

ALCIBIADES ΠΟΛΥΤΡΟΠΟΣ: SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHER AND TRAGIC HERO?*

Abstract. Alcibiades and Socrates: oil and water, never to mix? Many previous scholars have thought so, finding Alcibiades of interest only as a failed philosophical *exemplum*, but this article suggests that, at least in the *Symposium*, Plato presents Alcibiades as the figure in the dialogue closest to Socrates in philosophical attainment. The claim is supported through a series of comparisons, drawn from the dialogue itself and from other ancient sources, particularly Thucydides. Alcibiades can be read as similar to Socrates both in his greatness and in his destiny: to be destroyed by the city that both reared him and underappreciated him. Such a reading opens wider historiographical and even historical perspectives.

Introduction

The name of Alcibiades—brilliant Athenian general and statesman, impious free-liver, traitor, patriot—is inextricably linked with the history of the Peloponnesian War, and opinion on him is as sharply divided among modern scholars as it was among contemporary Athenians and later Greeks. Indeed, Alcibiades’ perceived ambiguity offers a starting point for the claims of this article, which examines the two main characterisations that scholars have posited for the Alcibiades of Plato’s *Symposium*, that of philosophical failure and of unsettling critic of Socrates’ and Diotima’s views of love. I propose a third way: in contrast to these two views, I suggest that Plato portrays Alcibiades as one of Socrates’ great successes, as an unusually promising student of Socratic philosophy just before his career took a turn for the worse. Alcibiades’ failure to please the Athenian people can be seen as a tragic failure, as similar to the Athenian people’s failure to appreciate Socrates. In fact, Alcibiades’ character, as the *Symposium* outlines it, actually contributes to Socrates’ greater glory, rather than serving only as an embarrassing reminder of Socrates’ or his own shortcomings: he shows that Socrates was a successful teacher of

* This article has had a longer gestation period than those giving birth in the Beautiful, and suffered more changes than Alcibiades himself. Thanks are due to many, but I must omit most. Audiences at the Oxford Philological Society, the Cambridge Literary Seminar, Durham University, and Florida State University helped me to see where I was trying to get, and even showed the way(s); Tim Duff provided early and Grace Ledbetter late encouragement, and Grace a veneer of philosophical authenticity. I thank too the reader for *Histos* for very useful comments, and John Moles for the *summa manus*. There really ought not to be any faults remaining, but I suppose I must be responsible for them.

philosophy—or that he might have been under different historical circumstances.

Modern scholarly reception of the Platonic Alcibiades has followed two main tracks. The Alcibiades and Socrates of the *Symposium* (especially) are usually understood to serve as negative reflections of one another: Alcibiades appears primarily in order to measure his own (shameful) distance from Socratic wisdom.¹ Occasionally, scholars suggest that the fault is Socrates', either wholly,² or partly.³ But either way, the two men are only ever negative mirror images of each other. The other main interpretation posits the Alcibiades of the *Symposium* as offering the only significant critique in the dialogue of Diotima's/Socrates' view of love; he is given genuine philosophical prominence, both because of what he says and of the fact that he has the last word.⁴ Each of these interpretations opposes Alcibiades to Socrates.

By contrast to these two views, which posit more or less irreconcilable opposites, I suggest that the *Symposium* portrays Alcibiades as one of Socrates' successes, as a gifted student shortly before his tragic fall. While we can certainly understand Alcibiades' sufferings as a result of his own misdeeds, and so richly deserved, this is not the only way to interpret the evidence: if, following some ancient sources, we blame the failures of contemporary Athenian politics not on Alcibiades but on the Athenians themselves, we might even conclude that Alcibiades serves as a Socrates-like example of how dangerous the Athenian people can be to its greatest men.

I first offer some context for Alcibiades himself, then discuss ways in which he can be seen as similar to Socrates, and as a potentially respectable, if never fully realised, voice for philosophy. In appealing to sources other than the *Symposium* I may seem vulnerable to the accusation of prejudicing the interpretation of that work, but I shall try to show that other sources—some of which Plato will have read, including, it has recently been shown,

¹ There is some support for this in ancient texts, but most of them are non-contemporary; cf. e.g. Max. Tyr. 6.6. For a handful of articulations of this standard view, see e.g. Rutherford (1995) 197; Reeve (2006) 140–1; and Verdegem (2010) 56–7. See too Nails (2006) 204–5 on Alcibiades' damage to philosophy through 'profanation' of Socratic mysteries.

² Gagarin (1977) 22, 34–6.

³ Sheffield (2006a) 184.

⁴ Lear (1998) 149–52 suggests that, rather than illustrating Socrates' account of the erotic, Alcibiades serves to deconstruct it, to suggest that virtue *cannot* be taught and that *eros* does *not* inevitably lead to improvement. Nussbaum (1986) 165–99 argues that the dialogue is meant to offer Alcibiades and Socrates as irreconcilable alternatives; see Nails (2006) 191 and *passim* for a critique of this view.

Thucydides⁵—open interpretative perspectives which are also delineated in the dialogue and in some cases with great subtlety and economy. Because interpretation of Alcibiades' role in the *Symposium* is so controversial, I provide fairly full documentation of the range of scholarly opinion. And although my primary focus is on the *Symposium*, I hope that the discussion will illuminate other literary treatments of Alcibiades and perhaps indeed the man himself. For as Jasper Griffin has written in connection with Propertius and Antony:

... the stereotype, of the man of action who lives a life of luxury, goes back a long way. It presents us with a striking example of the interplay of experience and literature. Already with Alcibiades there was doubtless both a spectacular personality and a conscious playing up to the legend which surrounded him; Plutarch shows him performing an outrageous but trivial act 'so that the people should talk about that and not say worse things about him'.⁶

Thucydides' Alcibiades

Because we never have as much information about a figure from the ancient world as we would like, I use the full range of sources about Alcibiades. The very wealth of material about him, of both positive and negative import,⁷ suggests that there was no single monolithic understanding of him, and indeed, this is part of the point I wish to make. The contemporaries of Alcibiades seem not to have known how to react to him; the Athenians expelled and recalled him, then expelled him again, and if he had survived beyond 404 it is quite possible that he would have again been recalled to Athens (cf. the suggestion to do so in Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1425–6, 1431–2, first performed in 405).

Our best single source on Alcibiades is surely his contemporary Thucydides, and I suggest that the historian shares with Plato a belief that Alcibiades was possessed of extraordinary capabilities. I therefore briefly treat Thucydides' characterisation of Alcibiades to provide basic biographic

⁵ Highly suggestive observations in Rutherford (1995) 66–8; Hunter (2012) 77–9; my own discussion uncovers further possibilities.

⁶ Griffin (1977) 21.

⁷ Negative ancient assessments of Alcibiades: Athen. 12.534b and especially Plut. *Alc.* 2.1, although the latter narrative is, on the whole, apologetic; see Russell (1966); (1972) 117–29; Duff (2003); (2005); Verdegem (2010). For positive valuation, see Nepos, *Alc.* 11 on the fact that both Theopompus and Timaeus praised Alcibiades for his adaptability, a fact particularly significant (to Nepos), because neither of those historians was prone to praise anyone.

information while I situate my further discussion. I am primarily summarising the case for a positive evaluation of Alcibiades by Thucydides that has been made by other scholars, although I shall also cite other historical and biographical treatments in order to fill out the very complex picture. It is of course a relevant question whether Alcibiades himself, or someone close to him, was Thucydides' main source for the events surrounding Alcibiades, whether this affected Thucydides' judgement, and whether indeed it explains why Alcibiades becomes central to the second half of the narrative.⁸ But irrespective of Thucydides' sources of information, Alcibiades might simply have seemed to the historian of great or absolute importance, or he might have seen Alcibiades as the crystallisation of certain key ethnographic features of the Athenians (for instance, their congenital expansionism). So we must take the text as it stands.

Alcibiades bursts into Thucydides' history as vividly as he does into Plato's *Symposium*. This need not be a coincidence.⁹ He is elaborately introduced in Book 5 (5.43.2), where he manipulates the Spartan ambassadors into undermining their own offer of peace. He himself favours alliance with Argos, both because he thinks it will be more beneficial to Athens and because he is annoyed that the Spartans have not paid him more respect (5.43.2). This blending of public and private motivation is a primary characteristic of Thucydides' Alcibiades, and shall prove important throughout my discussion.¹⁰ The speed and vigour of Alcibiades' actions and the end to which they are directed—annulment of the Peace of Nicias—may remind readers of the significance of his name: 'strength-force-violence'.¹¹

⁸ Brunt (1993) 22–34 makes the best case, suggesting that Thucydides, swayed by admiration, inflates Alcibiades' abilities (46). Others disagree: hints in Westlake (1968) 231–2; more explicit in Westlake (1985) 104–5; Erbse (1989) 75–82 is sceptical. See Gomme–Andrewes–Dover (1981) 3 for a judicious statement.

⁹ See n. 6 above.

¹⁰ Forde (1989) 72–3. On the double motivation, see Hornblower (2008) *ad loc.* At the same time, many other figures in the post-Periclean narrative also seek to integrate public and private gain. For Thucydides' own general view of the statesmen after Pericles, among whom Alcibiades surely looms large, see the emphatic 2.65.10, which is to some degree qualified by the Alcibiades narrative, as we shall see. Nicias too is driven by private motivations, so Thucydides is not necessarily suggesting Alcibiades' inferiority; rather, he points to a new feature of the times (Gomme (1956) *ad loc.*); although see 2.65.2 for a split between public feeling and private already in the Athenian people. On the importance of Alcibiades' private life to the Athenian view of him, see Seager (1967) 7–9.

¹¹ Indeed, as John Moles points out to me, we may be meant to make something of Alcibiades' name as 'controlled' or mediated by Socrates' ('preserving strength'). Cf. Diog. Laert. 6.2; 14–15 for later Socratics' puns on 'Antisthenes'.

We next encounter Alcibiades in the debate over the Sicilian expedition.¹² While Alcibiades supports the expedition, the more conservative Nicias argues against it. Here too Alcibiades' private motivations are alluded to, by Nicias, by Thucydides, and finally by Alcibiades himself (6.12–13, 6.15, 6.16–18 *passim*). In his speech, delivered in response to an attack by Nicias on the folly both of the expedition itself and of electing Alcibiades general, Alcibiades makes several claims about himself and his relationship to the people of Athens.¹³ What Nicias suggests is extravagant and self-serving behaviour,¹⁴ Alcibiades reframes as Athenian-serving too. Like Pericles before him, Alcibiades seeks to convince the Athenians to look beyond their own private feelings toward the greater good: his grand gestures, while they provoke enmity among the envious, should rather be seen as contributing to Athens' own grandeur. The similarity to Pericles' technique is noteworthy.¹⁵

Alcibiades also follows Pericles in asking the people to trust his policies rather than changing their minds about them (*μὴ μεταγινώσκετε*, 6.17.2). By contrast to the people, but like Pericles, Alcibiades depicts himself as admirably steadfast: if only the Athenians can maintain their fixity of

¹² On the speeches of Thucydides, see Gomme (1937); Finley (1942) 95–104; Kagan (1975) 77–8, and Pearson (1947) 40–43, with copious citations at Andrewes (1962) 64–71; Scardino (2007) offers the most comprehensive recent treatment. On the precise translation of 1.22 (where Thucydides makes some claim (though it is unclear what) about the truth-value of his speeches), see Badian (1992); and for bibliography on the question, West (1973) (to 1970) and Marincola (2001) 77–85 (thereafter). Finally, on the characterisation of Alcibiades through this particular speech, see Tompkins (1972) 204–14.

¹³ Indeed, the Spartan ambassadors had made the mistake of believing that Alcibiades' interests could be divorced from those of Athens. So too, as Gribble (1999) 183–6 notes, Thucydides' comments on Alcibiades' goals (6.15) point up the disastrous consequences to Athens of its ambivalence toward him.

¹⁴ To the charge that Alcibiades' entry of eight Olympic chariot teams and first, second, and fourth-place victories of 416 (Thuc. 6.15.2, Plut. *Alc.* 11) were excessively ostentatious, one need only look at Nicias' display, the previous year, of his dedications to Apollo (Kagan (1981) 153–4; see also Hornblower (2008) *ad* 7.86.4 on Nicias' extravagant expenditures). The fact that one is seen as piety and the other as self-aggrandisement merely signifies that the two men had different ways of attracting attention. There was a notorious court case, lasting many years, over the ownership of one of those teams (Isoc. *Or.* 16; Plut. *Alc.* 12; Diod. 13.74.3).

¹⁵ See Gomme–Andrewes–Dover (1970) *ad* 6.16–18 on Periclean reminiscences in Alcibiades' Sicilian speech, and main text below. Edmunds (1975) 125 suggests that Alcibiades applies to himself Pericles' notion that to those who take great risks, great rewards accrue: Alcibiades believes that his own great expenditure entitles him to honour among the Athenians.

purpose, all will be well. This seemingly paradoxical characterisation of Alcibiades as unswerving may not simply be ironic, for immediately after this speech, Thucydides presents Nicias as deciding that he cannot sway the Athenians from their decision by arguing against it, but may be able to do so if he exaggerates the provisions needed (*οὐκ ἂν ἔτι ἀποτρέψειε ... τὰχ' ἂν μεταστήσειεν αὐτούς*, 6.19.2). So Nicias himself changes, now demanding great resources for the expedition. In fact, Nicias' alteration of purpose causes the Athenians also to change, and brings about a significant increase in the armaments voted for the expedition, which will eventually mean that more men and ships are lost.

We might understand this episode to portray Alcibiades as unsuccessfully advocating a (praiseworthy) Periclean policy of fixity. Pericles had famously claimed to be 'the same' (1.140.1, 2.61.2), but, paradoxically, his immutability permitted the Athenians to be irresponsible, since they could rely upon him to return them to the proper course of action whenever they strayed (2.65.9).¹⁶ In any case, Alcibiades has for the second time demonstrated his steadfastness, while others advocate change. Again, his public stance suggests that a comparison between himself and Pericles need not be as preposterous as is often thought. Of course, the expedition itself, many modern scholars believe, is anti-Periclean in the extreme; Pericles had sought to contain the war rather than to expand it to new theatres. One part of Thucydides himself subscribes to that criticism (cf. 2.65.11). The fact that one can claim to be Periclean while advocating radically different policies points to the inherent ambiguities of 'same'-ness, and to the tension in Alcibiades—both as historical figure and as historiographical and biographical figure—between steadfastness and changeability, the latter a characteristic emphasised by the later historians Theopompus and Timaeus and by the biographers Nepos and Plutarch.¹⁷

Alcibiades convinces the people to support the Sicilian expedition, and Nicias, contrary to his intention, convinces them to vote more resources to it than they had originally planned.¹⁸ At this moment in Thucydides' narrative the Athenians become deeply *enamoured* of their expedition (6.24.3: *ἔρωσ*,

¹⁶ Cf. Crane (1998) 43; Edmunds (1975) 13; as Crane (1998) 278 notes, consistency is a much-touted value throughout Thucydides, even if it is rarely observed: e.g. the Spartans see themselves as consistent (1.84), but the Athenians note that they change when outside of Sparta.

¹⁷ Cf. n. 8 above; Plut. *Alc.* 2.1. For the ways Plutarch displaces Alcibiades' *πολυτροπία* and implicitly compares him to Pericles, see Fulkerson (2013) 209–12.

¹⁸ This blending of two probably incompatible plans is not likely to have succeeded, although Thucydides suggests in 2.65.11–12 that it might have if Alcibiades had remained in charge.

πόθῳ, ἐπιθυμίαν), and, while the application of such language to political and military contexts is always richly meaningful,¹⁹ we must register the strong link between Alcibiades and *eros* both in Thucydides and in Plato. So too, the historical Alcibiades actually advertised the link between *eros* in one's personal life and *eros* in public life by using Eros as a shield device (Plut. *Alc.* 16.1–2; Athen. 12.534e).²⁰ But just at this very moment an unpleasant and (surely) profoundly unerotic incident intervenes: nearly all of the herms in the city of Athens are mutilated. This is understood to be a gesture hostile to the expedition, and the Athenians take it very seriously. Pleas for information about other sacrilegious acts turn up reports of prominent Athenians participating in ersatz private re-enactments of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Alcibiades is named among the culprits (6.27–9). Although he urges the Athenians to settle the matter before he sails to Sicily, Alcibiades' enemies delay things. It is not clear whether Alcibiades was guilty of either crime (Thucydides expresses doubt),²¹ but he was soon recalled to Athens from Sicily to stand trial (6.53). He escaped by detaching his ship from those returning to Athens (6.61.6), and was found guilty and sentenced to death *in absentia*.

After eluding the Athenian ship, Alcibiades contacted the Spartans, who assured him of a welcome. Other sources (Isoc. 16.9 and Plut. *Alc.* 23.1) suggest that Alcibiades turned to Sparta as a last resort; not uncharacteristically, Thucydides seems to compress the time (6.88.9)²² in the interests of a tighter and more 'dramatic' representation of characters and events. Alcibiades addressed the Spartan assembly and offered his assistance in their war against Athens. It is often assumed that this is treachery, but the charge remains unproven:²³ once exiled from Athens, Alcibiades might not

¹⁹ Cf. Ludwig (2002).

²⁰ Cf. further pp. 281 and 283–5, below.

²¹ For the two events and their significance to the Sicilian Expedition (and therefore, the Peloponnesian War as a whole), see Thuc. 6.27–9, 53, 60–1, Gomme–Andrewes–Dover (1970) and Hornblower (2008) *ad locc.* and 264–88; Kagan (1981) 205–9; Furley (1996); and Murray (1990). Furley discusses at length the crimes and their relation to one another, and persuasively argues (30) that the mutilation was designed to undermine the expedition (and Alcibiades), and that the profanation was not; he sees two rival oligarchic factions as responsible.

²² See Gribble (1999) 127–31.

²³ Thucydides offers no negative judgment against Alcibiades for his changing sides in the war; if anything, he blames Athens for exiling him (6.15, 6.61, 8.1.4, 8.47.2, 8.53–4, 8.97). Note that Alcibiades' behaviour in this respect recalls that attributed to Themistocles in Book 1 (1.137.3–4; 138.2), where again there seems to be no criticism. Cf. further Delebecque (1965) 197–222; Forsdyke (2005) 182–4, 267–74 on Thucydides', Xenophon's, and Plato's presentation of the Athenian democracy as engaging in

have been expected to remain loyal to it (6.92.3–4).²⁴ He had knowledge that would harm his home city, but it is this, rather than in his decision to make himself of use elsewhere, that makes him distinctive (6.90.1 and 91.1, recognised by the Spartans at 93.1). Because there were few mechanisms in the ancient world by which foreigners could become naturalised citizens, it is not unreasonable that Alcibiades might use any resources at his disposal in order to secure for himself a positive reception with the Spartans.²⁵

Alcibiades' speech to the Spartans has received much attention. Some find his sentiments sophistic and preposterous,²⁶ others conceive of the speech as a brilliant piece of rhetoric.²⁷ Either way, it convinces the

tyrannical behaviours like the exile of Alcibiades and death of Socrates. But see also Mayer (1998) 232 on the fragment of a biographical treatment of Alcibiades, which may refer to him as *αὐτόμολος*.

²⁴ This is most persuasively argued by Pusey (1940) 228–9; Gribble (1999) 127–31 also addresses the important issues, drawing attention to the fact that Athens had severed its ties with Alcibiades, not the other way around, and that a desire for return and vengeance on his enemies would not have been seen as anathema. See too Isoc. 16.6–9 for a defence of Alcibiades along these lines (Gribble (1999) 128–9). Phrynichus' letters to Astyocheus attempting to start a revolution (Thuc. 8.50–1) can serve as an example of such political behaviour: Phrynichus is himself a tricky character, as he seems to have tried twice to betray Athens in order to gain the upper hand against his domestic enemies. On the practice of exile in Greece, see Balogh (1972), *passim*.

²⁵ Cf. the evidence of Teles (27.10–29.1) that the Spartans 'consider all those as citizens who have adopted their way of life'; Nesselrath (2007) 90. If this is accurate, Alcibiades was behaving in the most sensible fashion.

²⁶ Gomme–Andrewes–Dover (1970) *ad loc.* are especially critical of Alcibiades here. Up for particular debate is Alcibiades' claim to patriotism as he works against his home city. Finley (1942) 229 suggests that Alcibiades' Spartan speech embodies Thucydides' comments at Corcyra about the warping of words, objecting particularly to the 'twisting' and 'distorting' of the concept of patriotism (232). But support for the sincerity of Alcibiades in this context is found in Nepos, *Alc.* 7.4.6, who claims that in Sparta, *ut ipse praedicare consuevit, non adversus patriam, sed inimicos suos bellum gessit, quod eidem hostes essent civitati: nam cum intellegerent se plurimum prodesse posse rei publicae, ex ea eiecisse plusque irae suae quam utilitati communi paruisse*. Pusey (1940) 217, 225–7 argues that the Greeks would at this time have had no notion of patriotism, suggesting that one's loyalty was divided among a variety of entities, and that one's 'party' would have been the paramount consideration. This argument, although no doubt overstated, has some force.

²⁷ Crane (1998) 323 suggests that 'Alcibiades is simply restating the deeply traditional Greek commonplace that one should harm enemies and help friends. The Athenians, who should have been his friends, have harmed Alcibiades, and Alcibiades thus has a right—even a duty—to retaliate in kind.'

Spartans,²⁸ who take his advice about specific strategies.²⁹ I have noted that Alcibiades is similar to Pericles in certain particulars. This speech suggests that both men, in different ways, considered themselves as instantiating the state. Where Pericles' life was public in the sense that he effectively stopped having a private life, Alcibiades' life was public insofar as he sought to 'encompass [...] the public within his private interest'.³⁰ But unlike Pericles, Alcibiades seems to want public acknowledgement of his superiority to others,³¹ and he fails precisely because he demands this recognition and the Athenian people feel unable to grant it. They cannot bear his method of conflating public and private; Thucydides says that as a public person (*δημοσίᾳ*, 6.15.4) Alcibiades was a most skilful general, but that the Athenians privately (*ιδίᾳ*) disapproved of his behaviour, and so ruined the city by taking the command from him (6.15.3–4). 'The many' in fact feared that Alcibiades 'desired tyranny' (6.15.4), another echo—albeit distorted—of Pericles, whose political position Thucydides famously describes (2.65.9) as 'democracy in word, in deed rule of the first man'.

According to Thucydides, Alcibiades offers much useful advice to the Spartans (6.93.2), but eventually finds that Sparta does not provide him what he wants in return. There are, typically, also suggestions of impropriety in further (and particularly outrageous) blurrings of the private and the public spheres.³² After spending some time with the Persian satrap Tissaphernes, whom he also charms and advises, Alcibiades then suggests to the Athenian generals at Samos that they overthrow the democracy, an idea that has allegedly already occurred to them (8.47.2).³³ Alcibiades is eventually recalled to Athens,³⁴ and thereafter supervises the war effort.

²⁸ See Debnar (2001) 203–17 for an exploration of why Alcibiades' speech works; she argues (214–15) that it transforms the Spartans into the kind of people (i.e. Athenians) who will find his speech persuasive.

²⁹ As with so many of the things Thucydides says about Alcibiades, scholars debate the truth of this, with some maintaining that Alcibiades was only telling the Spartans what they already knew, and so was not particularly influential (Ellis (1989) 66), and others that he changed the course of the war; see Gomme–Andrewes–Dover (1970) *ad loc.*

³⁰ Forde (1989) 157.

³¹ Forde (1989) 169.

³² See Gomme–Andrewes–Dover (1981) and Hornblower (2008) *ad* 8.45.1 on when and how Alcibiades left the Spartan side.

³³ See Hornblower (2008) *ad loc.* on Thucydides' reluctance to make Alcibiades the primary cause.

³⁴ There is talk of support at 8.53–4, but only at 8.81–2 is he elected general. Forde (1989) 161–2 suggests that this election finally gives Alcibiades explicit acknowledgement

Thucydides' description of the behaviour of the Athenians in 411 suggests a people who acknowledge that they have been unfair to Alcibiades. Unfortunately, Thucydides' text ends abruptly in the summer of 411,³⁵ so we do not get a final judgment of Alcibiades and his relationship to Athens. Thucydides mentions a key service—Alcibiades prevents the Athenians at Samos from attacking the Peiraeus³⁶—but his future career is not discussed in much detail.³⁷ Of particular interest would have been the historian's overall judgement whether Alcibiades had done Athens more harm as its enemy or good as its commander. Even without this, however, we can see that our most reliable source on Alcibiades portrays him as someone who could have benefitted Athens greatly if he had been given full opportunity. As we have seen, for the Athenians as a whole the price of his help seems to have been found too high, but there must have been individual Athenians who disagreed—including Socratics such as Xenophon and Plato—and the Athenians themselves in general wobbled successively between apprehension and attraction.

Context: Socrates, Alcibiades and Symposia

The internal dramatic date of Plato's *Symposium* is 416 BCE, that is, between six months and a year before Alcibiades was to lead the fateful Sicilian Expedition.³⁸ The 'external' dramatic date—for the story is retold third-hand by a man who was not present at the original party—is 401/400. It may even be between Socrates' preliminary hearing and his trial.³⁹ Both dates,

of his status: in the army chain of command, he is now at the top. At 8.97.3, he is recalled by the Athenians (cf. Hornblower (2008) *ad loc.* for the double reinstatement).

³⁵ I do not accept the view of some that Thucydides deliberately ended here.

³⁶ Thuc. 8.86.4–6, cf. 8.82. On the significance of Thucydides' use of *πρῶτον*, 'first' (sc. benefit conveyed by Alcibiades, 8.86.4), see the commentators *ad loc.*

³⁷ E.g. 8.88, 8.108, with Gomme–Andrewes–Dover (1981) *ad locc.*; cf. Xen. *Hell.* 1.1.9 on Tissaphernes' arrest of Alcibiades and 1.1.10 on his escape. Westlake (1968) 257 refers to Alcibiades' 'unsuspected gifts of military leadership' after the period recorded by Thucydides but Gribble (1999) 209 argues that Thucydides seems to have seen Alcibiades' importance as exaggerated; if so, the text we have gives the essentials of his judgement on Alcibiades.

³⁸ On the interval between the two events, see Dover (1965) 15; (1980a) 9 n. 1; the probable date of actual composition is between 384 and 379 (*ibid.* 10 and n. 1).

³⁹ Nails (2006) 205–6; Nussbaum (1986) 169–70 makes it shortly before the death of Alcibiades.

therefore, are fraught with significance for the two main figures of the dialogue.

Agathon's first poetic victory in 416 provides the occasion to introduce the reader to a Socrates both like and unlike the Socrates who appears in other Platonic dialogues. So too, Alcibiades is both eerily familiar and strangely different. The symposium is an upper-class male Athenian phenomenon, a gathering of like-minded aristocrats which may, but need not, have political implications; it is surprising, or so the dialogue suggests, to find Socrates at such an event.⁴⁰ In some ways Plato's *Symposium* is typical, but mostly it shows us symposiastic conventions as it avoids them: so, for instance, instead of the normal supervised drinking (usually heavy), recitations of memorised or extemporaneous poetry, and entertainment by musicians and/or prostitutes, the gentlemen of this dialogue decide that they will entertain themselves with civilised conversation. This 'abnormality' provides a suitable context for the role of the transgressive Alcibiades. The promise of discourse is amply fulfilled: the *Symposium* is comprised of six speeches in praise of "Ἔρως/ἔρως (love, either as a god or an activity), each characteristic of its speaker (all real Athenians) and each offering a particular understanding of what love is and does.

I pass over the events before the arrival of Alcibiades, instructive though they are for other purposes.⁴¹ Immediately after Socrates has explained the true nature of love, which involves hierarchical ascent and which he himself learned from a woman named Diotima, Alcibiades crashes the party in order to congratulate Agathon on his victory. As I have already noted, his entrance into this text is like his entrance into Thucydides' *History*. Alcibiades does not see Socrates at first, but when he does, he is taken aback. He agrees to give a speech, but says that in the presence of Socrates he cannot praise anyone else. His speech is peculiar, part accusation, part encomium, and unwittingly (as it seems) assimilates Socrates to Socrates' own portrait of Eros.⁴²

⁴⁰ Relihan *et al.* (1992) 214.

⁴¹ On the participants in the dialogue, see Nails 2002 (s.vv.); she notes that fewer of the followers of Socrates are aristocratic than is usually observed. There is much debate about whether, and how, the previous speeches contribute to Socrates': they are often seen as partial explications which he 'weaves together' into a larger whole (e.g., recently, Sheffield (2006b) *passim*; *contra*, Rowe (2006) 21–2, who thinks rather that Socrates offers a contrast). For a good overview of the primary concerns of each man's speech, see Rutherford (1995) 179–205 and Dover (1980a), and for in-depth analysis of each one, and of their connections to one another, Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004).

⁴² Bury (1909) lx–lxii, followed by many, most recently Blondell (2006) 150. That we should read between the lines and infer that Alcibiades has already heard Socrates' report of Diotima's speech seems implausible.

Alcibiades focuses on the temperance of Socrates: his tolerance of cold and alcohol and, most impressive of all (to Alcibiades, and surely also to his audience), his imperviousness to the charms of Alcibiades himself; all of these features are well-discussed in the scholarly literature. What is not so often observed is that, in addition to offering credibility to Socrates' status as a philosopher and providing an intimate, gossipy look into the personal lives of two famous Athenians, the speech also authenticates Alcibiades: he is linked to Socrates in a way that the other participants can only dream of. The speech also encourages the notion that understanding Socrates is a precursor to understanding philosophy, in a manner similar to that explored by Socrates' own speech. Furthermore, Alcibiades' assimilation of Socrates to Socrates' own portrait of Eros itself suggests intuitive understanding of the philosophical issues. And the intermixing of public and private lives reflects the historical reality of the phenomenon of Alcibiades, as well, perhaps, as Thucydides' portrayal of that intermixing.

Steps on the Ladder

The historical Alcibiades was, obviously, not as far along the road to philosophy as Socrates, but the *Symposium* seems to put him at a kind of intermediate level. In fact, it does so literally, for if we find anything plausible in Diotima's speech on the nature of love, which moves upward from the embodied and particular to the disembodied and general by individually delineated steps (210a5–211d1), we may be encouraged to measure our own—and perhaps also others'—progress along the spectrum.⁴³ Similarly, other figures in the dialogue are imitations of Socrates, but in ways that suggest fundamental misunderstanding.⁴⁴ Thus Apollodorus and Aristodemus, both 'lovers' of Socrates, are not very far along the path; in their literal aping of Socrates' behaviour they serve as a kind of parody of Socrates' true virtue, and their mindless copying of exterior behaviours masks their inability to mimic Socrates in things that matter: walking about

⁴³ Nussbaum (1986) 184. There are a number of hints in the dialogue that such measuring is appropriate. Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004) 151–8 discuss the relation of the previous speeches to the ladder; *contra*, Reeve (1992) 90–1, who believes that none of the speeches offers scope for mapping onto the ladder. See too North (1994) 95–6 on the 'laddered progression' of Alcibiades' attempted seduction of Socrates and on the similarities between Socratic teaching and Diotima's ladder.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Hunter (2004) 87–98, on the ways in which Diotima's speech incorporates the previous speeches but also suggests that the other participants in the dialogue are missing key features.

barefoot is perhaps the least important characteristic of the philosopher.⁴⁵ Similarly, Agathon wants the wisdom of Socrates, but seems to think that he will acquire it merely by rubbing up against him on a couch (175c6–d3). This, of course, is the mistake that Alcibiades had earlier made with Socrates (e.g. 217a2–5), and Agathon’s repetition of it serves to make clear his philosophical inferiority to Alcibiades, in much the same way as Socrates’ speech shows that he had once made the same mistake as Agathon about the nature of Eros. Alcibiades, by contrast, has seen the wisdom in Socrates (216e6–217a3), and knows very well what it costs, but has not decided whether it is worth the price. (Note, again, the parallel with Alcibiades himself, too costly for the Athenians.) The ἀγάλματα inside Socrates—‘godlike and golden ... wholly beautiful and amazing’ (θεῖα καὶ χρυσᾶ εἶναι ... καὶ πάγκαλα καὶ θαυμαστά, 216e7–217a1) in Alcibiades’ formulation—are what matters, not his exterior.⁴⁶ Alcibiades’ own life can be understood to demonstrate that the exterior was less significant than the interior; Plutarch notes his ability to match his exterior to those of his neighbours (*Alc.* 23.4–5). At this point, Alcibiades has not yet given up on philosophy, but is still weighing his options (‘even still now,’ ἔτι καὶ νυνί at 215d9).⁴⁷

Many have observed that Alcibiades’ speech assimilates Socrates to Eros, and we may note here that Plato deftly substitutes a Socrates–Eros relationship for the Alcibiades–Eros relationship of Thucydides, while still retaining a strong association between Alcibiades and Eros. The effect of these adjustments is both to convey Socrates’ philosophical superiority to Alcibiades and to suggest the latter’s incipient, or at least potential, development into a lover of wisdom. But Socrates’ own retelling of Diotima’s speech and his role in the *Symposium* as a whole suggest that he is significantly further along even than Eros. For, unlike Eros, he is not barefoot, though he used to be.⁴⁸ And throughout the dialogue Socrates is repeatedly positioned as desirable but not desiring: unlike Eros, he no longer lacks anything.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ See de Vries (1935) 66–7; Blondell (2002) 107–8; Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004) 10–11.

⁴⁶ For the nuances of ἀγάλματα, see Reeve (2006) 125–7 and 138, and on Alcibiades’ misinterpretation, 133.

⁴⁷ To be sure, Alcibiades’ ultimate unwillingness to progress any further in philosophy is adumbrated throughout the dialogue; cf. Nussbaum (1986) 166 on the anecdote about Alcibiades’ refusal to play the *aulos* and Socrates’ depiction as Marsyas (an *aulos*-player).

⁴⁸ Gagarin (1977) 27–8.

⁴⁹ Sheffield (2006a) 8–9 notes that the dialogue has its origins in *eros* for the figure of Socrates, and Nussbaum (1986) 189 suggests that Socrates instantiates the perfectly

It is less important to determine Socrates' precise location on the ladder than to observe that on the human level he is a pinnacle. All other humans must be inferior to him, but by differing degrees. I therefore return to Alcibiades, concentrating on his features as detailed in the *Symposium* but again drawing upon the tradition as a whole. For this purpose, I make use primarily of his contemporaries or near-contemporaries Plato, Thucydides and Xenophon,⁵⁰ but also of anecdotes about Alcibiades taken from Plutarch's biography. Plutarch is late, and so, presumably, less reliable as a source. But given his tendency to rely on earlier sources, it is not unreasonable to entertain the possibility that some of what he says about Alcibiades reflects contemporary opinion.⁵¹

In the *Symposium* Alcibiades turns out to share some important characteristics with Socrates. Alcibiades, like Socrates, comes extremely late to the celebration (212c6–d5, 175c4–5). One was drinking, the other thinking, but the dialogue has already explained that there is nothing wrong with drink. If Socrates' late arrival, which causes him to miss most of dinner, can be read as a sign of his imperviousness to the things of the body,⁵² so too can Alcibiades' tardiness. Like Socrates, and like the Beautiful itself, Alcibiades appears suddenly (ἐξαίφνης, 210e4 and 212c6).⁵³ So too their capacity for alcohol: while Alcibiades claims to be drunk (214c6–8 and *passim*), and some have found evidence for this in the incoherence of his speech, a closer look at it suggests that its discursive structure is intentional.⁵⁴ The text does

sufficient whole-person of Aristophanes. See Steiner (1996) 90–3 for a similar, although negatively evaluated, reading. Blondell (2006) 152, 162, 177 sees Plato as offering a 'cubist' reading, wherein Socrates occupies every position on the ladder.

⁵⁰ The question of Aristophanes' treatment both of Alcibiades and of Socrates is extremely complicated, as it is difficult to determine where Aristophanes is exaggerating or inventing for comic effect and where he transmits authentically: see Dover (1980b) 54–8 on the portrait of Socrates in the *Clouds*, Moorton (1988) on Aristophanes' changing views of Alcibiades, and Vickers (1997) on Aristophanes' use of Alcibiades-figures to discuss contemporary politics.

⁵¹ On the function of the anecdotes in Plutarch, see Duff (2003) 108 and (2005) 157. For a similar attempt to reconstruct truth through gossip, see Vickers (2008) 10, and on the function of gossip (as a means of social control) in Athens, see Hunter (1990) 299–300, who also emphasises the unimportance, in this context, of actual truth (e.g., 307).

⁵² Rosen (1987) 27.

⁵³ Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004) 164.

⁵⁴ North (1994) 91–2 details several of the features of 'conventional rhetoric' in Alcibiades' speech, including the claim to speak truth and the use of drunkenness to establish Alcibiades as not δεινὸς λέγειν. Cf. too the similarity between Alcibiades' claim that he will speak randomly (*Symp.* 215a2–5) and Socrates' own prelude to his defence

indeed suggest that he is drunk, particularly during his entrance, where he seems to need help to stand (212d5–7), in the lack of dexterity with which he attempts to garland Agathon (213a4–7), and perhaps in the fact that he does not notice that Socrates also occupies his couch (213b4–c2). Alcibiades then drinks an astonishing amount of wine before giving his speech (214a1–2). Dover suggests that this is a kind of ‘epic treatment’,⁵⁵ and it certainly demonstrates that Alcibiades can hold his liquor; he ought to have passed out immediately after his perpotation. Whereas a smaller vessel of wine had sufficed for all of the men, Alcibiades demands for himself a much larger vessel, one normally used for cooling and not for drinking, which he then drains (ἐκπιεῖν, 214a2). It may even be the case that Alcibiades is to be understood as drinking unmixed wine, by contrast to the previous wine that had very likely (as was customary) been mixed with water. So Alcibiades’ reaction to alcohol is not like other people’s, a suggestion confirmed by Socrates when he says that Alcibiades has *not* engaged in mere drunken ramblings, but rather that he has had a single, sober purpose, to separate him from Agathon (222c3–d8).

Socrates, who has been invited to Agathon’s house, brings along an uninvited guest, noting that the good always come uninvited to the feasts of the good (174b5–6). This seems to be a throwaway line, until the arrival of Alcibiades, who is thereby marked, if implicitly, as—to some degree—a good man.⁵⁶ And the pun on Agathon’s name turns out to be important, for Alcibiades’ confusion of (a) good for (the) good delineates him as having made some philosophical progress, as does his demand to be led to Agathon/the Good (212d4–5).⁵⁷ Alcibiades has not been invited, but is clearly welcome, and, like the arrival of Socrates, the arrival of Alcibiades again changes the tone of the evening. Both men share not only a flair for the dramatic entrance, but the ability and even insistence on re-shaping the

speech (Plat. *Apol.* 17c1–3). Alcibiades was apparently a famous drunk: cf. Pliny *HN* 14.144, which lists him first. There are also similarities in the structure of the two men’s speeches in the *Symposium*, notably that each offers a narrative of education. Henderson (2000) 322 sees this negatively, understanding Alcibiades’ speech as illustrating ‘the conundrum of the speaker who tells the story of lessons he could never learn’. So too Nightingale (1993) 123–4, who believes Alcibiades is so much Socrates’ inferior that he cannot praise him properly. See too Scott (2000) 33–6 on Alcibiades’ speech as providing a view of the ascent from the outside. It will be clear that my own view is considerably more positive.

⁵⁵ Dover (1980a) 162.

⁵⁶ Nussbaum (1986) 185.

⁵⁷ Contrast Agathon’s own confused understanding of what ‘the good’ is.

symposium to their liking.⁵⁸ Alcibiades comes attended by a group of followers, not alone, but the dialogue pays little attention to them: he is first named as an individual, and appears with an *aulos*-player (assisting him to maintain his balance) and ‘some others of his followers’ (212d7). Thereafter, all references are to Alcibiades in the singular (e.g. 213a4, where Agathon summons ‘him’ not ‘them’). The very fact of a nameless group underlines the singular importance of Alcibiades.

Both Alcibiades and the Socrates of this dialogue confuse normal Greek categories of homosexual attachment, the one pretending to be a lover but really being a beloved (222b3–4), and the other by continuing to be attractive to men well beyond the age considered appropriate.⁵⁹ Beyond the fact that each is a transgressive erotic figure, however, both open up a dichotomy between active and passive that is extremely easy for moderns to overlook because it coheres with our own understanding of ‘normal’ love. The standard paradigm of homosexual relationships in Athens, as is well known, involves an older man who pursues a more-or-less resistant younger man. Alcibiades’ story of his own aggressiveness and of Socrates’ passivity in the face of it is very odd, even if we eventually come to understand it as a mutual quest towards philosophical enlightenment.⁶⁰ Both men, then, destabilise social and erotic paradigms. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades offers a trade of what he thinks Socrates is really after for instruction in virtue, thus suggesting that he, like Socrates and Diotima, sees sexuality as merely a first step toward some greater attainment. But while Alcibiades makes a mistake in believing that Socrates wants to sleep with him, he is moved by the beauty of Socrates’ soul, which is a great step up from focusing on physical beauty. Alcibiades, known for his beauty, is attracted to the beautiful soul of ugly old Socrates. This alone sets him far above the common run of man.

⁵⁸ Henderson (2000) 299; cf. Blondell (2006) 150, and Relihan *et al.* (1992) 216–17 on the ways both men change the rules of the symposium.

⁵⁹ Wohl (1999) 366; see the tales of Alcibiades’ loves, of both men and women, transmitted in a variety of sources (e.g. Athen. 12.534f–535c, with Littman (1970) 263 and Wohl (1999) 362 on the trickiness of locating Alcibiades on a traditional Greek erotic spectrum.

⁶⁰ As Halperin (1986) 68 suggests. See the similar reversal of active and passive at Plat. *Alc. I* 135d; in the *Symposium* there seems to be not exactly a reversal but an unwillingness on the part of each man to assume an active role (Hunter (2004) 106), finally overcome by Alcibiades’ impatience. But cf. too Plat. *Prot.* 309a1–4, where Socrates is presumed to be ‘hunting’ Alcibiades, with the discussion immediately following of Alcibiades’ beauty (and the fact that he is really a bit too old to be so attractive), and *Gorg.* 481e–482a, where Socrates calls himself an *ἐραστής* of Alcibiades, who is later referred to by implication as an *ἐρόμενος*.

Both Alcibiades and Socrates have a variety of ‘lovers’; Socrates even brings one of his to Agathon’s house. If Socrates gravitates toward the beautiful, it also gravitates toward him; in fact, Agathon and Alcibiades behave toward Socrates as if he were the living embodiment of Agathon’s description of Eros, blissfully consorting with the young and himself a universal object of desire (195a7–b6).⁶¹ But this is the role we might have expected Alcibiades to occupy, for he is the attractive one. We might read Socrates’ seductiveness as evidence of the superiority of philosophy to all other pursuits: the philosopher automatically becomes more desirable than other men, even if he is as unpromising physically as Socrates seems to have been. But if Alcibiades remains universally attractive *outside* the confines of Agathon’s dining-room, within it he wins only second place and is forced to place himself physically between Socrates and Agathon in order to gain some of their attention (or so Agathon suggests, 222e1–5). Even here, however, there is a larger significance, for Alcibiades takes second place to Socrates, not last.⁶²

As with drink and sex, so with food: the Socrates of the *Symposium* is a man who can eat when there is food, but will just as easily do without (220a2–6). Descriptions of Alcibiades’ post-exilic adoption of the Spartan lifestyle often emphasise unpleasant detail (Spartan bread and black broth, Plut. *Alc.* 23.3); this is reminiscent of Socrates’ own lack of interest in food. As a wealthy aristocrat, Alcibiades enjoyed the customary pleasures offered by Athens (and because he was covetous of honour, he did so in as extravagant a way as possible), but when they were not available he did not miss them. Alcibiades was made of heartier stuff than the standard portrait of him as a slave to luxury suggests. To the Athenians, life at Sparta was a dismal prospect: even Socrates probably never led such an austere lifestyle as did Alcibiades during his time in Sparta. Alcibiades’ capacity for tolerating such deprivation in the service of a larger goal renders him, I think, at least a plausible candidate for philosophy. As we have noted, Alcibiades’ adaptability is an important element of the historiographical and biographical tradition in Theopompus, Timaeus, Nepos and Plutarch, and

⁶¹ Hunter (2004) 19.

⁶² There is, of course, a vast chasm between the sexual practices of Alcibiades and Socrates: we should expect this, as one is much further along his philosophical journey than the other. But see, interestingly, the hint in Xenophon that Socrates was not a stone: at Xen. *Symp.* 4.25–6, Socrates asserts that one who wishes to have self-control must not kiss beautiful boys. Cf. Vlastos (1991) 38–42 on Socratic *eros*. And Halperin (1986) 74 makes the case that to become ‘an *erastês*, an aggressor in love, is to begin to make progress in the quest for immortality’. See too the interpretation of Alcibiades’ attempted seduction of Socrates as its own kind of ‘seeking’ (Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004) 173).

there are at least hints of this in the *Symposium*. The same is true of Socrates: his arrival ‘washed and with slippers strapped on, which he rarely did’ is noteworthy (174a2–3). This aspect of Socrates finds its fulfilment in the developed adaptability of his pupil Aristippus.⁶³

Similar too is Alcibiades’ and Socrates’ mutual disdain of money, however differently it is played out. Our sources depict Socrates as poor, but as considering himself wealthy because he had so few needs.⁶⁴ Alcibiades, of course, was anything but poor.⁶⁵ But the fact that Alcibiades was so often assumed to be wasting his resources or in need of money (e.g., Thuc. 6.12.2; Plut. *Alc.* 16.1–2) but never accused of taking bribes suggests that he was well able to live within his means. This is a less austere, surely, but not necessarily less admirable, way of claiming that money is not important. And a number of the anecdotes about Alcibiades suggest that he sometimes used his money to benefit others: for instance, we are told that he once enabled a poor lover to become rich (Plut. *Alc.* 5.1–3, 10.1).⁶⁶

If, then, we put the picture of the *Symposium* together with those of Thucydides and other sources and other Platonic representations, we find that both Socrates and Alcibiades are regularly described as behaving in ways that lead to being misunderstood by the majority of Athenians. Socrates’ peculiar, self-regarding behaviour in Athens, including hounding famous men to discover what they really know, eventually leads to his trial and death, shortly after the ‘external’ dramatic date of the *Symposium*. Alcibiades too is misinterpreted: the people understand his ostentatious displays of luxury as signs of incipient tyranny, and mistake his willingness to indulge himself for true degeneracy. Once outlawed, his desire for honour (and, some of the sources suggest, his will to benefit Athens even in spite of itself: cf. Xenophon’s description of his advice to the Athenian generals before Aegospotami, *Hell.* 2.1.25–6) cannot allow him to retire into private life. Alcibiades’ behaviour here and throughout his life, to be sure, is not philosophical *per se*, but it does parallel Socrates’ in certain respects, and in ways much more sophisticated than other Socrates-imitators. There was clearly a relationship between them of great significance.⁶⁷ And to the ordinary, non-philosophical Athenian, the two men—friends, perhaps

⁶³ Diog. Laert. 2.66 ‘he was capable of harmonising himself alike to place, time and person, and of playing his part harmoniously in every circumstance.’

⁶⁴ E.g. Socrates’ claim in Xenophon that he does not care for money, so is free (*Apol.* 16).

⁶⁵ For what we know of Alcibiades’ financial worth, see Davies (1971) 600.IX.

⁶⁶ Cf. Hatzfeld (1940) 138.

⁶⁷ Cf. Henderson (2000) 322; Blondell (2006) 166 n. 81.

master and pupil—must have looked alike in many essential factors,⁶⁸ the most important being their shared uniqueness. And within the *Symposium* Alcibiades' claim about Socrates' incomparability to others at 221c4–5 is also true of himself. Hunter comments:⁶⁹

Alcibiades himself incurred hatred in Athens because of his 'out-of-the-ordinariness' (*paranomia*). Democracy entails a levelling of the citizens, and those whose 'strangeness' (*atopia*) cannot be levelled out, who cannot be 'likened' to known categories, are likely to pay the penalty; the state no more knew what to do with either Alcibiades or Socrates than Alcibiades knew what to do with Socrates. In both their cases, it was Athens who was the loser (cf. Thucydides 6.15.4).

And both men, by their own principles, could not compromise their ways of life. We may examine from this perspective Socrates' assertion at *Apology* 32d that if the Athenians were to grant him his life but forbid him to practise philosophy, he would disobey it. He would disobey it because it was wrong, and he knows the wrongness of this as he knows few other things.⁷⁰ Thucydides' Alcibiades seems to have a similar knowledge about the behaviour of the Athenians: it was (to him) patently wrong, and so he refused to acknowledge its validity. It has already been noted⁷¹ that Alcibiades seems to see himself not as a citizen of a *polis*, but as in his own right almost a *polis*, capable of making arrangements with other sovereign nations. This is usually read as another instance of Alcibiades' great *hybris*, but it also looks like what Aristotle would later term *μεγαλοψυχία*, a decidedly positive—even philosophical—characteristic.⁷² It was possible, then, for a great philosopher to regard Alcibiades as at least an embryonic philosopher.

⁶⁸ Nails (2006) 199–200 notes that the philosophical life, examined from the outside, is likely to seem 'ridiculous' and courts 'both personal animosity and injustice'.

⁶⁹ Hunter (2004) 110.

⁷⁰ See Rutherford (1995) 30 and Woozley (1980) 300, 303 and 307 on the paradoxical nature of this *Apology* passage.

⁷¹ P. 277 above; Forde (1989) 7 and *passim*.

⁷² *Post. An.* 2.13 (97b) on Alcibiades and Socrates as both possessing 'greatness of soul', *μεγαλοψυχία*, with Gribble (1999) 15 for discussion.

Receptions of Alcibiades

It is usually assumed that when Alcibiades appears or is alluded to in Platonic dialogues, the author's primary concern is to exonerate Socrates for Alcibiades' behaviour.⁷³ Socrates, according to this traditional interpretation, recognised Alcibiades' enormous potential, but his failure to harness it for good is blamed not on Socrates but on Alcibiades' own inability or unwillingness to put in the effort. In fact, Alcibiades confesses as much in the *Symposium* (215d6–e3, 216a4–c3),⁷⁴ and Socrates worries about precisely this in the *First Alcibiades* (132a; his concern is whether Alcibiades will have the fortitude to be just or whether he will become a *δημεραστής*, a lover of the people [i.e. of praise from them]).⁷⁵ According to this view, Socrates is always being given another *Apology*, always being exonerated of the charge of corrupting the youth that proved fatal in 399.⁷⁶

But I do not think that this is the most persuasive way of reading Alcibiades' presence in the dialogues, and particularly not his *continued* presence. For one thing, after his own death, the figure of Alcibiades himself was not unilaterally or universally despised; in the next generation's orators, his name was a locus for both praise and blame,⁷⁷ and Plutarch, admittedly much later in the tradition, suggests that the Athenians considered their 'second anger' against him to be their greatest mistake (*τὴν δευτέραν πρὸς Ἀλκιβιάδην ὀργήν*, *Alc.* 38.1–2). By the time of the composition of the *Symposium* in the period 384–79,⁷⁸ there seems to have been a haze of nostalgia, at least for some, around the figure of Alcibiades, such that we need not automatically read his appearance in a dialogue as meant to refer us, yet again, to the question of Socrates' corruption of the youth, for it was

⁷³ See, e.g., Hatzfeld (1940) 36; Vickers (2008) 154–65.

⁷⁴ Cf. Bury (1909) li.

⁷⁵ As Denyer (2001) notes *ad loc.*, the word seems to be made up for this occasion. On Alcibiades' *eros* for the *dēmos*, see Ludwig (2002) 331–3, and on the slippage between public and private *eros*, 18; see also pp. 274–5 above.

⁷⁶ Most agree that the trial of Socrates in 399 was politically motivated, and that the failures of Alcibiades and Critias were being laid at Socrates' door. Of the charges against Socrates—impiety, introducing new gods into the city, and corrupting the youth—the third makes more or less clear that Socrates' insistence that virtue could not be taught was not persuasive to his contemporaries. Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.12–26 explicitly clears Socrates of the charges in relation to these two men.

⁷⁷ Praise: e.g. Isoc. 11.5, 16.16 and *passim*; blame: e.g. Lysias 14.1 and *passim*; Dem. 21.143–50; cf. too Denyer (2001) 3 and especially Stephens (1995) 215–16, on a papyrus that contains arguments for and against Alcibiades.

⁷⁸ See n. 38 above.

not universally acknowledged that Alcibiades had been corrupted. For some, he may even have been a hero.⁷⁹

Indeed, it is not even clear that Alcibiades had to be understood as anti-democratic. Socrates may or may not retrospectively be held responsible for the failures of Critias, one of the so-called Thirty Tyrants at Athens, but Alcibiades by contrast played no small part in broadening the base of government, at least if Thucydides is to be believed. As we have seen, the historian suggests that Alcibiades encouraged the initial overthrowing of the democracy (8.47.2), but that he had nothing to do with its execution (8.63.3–4). He then claims that Alcibiades was on the side of the democracy (8.76.7), and credits Alcibiades with several pro-democracy acts (most notably the prevention of civil war by the Athenian sailors at Samos, 8.86.4–6).⁸⁰ Isocrates too suggests that Alcibiades is to be associated with the democracy, arguing that his condemnations were associated with abolition of democracy, that he was faithful to the majority, and that he helped to reinstate the democracy (16.4–5, 20, 36–7, 40–1).⁸¹ So there is a tradition behind the portrayal of Alcibiades which need not always be apologetic, even by those faithful to Socrates.

Further, while we do not know much about the audience Plato envisioned for his dialogues, and cannot determine his personal judgment of Alcibiades, we will likely not be far wrong if we see him as having aristocratic sympathies and as expecting those who read his philosophical works to feel similarly. From such a political perspective, it is perhaps far more plausible to suggest that Plato might have seen the message of Alcibiades' life not in his philosophical failings but in the fact that, like Socrates himself, he was misunderstood and victimised by the irrational and fickle Athenian *dêmos*, which deprived itself of its most capable leaders through repeated fits of pique. This, at least, is the portrait which a number

⁷⁹ There is certainly a historical moment when Alcibiades' failure to listen to Socrates becomes the important lesson to draw from his life, cf. Cicero, *TD* 3.77–8, Plut. *Alc.* 4, *Mor.* 69E–F; Aristid. 3.576–7; Aug. *CD* 14.8 (citations and brief discussion at Graver (2007) 252 n. 1 and 191), but it is not clear that this is so in the earlier Greek tradition.

⁸⁰ Thucydides makes clear that, in his opinion, Alcibiades was not much interested in the form of government, provided he had authority (8.48). This, I think, is essentially true.

⁸¹ Isoc. *Or.* 16 is, of course, a speech in defence of Alcibiades' son, and so might be expected to bend the truth. The point I wish to make is that it seemed at least plausible to him to suggest that Alcibiades was on the side of the democrats; indeed, the democratic exiles are compared to Alcibiades in their willingness to harm their city for its own good (16.13–14); cf. also Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.16, which reports some people's belief in Alcibiades' democratic impulses.

of other ancient writers with similarly upper-class backgrounds offer of the *dēmos*.⁸²

Thus to see Plato as obsessed with proving Socrates innocent of encouraging the excesses of Alcibiades, particularly after his very earliest work, that explicitly treating the trial and death of Socrates, seems unnecessarily one-sided. I do not deny that the judicial killing of his teacher was a formative influence on Plato, but by his so-called middle period⁸³ he had more on his mind than distancing Socrates from Alcibiades.⁸⁴ Although the pro-Socratic tradition has every interest in seeing Alcibiades as simultaneously not very much influenced by Socrates (Plato's suggestion in some of his dialogues) and as better than he would have otherwise been (the tack taken by Xenophon in his rare treatments of the issue), that need not be Plato's primary aim every time he writes about him.

Conclusions: Tragedy, Historiography and Symposium

In this article, I have focused on under-explored similarities between Socrates and Alcibiades. I have suggested that these similarities convey an important point: Plato is implicitly arguing that Alcibiades was, or rather, could have been, the most successful, most authentic pupil of Socrates.⁸⁵ The two men are inextricably joined together in the dialogue. While Alcibiades' speech is an encomium of Socrates, it is also an encomium of himself, as the only man in Athens possessed of both the knowledge and the ability to praise Socrates. If the *Symposium* suggests that Socrates is beyond Eros in his philosophical attainments, it also offers a portrait of Alcibiades as some of the way there: Alcibiades, despite the luxury surrounding his person, may himself be the figure of Eros, for he is the child of both resourcefulness and

⁸² See e.g. Xenophon's treatment in the *Hellenica*, with Forde (1989) 34 and Due (1991) 42–3 on his portrait of an irrational Athens which took an immoderate position in regard to Alcibiades; cf. also MacDowell (1962) 9–10 on the Athenians' ability to forgive Andocides when it suited them. Plutarch's portrait of Alcibiades also seems to take this approach: Alcibiades becomes the statesman the Athenians deserve (see too Ludwig (2002) 163).

⁸³ See Cooper (1997) xii–xviii for discussion of Platonic chronology. He notes that we have very little hard information, and eschews the designations 'early,' 'middle,' and 'late,' but suggests (xviii) that the dialogues about the Forms (of which this might well be one) are likely to be later than the 'Socratic' dialogues.

⁸⁴ Cf. also Rutherford (1995) 21.

⁸⁵ For similar claims, see Relihan *et al.* (1992) 215 and Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004) 170–1; I do not claim that Alcibiades was an actual philosopher; his life as a whole was incompatible with genuine progress in philosophy.

of want, resourcefulness because of his position in society and his own natural gifts, and want because he demanded a great deal from life.⁸⁶ Like Eros, Alcibiades is neither beautiful nor ugly, but somewhere in between, for despite his physical beauty, his attractions are repeatedly shown to be inferior to Socrates'. Furthermore, Alcibiades understands what Socratic philosophy is, and behaves in some important ways like Socrates. Unlike Socrates, however, but like Eros, Alcibiades retains ties to the non-philosophical world. His intermediate nature is exemplified by his position on the couch: he is halfway between philosophy, as embodied in Socrates, and empty although pleasing rhetoric, represented by Agathon.⁸⁷ Thus Alcibiades represents an intermediate step on the path to virtue.

To what purpose or purposes? One is to register a feeling of lost opportunity. Both men, in their different ways, could have enabled the Athenians to become much greater than they were able to be without them. Each represents a road not taken: Socrates could have led Athens to virtue, and Alcibiades could have led it to dominance. Most of the Athenians' difficulties with Alcibiades seem to have been of their own making and to have derived from the fact that they were unwilling to acknowledge his particularity, just as they later refused to acknowledge Socrates' particularity. There is indeed a failure depicted in the *Symposium*, but it is not that of Alcibiades or of Socrates, whose relationship was curtailed before it could bear fruit for the Athenian state. Registration of that sense of waste is, no doubt, partly apologetic. But it also forms part of a wider and deeper critique of Athenian democracy.

A second main purpose seems to be to suggest a paradigm of the philosopher-statesman relationship, or of the relationship between philosophy and statecraft. We might appeal to the discussion in the *Phaedrus* of the 'second-best' kind of soul, which seeks not wisdom but kingship (e.g. 248d). Might Plato have seen in Alcibiades the (unrealised) possibility of blending them, creating a marriage of philosophy and politics? And might we also connect the figure of Alcibiades to Plato's later association with Dionysius of Syracuse? Denyer notes the similarities between Dionysius and the Alcibiades of the *First Alcibiades* (generally now agreed to be Platonic),

⁸⁶ See Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004) 127 on the necessity for the philosopher to be both greedy and dissatisfied: 'Seekers after wisdom, therefore, should resemble Love's character and be constantly hungry. Homeostasis and perfect equilibrium are characteristics of ignorance or death, not of maturity or perfection.'

⁸⁷ Rosen (1987) 208.

and suggests that that dialogue reflects Plato's disappointment of his hopes to turn theory into practice.⁸⁸

This article has largely focused on the different representations of Alcibiades in the *Symposium* of Plato, pupil of Socrates, and the historiographical (including biographical) traditions. These different representations in fact reveal significant commonalities. And Plato and the most important representative of the historiographical tradition, Thucydides, appear to offer at base the same political and moral analysis: Alcibiades represented a tragically missed opportunity by the Athenian people, a missed opportunity which was one of the factors in the fall of Athens herself. Many works of Plato can be argued to offer, in their totality, a sustained historical analysis of what went wrong for 5th-century Athens. They do this by locating dramatic contexts on the cusp of great change or disaster, both for individuals and the state.⁸⁹ From this perspective, Plato, like Thucydides, is engaged in a historiographical project. One of these works, the *Symposium*, may well reflect Plato's own reading of Thucydides. Indeed, the *Symposium* itself seems to exhibit some historiographical markers, notably in the very elaborate grounding of its authority and authenticity as a record in 172a–174b and the use of such vocabulary as *σαφές* (172b 5, 172c1) and *εἰδέναι* (172b4) ~ Thuc. 1.22.4 *σαφές*, 5.26.5 *εἴσομαι*. Consequently, several factors (philosophy, historiography, tragedy and the links between them, and also the specific links between Plato and Thucydides) suggest that it might be useful to refer to the famous distinction between historiography and tragedy made by Plato's own pupil, Aristotle (*Poet.* 9.1451a36–b11):

It is clear from the preceding that the job of the poet is not to say what happened, but what could happen and what is possible according to probability or necessity. For the historian and the poet do not differ in speaking either metrically or unmetrically (for it would be possible to put Herodotus' words into metres and they would not be less history with metres than without metres); no, they differ in this respect: that the one says what has happened, the other what could happen. Therefore poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history. For poetry speaks more of universal things, history of individual things. Universal things are what sort of person says or does what sort of thing according to probability or necessity—which poetry aims at, adding names. But individual things are what Alcibiades did or experienced.

⁸⁸ Denyer (2001) 12–13. The dating of the *First Alcibiades* is controversial. Denyer, in the minority, dates it to the early 350s (11).

⁸⁹ Nails (2002).

An additional factor for bringing this passage within the concerns of this paper is Geoffrey de Ste. Croix's insight that Aristotle must have had Thucydides—and particularly Thucydides' treatment of Alcibiades—in mind when he characterised history as concerned (or, more concerned) with individual things and when he divided Alcibiades' career into what he did and what he experienced or suffered (cf. Thuc. 1.22.1; 23.1).⁹⁰ Aristotle's polarisations (or, near polarisations)⁹¹ between historiography and tragedy in favour of the latter are of course grossly unfair, since great and profound historians such as Thucydides are certainly also concerned with universals *and* with the interplay between individual things and universals *and* with the interplay between 'what happened' and 'what could have happened according to probability or necessity', *and* even with 'what according to the human thing is going to happen sometime again like these things and near these things' (1.22.4). Nevertheless, Aristotle's schema enables us to map Plato's achievement in the *Symposium* in regard to Alcibiades with some precision. Alcibiades could have been a tragic hero in the precise sense of being the central figure of a tragedy. He regarded himself as the instantiation of his city. His ambitions approached those of a tyrant or king, and his behaviour was certainly regal. His character was mixed but nearer the good than the bad. He underwent a change (in fact, several changes) from extreme good fortune to extreme bad fortune. For these changes of fortune he himself bore some responsibility. His bad fortune ultimately brought disaster upon his own city. But Plato's portrayal of Alcibiades in the *Symposium* shows that Aristotle's conception of tragedy is too restrictive. Aristotle's choice of Alcibiades as the quintessential figure of historiography rests on the assumption that supreme individualists cannot provide useful philosophical paradigms—but, as we have seen, portrayal of supreme individualists necessarily involves charting them in relation to other less distinctive individuals and against norms of behaviour. So too, tragic pathos is achieved precisely by locating the representation 'on the cusp' and by *not* portraying the change of fortune. And *not* portraying the change of fortune but emphasising the moments just before the change of fortune also suggests the story—or history—that might have been, since the tragic figure's change of fortune (and the consequent change of fortune of his city) may be due not so much to his own actions as much—or more—to other people's reactions to him. There was of course a tragic convention of near total avoidance of

⁹⁰ Ste. Croix (1975).

⁹¹ In conversation Chris Pelling has repeatedly emphasised the force of the qualifying 'more'. But the qualification is itself not absolute, as the other unqualified statements show.

contemporary or recent-past history as explicit themes, but the convention was not absolute. If no subsequent tragedian wrote a tragedy of Alcibiades, it may have been because Plato's dramatic dialogue on the theme, the *Symposium*, had already done so and had so brilliantly combined historiography and tragedy.

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