

Alcibiades at the Crossroads: Philosophers, Courtesans and the Contest for a Young Man's Soul  
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Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 10 pits two courtesans, Chelidonion and Drosis, against a philosopher named Aristaenetus. At issue is a young man (*meirakion*), Cleinias, who has ceased visiting Drosis on the advice of Aristaenetus, with whom he now studies philosophy. A letter from Cleinias explains that his teacher forbids him to spend time with (*suneinai*) a courtesan because "it is far better to prefer virtue (*aretê*) to pleasure (*hêdonê*)" (10.3). Drosis attributes Aristaenetus' prohibition to his own predatory desires, since he is a *paiderastês*, whose teaching is a pretext for "spending time with (*suneinai*) the handsomest youths" (10.4). Chelidonion suggests a fitting remedy: she will write "Aristaenetus is corrupting (*diaphtheirei*) Cleinias" on a wall in the Ceramicus, where Cleinias' father often walks (10.4). Lucian's playful dialogue thus closes with an echo of the trial and execution of Socrates for corruption of the youth. Similarly, in Alciphron's *Letters of the Courtesans* 7, the *hetaira* Thaïs writes to her lover, Euthydemus, to complain that he ignores her now that he has taken up with a philosopher. "Do you think a philosopher (*sophistês*) is any better than a courtesan?" she challenges (7.4), casting herself as the philosopher's rival. She then adduces the example of Socrates and, like Chelidonion, recalls his trial and the charge of corruption: "Judge, if you want, between the *hetaira* Aspasia and the philosopher Socrates and consider which educated better men. You'll see that her pupil was Pericles, while his was Critias" (7.7).

I argue that these texts of Lucian and Alciphron constitute playful but insightful readings of Socratic protreptic that point to an under-appreciated motif in Plato and Xenophon: an erotically-charged rivalry or contest (*agôn*) over young men, in which their education and future lives are at stake. This motif is most explicitly developed in Plato's *Alcibiades I* and Books 1 and 2 of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, where it plays an important role in the apologetic discourse of these works by reframing the question of corrupting the youth - and Alcibiades in particular - as a contest between the virtuous influence of the philosopher and the corrupting influence of other forces in the *polis*.

The *Alcibiades I* begins by contrasting Alcibiades' many other *erastai* with Socrates, who alone has not given up pursuing him, though he is now on the verge of adulthood. Socrates ultimately succeeds where his rivals failed, gaining Alcibiades' love by presenting himself as his "only true lover" (i.e., the lover of his soul rather than his outward beauty) and as the one man who can help him fulfill his ambitions. By the end of the dialogue, however, another rivalry comes into view, in terms that, again, recall the trial of Socrates: "I shall never forsake you," Socrates says, "unless you are corrupted (*diaphtharêis*) by the Athenian *dêmos* and become ugly. For this is what I fear above all, that you will be corrupted by becoming a lover of the *dêmos* (*dêmerastês*)" (131e). The *dêmos* thus takes the place of a rival seducer, suggesting a critical reworking of Pericles' invocation to become and *erastês* of the *polis* (Thucydides 2.43) as well as recalling Alcibiades' vacillation between his love for Socrates and his desire for the power and honors bestowed by "the many" in the *Symposium* (216a-c). Plato thus envisions an *agôn* between Socrates and the *polis*, in which blame for Alcibiades' corruption and subsequent career can be assigned to the latter.

Xenophon, responding directly to Polycrates' *Accusation of Socrates*, takes a different tack in the *Memorabilia*. Having detailed Socrates' positive effects on Alcibiades and attributing his corruption to other influences, including "being hunted by many great ladies" and "spoiled (*diathruptomenos*) by many powerful men" (1.2.24), Xenophon begins the major task of the *Memorabilia*, namely to demonstrate that Socrates, so far from corrupting his companions (*sunontes*), greatly benefited them. In Book 2, the well-known story of Heracles at the Crossroads caps a lengthy discussion with Aristippus (2.1.1-20) on the question of the proper education for two young men, one who will go on to rule others, while the other will stay out of public life. The different lives the two women offer Heracles condense these two paths of education into a single moment of choice, a judgment rendered in an *agôn* between the personified figures of Virtue (*Aretê*) and Vice (*Kakia*). Heracles, making this choice just as he passes from boyhood to adulthood (2.1.21), becomes the paradigm of a *neos* of great potential, and I suggest that we should see behind his image that of Alcibiades as the most prominent and controversial of Socrates' young companions. Moreover, Xenophon's description of Vice, which indicates that she is a *hetaira*, sets the stage for the later tradition's reworking of the motif of the *agôn* over young men as a rivalry between philosophers and courtesans.