρα* in a way that matches the *μέτροις* reading of 187d, Diotima is making a different point, and so we cannot straightforwardly infer that the two passages should have similar diction. Second, the *ῥυθμοῖς* reading of 187d2 is compatible with Diotima’s claim, because Diotima is making a distinction that requires her to use *τὰ μέτρα* but would be obfuscated otherwise. Diotima’s overall point is that a single word, *ποίησις*, applies to creation in general and to a specific kind of creation, that is, to production of any sort and to the production of music and poetry in particular; likewise, the name *ἔρωσις* applies to both the desire for good things in general and to a specific kind of desire (205d1–8). In singling out music and poetry as a branch of the more general act of *ποίησις*, Diotima is accurately noting that the same word applies to the creation of music with or without words. If she had said *τὸ περὶ τὴν μουσικὴν καὶ τὸν ῥυθμόν* instead, she could have implied that only musical composition gets the name “*ποίησις*,” which would be inaccurate (cf. Arist. *Poet.* 1447a82–b24). But this does not erase the distinction between musical and nonmusical composition which Plato elsewhere maintains when using the term *μέτρον*. Even here we may read *τὰ μέτρα* as referring specifically to what English speakers would call poetry, as distinguished from music.¹⁴

All in all, then, it would appear that reading *μέτροις* at 187d2 goes against Plato’s standard usage of the term. It would not be completely implausible to think that Plato departs from his normal style here, since the passage is written in Eryximachus’ voice and the *Symposium* is one of several places where Plato demonstrates his ability to reproduce the styles of others. But as it is still Plato writing the speech, and the speech does not seem to depart from Plato’s usual diction in any other noticeable way, the more plausible path is to take the option that is consistent with the rest of the corpus, and read 187d2 as *μέλεσι τε καὶ ῥυθμοῖς*.

An objection can be raised here, one which segues into the second source of evidence for adjudicating between our variant readings. One might reasonably think that Plato’s

12. I argue shortly that the logic of the *Symposium* passage suggests a contrast between rhythm and meter. There is some tension between this claim and Plato’s willingness to use *ῥυθμός* to refer to both. But we must distinguish between linguistic and philosophical evidence. Linguistically, Plato is much more willing to use *ῥυθμός* than *μέτρον*, even when he is discussing meter rather than (or in addition to) rhythm. But philosophically there is a difference between the two, at least in the *Symposium* passage. And so it can be simultaneously true that (1) Plato sometimes uses *ῥυθμός* to refer to what we would call meter, and that (2) in some contexts, Plato distinguishes rhythm from meter, using *ῥυθμός* only to mean rhythm.

13. Note that Nehamas and Woodruff (1989) translate this line as “the part the Muses give us with melody and rhythm.”

14. I should also stress that, even if we insist on taking 205c6 to agree with the *μέτροις* reading of 187d2, this one occurrence does not outweigh the body of evidence canvassed above which suggests that the *ῥυθμοῖς* reading is correct.

standard diction only holds in standard circumstances. Plato may need to abandon his normal style in order to make certain points. And so we must also look at the substance of the passage in question, to see whether ῥυθμοῖς or μέτροις makes better sense in context.

The basic idea in Eryximachus' speech is that Eros is able to foster concordance between opposites to create good results, be they health, affection from the gods, or the literal harmony of music. Different pairs of opposing elements are relevant in different fields; for instance, somatic health is a balance between hot/cold, sweet/bitter, and wet/dry (186e6–7). Eryximachus tells us that there are two pairs of opposites relevant to music: high and low (ὄξις καὶ βαρύς) and fast and slow (ταχύς καὶ βραδύς). High and low are explicitly identified with harmony (187b3), while rhythm is defined as the agreement of fast and slow (187c1–2).¹⁵ The basic elements of meter, however, are not fast and slow, but rather long and short (μακρός τε καὶ βραχύς), as Plato mentions at *Republic* 400b1–c6 when discussing Damon. These elements are absent from the *Symposium*, and Eryximachus is careful to make clear exactly which elements he has in mind throughout (e.g., 186e6–7, 188a3–4). An abrupt introduction of a concept requiring new and unarticulated elements does not fit the tenor of Eryximachus' speech. One might respond to this argument by suggesting that long/short and fast/slow amount to the same thing, but this is unlikely. Long/short is a matter of the quality of a syllable's duration, and it does not map onto tempo.¹⁶ While long syllables would presumably be slow (i.e., take more time to pronounce) relative to short syllables, the speed of either group could vary.¹⁷ For example, a spondee has two long syllables, — —, but it could be spoken quickly or slowly depending on context. A clear articulation of this phenomenon is given by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a theorist in the first century B.C.E., who wrote, "There is not one nature of long and short syllables, rather some are longer than longs and some shorter than shorts."¹⁸ While Plato never gives us an articulation of the difference between fast/slow and long/short, he does appear to endorse such a distinction at *Republic* 400c1–3 (cf. *Grg.* 502c5–7).

In addition to lacking the proper elements to make sense in Eryximachus' speech, meter also fails to exhibit the right kind of concordance. Greek meter displays a wide variety of combinations, with either odd or even numbers of units and combinations of metric feet, for instance, the "balanced" dactylic —UU versus the "unbalanced" iamb U—. The number of possible metrical arrangements is staggering, and the possible patterns reveal few constraints or principles that would indicate that all μέτρα are concordant in any meaningful way.¹⁹ Socrates' incredulity at how Damon could claim to make the arsis and thesis (ἄνω καὶ κάτω) equal to short and long (βραχύ τε καὶ μακρόν)

15. This view is endorsed by Plato at *Leg.* 664e8–a3. The same idea is found in the treatise *Introduction to the Study of Rhythm* §11, written by the eleventh-century scholar Michael Psellus and likely based on Aristoxenus' *Elementa Rhythmica*, in Pearson 1990, 24–25. West (1992, 158) mentions other pairs of opposites typically associated with rhythm. For more on the connection between medicine and music, including in the *Symposium*, see Lippman 1964, 34–36.

16. See Devine and Stephens 1994, 98–100; Maas 1962, 36–38; Raven 1962, 21–24 (esp. 2.13).

17. This phenomenon is discussed in Aristoxenus' *Elementa Rhythmica* 2.4, with Pearson's 1990 commentary at xxxii–xxxvii, 49–50, and 63.

18. Dion. Hal. *Comp.* 15, quoted from Roberts 1910, 151–53.

19. See Raven 1962 for an accessible overview of the possibilities, and Maas 1962, 24–32 for an exposition of how and when these possibilities tend to be used. West (1982) gives a useful introduction to the use of these possibilities over time.

suggests that Plato would not be able to guess how to make meter concordant either (*Resp.* 400b4–c5).²⁰ A similar line of thought is found in Aristoxenus, who goes to some length to distinguish “harmonious” arrangements from unharmonious arrangements based on the ratio of arsis to thesis.²¹ Though several meters count as unharmonious on Aristoxenus’ system, they still count as meters in a way that, say, discordant notes would not count as a chord.

We can look at Greek music theory more generally to see this distinction repeated. Meter and rhythm were categorized under separate disciplines, grammar and music respectively.²² Corresponding to this distinction is a division of method, which Plato appears to endorse at *Republic* 530e1–31c4: metricians tended to be empiricists, focused on collecting and cataloguing instances of various meters, while rhythmicists were typically rationalists interested in the theoretical analysis of mathematical proportions, much as in harmonics.²³ The latter is clearly closer to Eryximachus’ own approach in the *Symposium*.

This brings us to the second feature of Eryximachus’ speech: the use of music in education. The reason that Eros is important in education, Eryximachus argues, is because it allows us both to gratify those who are orderly (κόσμιος) and to make those who are not yet orderly more so (187d4–6). The idea here is that there is a kind of isomorphism between music and soul, such that one can use harmonious music, where high/low and fast/slow are in concord, to engender psychic harmony. We are not given the details of how this works in the *Symposium*, but *Laws* appears to adopt a similar view; here we are told that the young are unable to control their movements, and that orderly movement and sound, explicitly named “rhythm” and “harmony,” are used both as a model for orderliness and as a charm to entice people to take pleasure in orderliness (664e3–65c7; cf. *Resp.* 401d5–402a4; *Ti.* 47c4–e2).²⁴ Plato also has Protagoras describe this phenomenon in his discussion of how education works (*Prt.* 326a4–b6); here poetry is studied only for its content, while music is studied for the effects that rhythm and harmony have when engrained in the soul. Aristophanes has his Socrates mention the same phenomenon in his *Clouds* at 635–53. Presumably Eryximachus has a similar effect in mind, as he expressly notes the importance of engendering the right pleasures without giving rise to intemperance (187e1–3). In both texts, the mechanism by which this is accomplished is rhythm and harmony. Hence we should expect at 187d2 to see ῥυθμοῖς rather than the heretofore-mentioned μέτρος, which, notably, is also absent from these parallel discussions.²⁵ Not only is meter absent from the discussion of how education works, it is not easy to see how it would fit the context. On this theory education works through a kind of isomorphism, where the physical properties of music engender themselves in the soul. But there is no reason to think there is an isomorphism between meter and soul as is there is with rhythm and soul. We are given no indication that Plato thinks the soul

20. For a quick overview of arsis and thesis, and the problems in accurately interpreting these concepts, see West 1994, 133–35. They are discussed in the same terms in Aristoxenus *Elementa Rhythmica* 2.20–21.

21. *Elementa Rhythmica* 2.30–36, with Pearson’s commentary at xxxviii–xlvi.

22. Schofield reports that this division is present in Plato, Aristophanes, Aristotle, Xenophon, and the Pseudo-Platonic author of *Theages* (2011, 231). Several other relevant sources are cited at Mathiesen 1985, 162. Cf. Crocker 1958, 8; Sachs 1953, 138; West 1994, 243.

23. Crocker 1958, 7; Sachs 1953, 138; West 1982, 20; West 1992, 233–45.

24. See West 1992, 157–59 for discussion of this phenomenon outside of Plato.

25. We do, however, see μέτρα used at *Leg.* 669d7 to describe poetry without musical accompaniment, which, as we discussed above, matches Plato’s usual style.

has long and short elements or movements that can be brought into concordance via the long and short elements of meter.

The putative role of rhythm or meter in education gives rise to an important objection.²⁶ The passage where our manuscripts disagree draws a contrast between the production of music and the utilization of music. To maintain this contrast, the referent of 187d2 must be the finished product utilized in education. One might worry that using *ῥυθμός* to refer to both the materials and the finished product could elide this distinction. But BT's reading would use *μέλεσι τε καὶ μέτροις* to refer to something like "songs and poems" that are composed using harmony and rhythm. This worry, if justified, is a strong point in favor of the *μέτροις* reading. However, I do not think this objection ultimately succeeds. It can be rejoined on both stylistic and substantive grounds. Substantively, the objection fails because meter is no better than rhythm at filling the required role. Partly this is because, as I have argued above, meters are neither properly concordant nor properly isomorphic with the soul, and therefore are not the right sort of thing to use in education. But it is also because meter is not in fact analogous to melody the way the objection would require. Meters are not finished products, but rather structural elements; they are themselves the pieces out of which poems are constructed. For the present objection to work, we would need a clear reference to a finished product, something like *αἰοδή* or *τὰ ἔπη* (song or verses) instead, as we see at *Republic* 607a5–6. In other words, this objection is self-undermining, because reading *μέτροις* at 187d2 would also fail to maintain the contrast that the objection insists on.

Stylistically, we have already seen that Plato often uses *ῥυθμός* to mean what we would call "meter," usually reserving *μέτρα* for poetry without music. If Plato is following this tendency in the *Symposium*, then *ῥυθμοῖς* would not blur the relevant distinction between production and utilization after all, because the same term can apply to both. That is, "rhythms" can be constructed out of rhythms and harmonies, just as melodies can. Aristoxenus, for instance, explicitly refers to rhythmic compositions (*ῥυθμοποιία*) as parallel to melodic compositions (*μελοποιία*), and he repeatedly stresses the difference between the possible rhythms available to a song and the rhythm that is created when the song is written and/or performed.²⁷ We do not quite see this usage explicitly in Plato (*Leg.* 669e1 suggests it, but not definitively), but we do see the "composition of harmonies" (*τὰς τῶν ἁρμονιῶν συστάσεις*) at *Laws* 812c1, and given how frequently harmony and rhythm are paired by Plato in the *Symposium* and elsewhere, this at least suggests that he would be comfortable with the idea of composition of rhythms as well. This would mean that *μέλεσι τε καὶ ῥυθμοῖς* would make perfect sense as something like "tunes and cadences," where "cadences" refers to a composed work (as, e.g., with marching percussion or military bands). If this is right, then the above objection fails.

Our survey of the available evidence shows that reading *ῥυθμοῖς* at *Symposium* 187d2 is preferable to the *μέτροις* found in the texts and translations. Plato almost always uses *ῥυθμός* rather than *μέτρον* in musical contexts, even when he means to talk about meter; the exception is when he refers to poetry without music, which is not under discussion in Eryximachus' speech. Nor does *μέτροις* fit the substance of the

26. I am indebted to an anonymous referee for helping me see the strength of this objection.

27. *Elements of Rhythm* 2.13, in Pearson 1990, with commentary at 56–57.

passage: meter does not fit into Eryximachus' discussion of either the basic elements of music or the use of music in education. Hence I submit that the $\acute{\rho}\theta\mu\omicron\iota\varsigma$ reading is more likely to be correct, consensus of the editors and translators of the *Symposium* notwithstanding.²⁸

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