

Rebecca RESINSKI

Before and Beyond Love: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and Plato's *Symposium*

Hedwig is born Hansel. In East Berlin, he meets Luther, an American officer who wants to marry him and bring him to the States. Undergoing an operation, Hansel becomes Hedwig, only to be deserted by Luther in Kansas. There, Hedwig becomes a musician and cultivates a lover/collaborator named Tommy who also leaves her--and climbs to stardom with her tunes.

When John Cameron Mitchell began collaborating with Stephen Trask on *Hedwig*, he asked Trask to write a song based on Aristophanes' speech from Plato's *Symposium*. Trask composed "The Origin of Love," a song retelling Aristophanes' story. When Hedwig sings the song in the film, cartoons render Aristophanes' tale mythical in quality, and the inclusion of Norse and Egyptian gods conveys a feeling of universality. The splitting of the ur-humans is made analogous to the separation of mother and child, and eros is understood as fundamental alienation. Two of the cartoon's split figures become a tattoo for Hedwig, an emblem of her search to find her lost half. Hedwig's body bears another witness to her quest: her "angry inch," neither penis nor vagina, an inverse of the primal wound in Aristophanes' story.

After Luther's desertion, Hedwig believes that she has found her other half in Tommy. The audience, however, suspects that Tommy is no complement to Hedwig, and Hedwig comes to realize that she doesn't need him because she already incorporates what he represented. At the film's end, Hedwig leaves behind her feminine accoutrements and walks into the world--naked, androgynous, and complete. Her tattoo transforms into a token of unity, suggesting that the self is completed not by another, but through internal discovery. Lack, the motive power of eros, is gone. Hedwig is beyond gender--and beyond love as conceived in Aristophanes' story.

In the *Symposium*, Socrates' conception of eros transcends Aristophanes': humans lack not their other half but knowledge of the good and beautiful; Socrates' eros is the desire to attain sight of these pure forms. Although the desired object is transferred beyond humans, Socrates' notion of desire retains an element of loss. Like Socrates, Hedwig moves beyond Aristophanes' conception of desire, but does so by eliminating the idea of loss and locating wholeness within the self. *Hedwig* revises both Aristophanes and Socrates: humans are whole, not halved, and they do not need to aspire to a non-human, transcendent realm to achieve unity and knowledge.

Hedwig and the speeches of Plato's *Symposium* provoke a comparison of their contexts of creation. The *Symposium* speeches are delivered at a gathering from which women have been banned, and *Hedwig* developed from drag performances at a New York club. In both venues, female characteristics are assumed by males--metaphorically (Halperin 1990) or physically--thus rendering females superfluous. Does *Hedwig*, growing out of a male homoerotic environment, exclude females from its scope as the *Symposium* seems to? Not necessarily. For the inclusion of the character Yitzhak (played by actress Miriam

Shor) intimates that the issues of gender and desire broached in this film are alien to neither males nor females, women nor men.