

The first two books of Plato's *Laws*, where the Athenian Stranger argues at length for the value of wine consumption, are often treated as marginal to the rest of the work. However, in this paper I aim to show that this early part of the *Laws* is highly relevant to Plato's political project. I argue that, by advocating the establishment of the well-conducted symposium as an institution of the *polis* (e.g. 640c-d), Plato is consistently appropriating a practice of the aristocratic drinking-club, the *hetaireia*. His goal in doing so is to employ the pleasure of wine for its instrumental value in promoting friendship between the citizens (note *philia* in 640c-d, *philo*i in 671e).

This interpretation would address two existing questions: On the one hand, Christopher Bobonich (2002) has seen in the *polis* of Plato's *Laws* an absence of intimate bonds between the citizens of Magnesia that would incentivize cooperation. On the other hand, a further interpretive crux is the reason for the pre-eminence of sensory pleasure in the *Laws*, especially when it is presented as beneficial (see esp. Stalley 1983; Bobonich 2002; Bravo 2003). I suggest that this is especially prominent in the first two books of the *Laws*: the Athenian Stranger clarifies at the outset (and maintains throughout) that the discussion is going to be “not simply about the drinking of wine (*oinou peri poseōs*), but about drunkenness itself (*methēs de autēs peri*)” (637d). The rationale behind this proposition is unclear: The Athenian initially argues for certain specific benefits of wine (it provides a means of learning to control indulgence as well as a test of character; see Tecuşan 1990). However, he subsequently dismisses these as secondary (652a-b) and later intriguingly points out that “one hesitates to mention the greatest gift that [wine] provides in front of the many, because, once it has been said, men perceive and understand it in the wrong way” (672a). What is this “greatest gift”?

By considering the shared experience of pleasure that the *hetairoi* take at their symposia as Plato's model for the merits of wine drinking, we can successfully address the above issues. More specifically, Plato is drawing on both the model of the idealized symposium of the archaic *hetaireiai* as depicted in lyric poetry (note how the discussion is introduced with the poetry of Theognis, 630a) as well as that of the *hetaireiai* as they existed in democratic Athens. The latter posed a well-known problem for the Athenian community: Because of their small size and exclusivity, *hetaireiai* were thought to enjoy a high degree of cohesion and thus be potentially destabilizing for the *polis* (see e.g. Strauss 1986; Hansen 1987; Murray 1990). By publicly institutionalizing the private symposium (esp. 673e-674c), Plato is preempting the formation of such subversive subgroups in his ideal community, while at the same time appropriating the benefits of their *modus operandi* for the community's advantage.

The *Laws* is programmatically concerned with the internal unity of the community and the avoidance of *stasis* (628b-c, again mentioning the need for *philia* in this context). According to the present reading, in devoting significant space to the discussion of wine, Plato is not digressing from this concern for social cohesion, but instead offers a solution borrowed from Greek tradition but reconfigured for his philosophical and political purposes.