

The dearth of cults of Eros in Athens was noted by Euripides (*Hipp.* 538ff) and Plato (*Symp.* 189c) and, although it has been conceded that the love-god's official worship was rare, Eros is generally thought to have been established as a cult deity in early times (Fasce 1977; Schachter 1981; Calame 1983). The scholars' assumption for the early cultic veneration of Eros is based on two late sources, Plutarch's *Amatorius* (748F) and Pausanias' *Description of Greece* (IX.27.1).

Not a cult-god originally, Eros appears to have been especially honored by the Thespians. By the second century BCE they were celebrating the Erotidaea, a festival in honor of Eros, which was held along with the Mousaea every four years (Paus. 1.30.1; Athen. 13.609d; cf. Plut. *Amat.* 763F). Pausanias declares ignorance of the cult *aition* for the celebration of Eros, while Conon ascribes the celebration of the god to Narcissus' love affair at Thespieae (*FGrH* 26F XXIV). Plutarch, on the other hand, is noticeably reticent about the Erotidaea, the very festival which occasioned his visit to the town of Thespieae and triggered, to some extent at least, the debate on *eros* that he and his friends had on Mount Helicon. It is only natural to assume that Plutarch, a native Chaeronean, steeped in the traditions of Boeotia, must have known different accounts of the origins and activities surrounding the cult of Eros at Thespieae (756CD).

There are some clues as to the actual events of the festival and the cultic character of the Thespian Eros in Plutarch's *Amatorius*. The presence of *kitharoidoi* at the Erotidaea suggests the association of the festival with musical contests, a component that it shared, at least occasionally, with the Mousaea, while the offering of public and private sacrifices and prayers to Eros (749B, 769D) points to the association of the cult of Eros, at least in Plutarch's time, with the prosperity of recently married couples. In all likelihood, Thespieae became especially popular as a place of worship not only for new brides, but also for a wide range of pilgrims seeking divine favour for their love affairs. And although there is no mention in the *Amatorius* of offerings for other erotic purposes, it seems reasonable to suppose that the Erotidaea may have included festivities of the deity in all his aspects and spheres of influence, both heterosexual and homoerotic. The nature of the debate on the merits of homosexual and heterosexual *eros*, the recurring associations of Eros with homoerotic relations in the *gymnasium* and the *palaestra*, but also with hetaeric love (753D-F; 759E), as well as the presence of the three statues (Eros, Phryne and Aphrodite) in the shrine of Eros argue in favour of this interpretation.

Furthermore, the cultic nature of the festival may be gleaned from the 'drama' which unfolds during the debate on *eros* at the time of the festival. Although it need not mirror corresponding ritual practices in the Erotidaea, the 'drama' does contain motifs which can be seen as reflecting the ritual fabric of the festival. A number of inscriptions which provide some information on the athletic programme of the festival and date from the 2nd cent. BCE to the 3rd cent. CE may, indeed, suggest the existence of maturation rituals for children and adolescents at the festival. A combined examination of the 'initiator drama' which frames the philosophical dialogue and the debate on *eros* may be more revealing about the ritual profile of the festival than what we might have initially expected and may also provide some answers to the attempts made by moralists-philosophers during the Graeco-Roman era to undermine the traditional erotic ideology and along with it the erotic texture of the Erotidaea festival.