

## Enter Alcibiades: Gender and Disruption in Plato's *Symposium*

In the *Symposium* Plato openly plays with Athenian gender categories to further his philosophical aims. The notion of time-limited *erastēs/erōmenos* relationships, with a clear dichotomy between active pursuit and passive receptivity, is challenged by the long-lasting relationship of Pausanias and Agathon and by the mythos of Aristophanes; then finally demolished in Socrates' dialogue with Diotima. Eros must be active and pursuing: "there is indeed no role for passivity in the pursuit of truth" (Halperin). This questioning of gender norms continues in Plato's presentation of Alcibiades, who—despite being in his mid-thirties at the dialogue's dramatic date—is depicted as a particularly aggressive *erōmenos*, quarreling with Agathon over proximity to the erotic master Socrates, and recounting at length his erotic pursuit of Socrates some years earlier.

Alcibiades' sexuality, like the whole of his irruption into the dialogue, serves to upset and call into question what had seemed settled at the end of Socrates' speech. While erotic pursuit may be the model for philosophical inquiry, the notoriously bad outcome of Alcibiades' political career makes the reader again question the wisdom of encouraging "shameless" (*Symp.* 192a) behavior in *erōmenoi*. Further, his appearance in the dialogue will be implicated in Plato's complex, multi-dialogue *apologia* for Socrates' infamous association with those who betrayed or opposed democratic Athens. This paper will examine the ways in which Plato uses common tropes of sexual behavior to depict Alcibiades as treacherous and unreliable. In particular, by depicting him as an over-age and particularly aggressive *erōmenos*, Plato plays on the cultural anxieties of masculine Athenian society, in particularly the need to make the sanctioned transition from *erastēs* to *erōmenos*. This is, as I have argued elsewhere, in effect a change of

gender: the *erastēs* and *erōmenos*, although both male in sex, have different and complementary sexual and social roles. Those who fail to make this transition are considered shameless and untrustworthy: either weak-willed *kinaidoi* (cf. Aesch. *De falsa legatione* 151.4), or potential betrayers (cf. Kleisthenes in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, where his ready availability as a *kinaidos* or prostitute is also an encoding of his alleged pro-Spartan sympathies). Alcibiades' gender ambiguity prefigures (as of the dialogue's dramatic date) his political unreliability, but it also contributes to the undermining of the revealed truth of Socrates' account of Diotima. Just as the discourse concerning Agathon and Pausanias earlier pointed to a radically new version of gender and philosophical inquiry, so here the gender non-conformity of Alcibiades brings this program of inquiry crashing back to earth. In doing so, Plato ends the dialogue with the radical denial of closure and certainty with which he began, in the dialogue's elaborate narrative framework, in which the reader is repeatedly warned not to take the words of the *Symposium* as absolute objective truth.

### Bibliography

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