

## Tragedy Off-Stage

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Plato weaves strands of the tragic and the comic, high seriousness and low bawdiness, into his *Symposium*; that much is uncontroversial. If someone should miss the sweep of the plot from the celebration of Agathon's prize for tragedy to the waves of drunken revelers, the *kômos*, there is a telling reminder at the end. With snores in the background, Socrates is passing the cup with Agathon and Aristophanes, "forcing them to agree that it belongs to the same man to know how to compose comedy and tragedy, and that the person who is an expert tragic poet is also a comic poet" (223d2–5).<sup>1</sup> Socrates' parting comment has generated a variety of interpretations, most of which take Plato's *Symposium* to be tragedy, comedy, and philosophy in one.<sup>2</sup>

The *Symposium* is obviously funny, less obviously tragic, though there are precedents for identifying both what the tragedy of the *Symposium* is, and what is tragic in the *Symposium*. I will argue that Peter H. von Blanckenhagen (1992) was right to suggest what Jonathan Lear (1998) would later argue in detail, that the *Symposium* sets up a tragedy that occurs off-stage — though I disagree with them about whose mistake has tragic results and what those results are. To anticipate my conclusion, the most defensible notion of tragedy across Plato's dialogues is a fundamentally epistemological one: if we do not know the good, we increase our risk of making mistakes and of suffering what are sometimes their catastrophic consequences. Specifically, the tragedies envisioned by the *Symposium* are two, both introduced in the dialogue. Like staged tragedies of the era, however, their most dramatic events occur off-stage. Within months of Agathon's victory, half the characters who celebrated with him that night in the late winter of 416 will suffer death or exile, resulting from charges of impiety, *asebeia*; and, also for *asebeia*, Socrates will be executed in 399, weeks after the dramatic date of the frame. The cause of both calamities was the ignorance — superstition and religious hysteria — of the Athenians. Not only did the *polis* use its democracy to destroy the lives and happiness of hundreds of people through summary executions, exiles, confiscations, and

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<sup>1</sup> Trans. Rowe. προσαναγκάζειν τὸν Σωκράτη ὁμολογεῖν αὐτοῦς τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀνδρὸς εἶναι κωμωδίαν καὶ τραγωδίαν ἐπίστασθαι ποιεῖν, καὶ τὸν τέχνη τραγωδοποιῶν ὄντα καὶ κωμωδοποιῶν εἶναι, echoed in *Laws*: "it is impossible to learn the serious without the comic, or any one of a pair of contraries without the other" (VII 816d9–e1, trans. Bury). We can see with some amusement where the elenchus would go if anyone could stay awake: since neither Agathon nor Aristophanes composed plays in the other's genre, if either had agreed to Socrates' principle, he would thereby have been admitting that he was not an expert poet (Rowe 1998a:214). On the bivalence principle more generally in Plato, see *Republic* I 334a1–3 where expertise in guarding is expertise in stealing (cf. *Republic* III 409d8–10), *Charmides* 166e7–8, and *Phaedo* 97d1–5.

<sup>2</sup> Clay 1975:250 called it "a new form of philosophical drama which, in the object of its imitation, comprehends and transcends both tragedy and comedy"; and Wardy 2002:58, "the literary genre which at once mixes and transcends the dramatic genres." Nietzsche 1967:§13 had gone so far as to offer a maxim to bind the three together: "only the intelligible is beautiful."

disenfranchisement, they killed Socrates, the city's best friend, because they mistook him for an enemy.

### ***Blanckenhagen's stage and actors revisited***

Blanckenhagen (1992:62) provided full descriptions of the characters of the *Symposium*, arguing:

The simple fact that Plato wrote just this historical fiction means that he expected his readers to recognize the identity and character of setting and actors, and to apply that knowledge to their reading; and this in turn demands that we collect all the information, internal and external, that would have been a matter of course in Plato's time, if we wish to understand what Plato tells us.<sup>3</sup>

Simple ignorance of the facts would be bad enough for our interpretations of the dialogue, but two things make it worse. One is rare, the selection of ornamental biographical details from suspect sources to add poignancy to, and reinforce, existing interpretations.<sup>4</sup> The other is virtually unavoidable: our long-held assumptions about Socrates and the people around him are comprised in a running background narrative that silently compensates for what we don't know. Absent positive evidence to the contrary, our intellectual backdrop is the image of Socrates in the company of aristocratic youths. Even Blanckenhagen (1992:56, 61–62) defaults to it, calling Plato's dialogues "historical fiction" and assuming more poetic license on Plato's part about Socrates' companions than I can. Far less for us than for Plato's auditors and readers, but nonetheless significantly, Plato's characters are more intelligible because of what we can know about them. We have substantial independent information about most of the characters gathered at Agathon's house, some of it, I hope to show, crucial to our understanding of the tragedy of the *Symposium*.

It is necessary then to introduce the characters and setting, to add information that was inaccessible when Blanckenhagen made his influential claims.<sup>5</sup> There are four pairs of

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<sup>3</sup> The date of Blanckenhagen's publication is misleading not only because the publication was posthumous, based on a lecture described as given "several years ago" (1992:68), but because Blanckenhagen's views on Plato's *Symposium* had exerted a lasting influence at the University of Chicago already in 1959 when Leo Strauss gave a set of lectures not published until 2001 (Strauss 2001:vii). Blanckenhagen died on the cusp of an era when computer use would steeply increase access to such information as he considered important. So thoughtful a scholar, I assume, would wish to sift current evidence before reasserting his claims; for that reason I will not joust with his particulars here. I provide an account that differs in some details but that respects the motivation for collecting the details that he articulated so well.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Nussbaum 1986:199 on what Alcibiades dreamed just before his death.

<sup>5</sup> Caveat: Plato was a child of eight in 416, so — precocious though he may have been, and attentive to Socrates' words later in life — I do not read the dialogue as history. Plato represented actual persons and their relations with some care: the more facts the archaeologists and epigraphers turn up, the more accurate Plato's accounts turn out to be. See Nails (2002:s.vv.) for the contemporaneous sources for the descriptions of the individuals, and for additional details about all of them.

men celebrating Agathon's victory, expressing four different relationships,<sup>6</sup> all of which go back before the war began, at least sixteen years, for we met them that long ago in Plato's *Protagoras*: Pausanias and Agathon were already lovers, Eryximachus and Phaedrus were already friends, Aristophanes and Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum were already fellow-demesmen, with social as well as civic obligations to one another.<sup>7</sup> Socrates' favorite was Alcibiades, whose first beard was filling out, and the two of them were about a year away from being posted to Potidaea. Socrates was beginning to attract the attention of both youths and intellectuals, Protagoras' for example (*Protagoras* 361d7–e6), but he was not yet well known in the city or even in his own deme (see *Laches* 180b–181a). When Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus were in town auditioning for paying students, all but Socrates were young enough to be considering higher education; so the rich and well-connected Callias (whose half-brothers were Pericles' sons, and whose sister would later marry Alcibiades) hosted a gathering where everyone who was anyone in Athens dropped in.

When we advance to 416, the fragile Peace of Nicias, declared in 421, has allowed some relief from the war. The characters are now mature men,<sup>8</sup> and at least three have married in the interim — Socrates, Alcibiades, and Aristophanes. Phaedrus of Myrrhinus, son of Pythocles, will marry his first cousin within the year. There is little money in his family or in that of Eryximachus, perhaps because the war has led to changes of fortune for so many. Eryximachus' father, the doctor Acumenus, is also a friend of Phaedrus and known to the Socratic circle (*Phaedrus* 227a5). Phaedrus is youngest of the group though he is at least twenty-nine; Agathon is at least thirty-one but looks youngest, clipping his beard very short; Eryximachus is not much over thirty-two, Aristophanes at thirty-four has been bald since his twenties, the lion Alcibiades is thirty-five, Pausanias is not yet forty, and Socrates is fifty-three.

By 416, Aristophanes had already made comedy of Agathon's friends, Socrates and Alcibiades, and seems in that very year to have abandoned a revision of the *Clouds* that he was preparing for a revival; he never brought Socrates back on stage.<sup>9</sup> From Plato's fourth-century perspective, however, and that of Plato's audience, Aristophanes was remarkable for later having scathingly represented the beautiful Agathon as a luxuriant Asian drag queen, obviously offensive to Athenian sensibilities, in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (Women at the Thesmophoria) in 411. That makes it peculiar that Aristophanes should be among the guests, and he is the odd man out in other ways: his speech is least compatible with that of Diotima, he conspires to speak out of order, he shushes Eryximachus, he deliberately bypasses

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<sup>6</sup> Pace Waterfield 1994:81–82.

<sup>7</sup> The special relationship to, and services due, one's fellow demesmen are attested in the literature and alluded to, for example, in Plato *Laches* 180b–d (cf. 187d–e), *Apology* 33e, *Phaedo* 115c3; Aristophanes *Clouds* 1206–1210, 1322, *Ecclesiazusae* (Assemblywomen) 1023–1024, 1114–1115, *Acharnians* 333, *Knights* 319–320, *Plutus* (Wealth) 253–254; and Lysias *For Mantitheus* 16.14, *Against Epicrates* 27.12.

<sup>8</sup> They are young enough, nevertheless, to be mindful of the lessons of such professors as they have encountered (cf. *Protagoras* 177b1–5, 185c5–6, 208c1).

<sup>9</sup> Henderson 1998b:3n2.

Aristodemus,<sup>10</sup> and he makes an aborted complaint about Socrates' speech — in short, he's a grumpy companion, though the folktale he embellishes is marvelous.<sup>11</sup>

The tragedian, Agathon, son of Tisamenus, is by contrast courteous and accommodating, especially so to Aristodemus. He gives scant reason in Plato's dialogue to credit Aristophanes' later representation.<sup>12</sup> It is his victory, his invitation, his celebration, and there are no hints that he offends with any affectations. His lover, Pausanias<sup>13</sup> of Cerameis, a deme just outside the northwest city wall, appears faithful to the pederastic life he praises in the dialogue.

In 416, 'Socrates' is a household word, thanks to Aristophanes' *Clouds* and other comedies, and thanks perhaps also to his notorious physiognomy, exacerbated by his failure to bathe regularly or to cut his hair. His early interest in natural philosophy and his distinguished military service are behind him now. He fulfills all his civic obligations, including the religious ones, but people are becoming aware of further strangeness in Socrates — that he claims a personal *daimonion*, and that he opposes the stories of the poets that attribute injustice to the gods of the Athenians. He is a householder, but an austere one: everything he owned, including his house, was worth five *minae* — enough for a single course with the rhetorician Evenus.<sup>14</sup> He has recently married Xanthippe, and their first son is on the way. Her dowry was probably adequate for her basic support; the fact that their first son will be named for her presumed father, Lamprocles, rather than for his, points in that direction. Socrates maintains close ties with his childhood friends, Chaerephon of Sphettus, and Crito of Alopece. With no visible means of support, he spends his time in conversation with anyone who will join him. On this night in 416, Socrates exhibits a habit we witness only in this dialogue, he goes into one of his odd "trances" on his way to Agathon's; Alcibiades will later describe Socrates' having done so on campaign as well.

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<sup>10</sup> See Figure 1. Aristodemus was on Eryximachus' couch, so should have spoken after Aristophanes (who had switched places with the doctor); but Aristophanes pointedly says "There are only Agathon and Socrates left" (193e2-3).

<sup>11</sup> Dover 1966:41-47 makes a compelling case for the lack of originality in Aristophanes' contribution to the occasion — a view that should mitigate others' perplexity that Plato should present Socrates' nemesis in a favorable light: the light is not favorable.

<sup>12</sup> I note that he abrogates his *symposiarch* (dominant) role, and that there is something in this mature man's appearance, perhaps the close-cropped beard, that invites his being called *νεανίσκος* (198a2). Blanckenhagen 1992: 58-62, however, details additional ways in which Agathon is portrayed as effeminate in the dialogue, especially in his depiction of *Erôs* as a self-portrait, banter about Agathon's youthful appearance that begins at 175d and continues throughout, and most of all Agathon's inviting Socrates to his couch. Finding nothing of the sort is Bury 1932:xxxiv-xxxvi.

<sup>13</sup> The name 'Pausanias', like the name 'Alcibiades', is of Spartan origin.

<sup>14</sup> For Socrates' net worth, see Xenophon *Oeconomicus* 2.3.4-5; for Evenus' fee, see Plato *Apology* 20b9-c1. By implication, the fine Socrates says he is willing to pay (38b8) with help from friends is considerable, six times his net worth.

Alcibiades of Scambonidae, son of Clinias and Dinomache — from Athenian “first families” on both sides, reared in the house of Pericles (his mother’s first cousin), and elected general as soon as he met the age qualification — is in 416 attractive, rich, and strong, a leader of men, at the peak of his power and influence; but he is spoiled, arrogant, and dissolute. He is rarely seen without his hangers-on —cousins, fellow demesmen, and men related by marriage — some of whose names are known to us,<sup>15</sup> so it would be odd to absent them from among the revelers in Alcibiades’ entourage at Agathon’s. Alcibiades was married to Callias’ sister, and is the father of two children, but his wife has recently died, probably at the time of giving birth to their second child, now an infant. He had long since run through Hipparete’s huge dowry. Diotima could be describing Alcibiades when she says of the lovers of honors and glory, “for the sake of that they’re ready to run all risks, even more than they are for their children — they’ll spend money, undergo any suffering you like, die for it” (208c6–d2). There was always controversy about what Alcibiades’ relationship with Socrates really was,<sup>16</sup> but there is no question that Alcibiades had a larger-than-life, heroic (if bad-boy), popular reputation by the time of the early Academy.

Another in the list of characters of 416 is Diotima of Mantinea though, given what is said about her postponing Athens’ plague, Socrates would have been acquainted with her when he was about thirty. We meet her in a flashback. Perhaps she is one of those “priests and priestesses” from whom Socrates occasionally says he has heard things (*Meno* 81a9), but most scholars consider her a wholly fictitious character. No matter. Diotima is a priestess, religious, who counts prophecy and magic among the branches of knowledge (*Symposium* 202e7–203a1). Thus, even if what she offers is beauty itself, or the good itself, she offers something less than what the philosopher seeks, less than what is to be found at the top of the divided line, for example: the fundamental, unhypothetical principle of the all (*Republic* VI 511b5–6).<sup>17</sup> She is a mystagogue who has been initiated into the higher Eleusinian mysteries, where she says she is not sure Socrates can follow (209e5–210a2).<sup>18</sup> I submit that he did not follow. Mystery religions, like rhetoric, like mathematics or fine poetry, are at best stepping

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<sup>15</sup> Alcibiades of Phegous, Adeimantus of Scambonidae, and Axiochus of Scambonidae (see Figure 2 below) are known from a number of inscriptions, from comic poets, forensic speeches, and historians. See Nails 2002:s.vv.

<sup>16</sup> Although Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.2.47) was a critic of Alcibiades, and Isocrates a supporter (*Busiris* 11.4), both say he sought to use Socrates for his own advancement.

<sup>17</sup> τοῦ ἀνυποθέτου ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ παντὸς ἀρχὴν (cf. VI 510b6–7) — not to be confused with the form of the good, despite the near unanimity of the confusion, and *pace* Lloyd Gerson’s contribution to this volume. See also *Republic* VII 533c8–9 contrasted with 534b8. The good, while the cause of what is correct and good in all things (VII 517b4–c7, 527b–c), is not the cause of everything — not the cause, for example, of what is bad in things (cf. II 379b3–16), and not the cause of the form of the bad (cf. V 476a5–8). I have argued this in greater detail elsewhere (Nails 2001), but my argument in this paper does not depend on the distinction.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Socrates’ remark to Glaucon at *Republic* VII 533a1.



Agathon

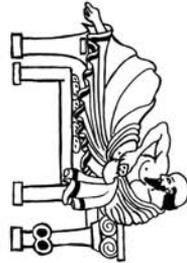
Socrates



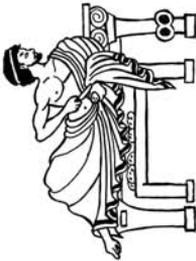
Eryximachus

Aristodemus

Aristophanes



Pausanias



Phaedrus

Unknown



Unknown



stones to philosophy, and we expect too much of Diotima, who is neither Socrates nor Plato, if we expect profound philosophy from her.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 1. Seating arrangement of the guests at Agathon's *symposium*, assuming the standard configuration of seven couches in a square room, and at least two unknown guests.**

We know something about the setting of the dialogue as well. In the fifth century, large private dining rooms were unusual, but the seating arrangement in the *Symposium* implies that there were probably seven couches (see Figure 1) because there were at least two additional guests whose encomia were not memorable (180c1–2). The arrangement in a square with the couches on a slightly raised platform was standard, so the number of couches, usually either seven or eleven, was always odd, to accommodate the door.<sup>20</sup> Lighting was provided by oil lamps along the wall behind the diners. The men's dining area was usually centrally located in the houses of the period, so the female relatives with whom Agathon lived (176e8) and who are noted as sequestered elsewhere, were most likely in an adjacent room with no common door. It is important to note that, by 416, the war's widows and orphans had been reassigned to *kurioi* under a highly regulated system, and the city was feeling the effects of the increased proportion of women. One finds evidence of it in the female-dominated plays of Aristophanes;<sup>21</sup> when Aristarchus complains to Socrates that the war has so increased the number of women in his house that he cannot feed them all (Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.7); and when the Athenians pass a wartime decree permitting men to have legitimate children by women other than their wives. All of this is in the wartime background of the dramatic date of the dialogue's interior story.<sup>22</sup>

There is another social issue of relevance to understanding the dialogue: Athenian citizen males did not marry until they were at least thirty, and the period of being an *erômenos* was very short — adolescence to first beard. Then what for the next dozen years or more? Nice Athenian girls were locked away, and, as Kenneth Dover (1989:88) says, “Purchased sex ... could never give him what he needed emotionally, the experience of being valued and welcomed for his own sake.” Whatever disapproval was expressed by a young man's parents

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<sup>19</sup> I will return to Diotima below. Ruby Blondell's contribution to this volume, emphasizing the rigidity of the order of the steps in the process of initiation described by the priestess, has added to my mistrust of the mysteries as a path to truth, beauty, wisdom, and excellence.

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Terry Echterling for producing Figure 1 from my embarrassing attempt to draw the layout of Agathon's dining room for my Plato seminar in 2005. Bergquist 1990:37 traces dining rooms from the pre-archaic to the Hellenistic period, and I have used her observations for the room's dimensions: it has walls of about 4.5 meters, with a diagonal of about 6.4 meters (it is roughly 20 meters square). There may have been more than two guests who failed to give memorable speeches, suggesting double occupancy on other couches as well.

<sup>21</sup> *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae*, both produced in 411, and *Ecclesiazusae*, produced in 392 or 391.

<sup>22</sup> The decree is known from Diogenes Laertius 2.26, Athenaeus 556a, and Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 15.20.6; but the original criteria for legitimacy had been restored by the fourth century, so it was not in effect for long. It is, however, a part of the persistent myth that Socrates took a second wife, Myrto. See Nails 2002:209–210. For a more insightful view of Plato's use of female imagery in the *Symposium*, see Angie Hobbs' contribution to this volume.

or the laws, sexual relations between young men were an appropriate extension of the *erômenos* stage.<sup>23</sup> The age difference in homosexual couples, if any, was probably not more than a few years (1989:86), and was likely to have involved physical pleasure for the *erômenos* as well as the *erastês* (1989:204). The view sometimes entertained that there was a generation's difference between Pausanias and Agathon runs into trouble with Plato's texts: Callias' guests in the *Protagoras* seem to be young men, born in the late 450s and early 440s — except Socrates and Critias, both of whom keep their distance from the individuals seeking paying students. It is Agathon's beauty and youth, not his companion's relative seniority, that merits comment (315d7–e3). Vases showing mature men with smaller adolescents, according to Dover (1989:204), were highly conventional, and did not reflect actual practice. Further, Agathon and Pausanias cannot be assumed to have cohabited in Athens (though cohabitation may have been a motivation for their joining the Macedonians): the *oikos* was a trans-generational institution that put civic obligations on an adult male, even if he was in a permanent erotic relationship with another male; so Agathon's celebration took place in his own house, which was not Pausanias' house.<sup>24</sup>

### ***In search of the tragic***

No one needs to be persuaded that Plato could write scenes that are tear-jerkers or side-splitters: the death of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, and the Stesilaus story in the *Laches* are proof enough of that claim. Equally, we have adequate evidence that Plato sometimes conceived tragedy broadly as encompassing serious subjects, and took trifling matters to be comic (cf. *Republic* X 595c1–2, *Laws* VII 817a2–b5). I want to see how far we can progress toward accommodating *Symposium* 223d2–5 with these modest claims. Without waxing technical, we might begin with Christopher Gill's minimalist judgment that the comment at 223d2–5 “seems to highlight Plato's own skill in combining both comic and serious drama in the service of philosophy” (1999:xxxix).<sup>25</sup> This asks less than the logical necessity Socrates invoked,<sup>26</sup> and mentions knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) not at all, but it nevertheless already excludes the explanations of a few commentators who have weighed in on 223d2–5.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The literature on heavy penalties for a citizen's allowing himself to be penetrated, and the hypothesis of intercrural sex (e.g. Dover 1989:103–105, Halperin 1986, 1990:94–99) is not fully persuasive about actual practice because the probability of being caught and charged appears to have been very low, and because the evidence in Old Comedy is more dispositive than that from the courts (Dover 1989:204).

<sup>24</sup> For a contrasting interpretation of the relationship between Agathon and Pausanias, and a different account of their circumstances, see the contribution by Luc Brisson to this volume.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Arieti 1991:110, Nightingale 1995:2.

<sup>26</sup> The 1989 Nehamas-Woodruff translation of 223d2–5 (“authors should be able ... tragic dramatist should also be ...”) is thus misleading, but the weaker sense they give the Greek has been taken up by Nightingale 1995:2, Corrigan 1997:54–64, et al.

<sup>27</sup> Murray 1996:107–108 denies that poetry is a skill (τέχνη) although “a practitioner of a τέχνη will have knowledge of the whole of a given subject area.” The knowledge facilitates accurate judgments about poetry but falls short of guaranteeing that one can compose comedy or tragedy, so Murray twice refers to the comment at 223d2–5 as “hypothetical” (1996:107, 174, cf. Shorey 1937:233n395a on poetry as inspiration, and Schein 1974). She concludes, “If composing poetry were indeed a τέχνη, then it would be the case that the same poet could compose

The bounty of comic elements from the *Symposium* that support Gill’s minimalism has been spectacular and delightful: dirt and food and boisterous drunks, slaves in charge, musical chairs, rules broken, seemliness made unseemly, and the order of things upset at every turn.<sup>28</sup> In a rare role-switch, Socrates-in-sandals (clean for a change) invites an uninvited guest, the dirty and barefoot runt, Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum. Plato also throws in some of his best slapstick scenes: the uninvited guest’s arrival without the invited guest; the doctor’s straight-laced speech with his patient in the background hiccupping loudly, holding his breath and then gasping for air, gargling, and sneezing — trying out each of the doctor’s remedies in succession until cured, just in time to follow the straight man with a stand-up comic’s re-told tale; and Alcibiades, drunkenly acting out his story on a Socrates who sits like Patience on a monument.

Solemn (σπουδαῖος) content does not flow so freely. Scholars have not been as successful at identifying tragic elements — except in relief against the comic, or as serious subjects given a light touch. Mystery religions, for example, are a constant running theme of the dialogue both in the vocabulary of initiation and revelation, and in actions represented, as others have pointed out in detail.<sup>29</sup> The Athenian democracy is another. A *symposion*, in contrast to a *hetaireia* or a *sunômosia*, was a democratic institution with no fixed membership or oaths sworn, but also in its deliberate emphasis on equal portions in the distribution of food and mixed wine, shared entertainment, taking one’s turn, and preserving left to right order.<sup>30</sup> Plato adds other democratic allusions to the dialogue. He uses demotics more than patronymics, for example, beginning with Apollodorus’ being hailed simply as “Phalerian” (172a4).<sup>31</sup> There is no permanent *symposiarch* for the evening. Rather, the guests are to drink as they please. And there is no hierarchy, so different men at different times make proposals for conduct, sometimes peppered with phrases appropriate to the Assembly (e.g. 176e4–177e8) or the courts (e.g. 219c3–6). Alcibiades arrives crowned in ivy and violets, where violets are

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both tragedy and comedy. Since no such poet exists, we are left to infer that poetry is not in fact a τέχνη.” This argument has the same form, and the same flaw, as the *Meno* argument (98d10–e9) that if excellence is teachable, then there must be teachers of it; since there are no teachers of it, excellence cannot be taught. Gill’s minimal formulation also excludes Strauss 2001:285–286 and Rosen 1968:326, who interpret the remark as revealing something about Socrates. Only by “natural gift,” they say, could a man compose both tragedy and comedy (d3–4); by art, a man who can compose tragedies can compose comedies (d4–5), but not the reverse, as confirmed by Aristophanes’ falling asleep before Agathon (d6–7). We are to learn from this, they tell us, that Socrates could compose comedies but not tragedies, and therefore wrote nothing. They make identical claims about the text, and Rosen credits Strauss with being πατήρ τοῦ ἐμοῦ λόγου.

<sup>28</sup> Wardy 2002 accounts systematically for twenty-nine significant sets of opposites introduced in the dialogue and provides asides on others. He analyzes these “polarities” by the degree to which they remain or collapse under examination. Although he does not claim his list is comprehensive, it comes close: I miss only democratic and hierarchic, a pair with historical significance for comedy and tragedy, respectively (Aristotle *Poetics* 1448a28–b2) and which feature in the structure of the *Symposium* as well.

<sup>29</sup> See Bury 1932, des Places 1964:17–18, des Vries 1973, Maraguianou 1985:248–251.

<sup>30</sup> Schmitt-Pantel 1990:19, Wecowski 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Although Eryximachus is introduced with his patronymic (176b5), that brings to mind Acumenus, the doctor known to those present who will share their fate in the months ahead. See Sider 2002:260–262 for Φαληρεῦς.

the symbol for Athens (Pindar fr. 76 Bergk),<sup>32</sup> and ivy is associated with Dionysus. Besides positive and neutral references, some are negative, e.g. Agathon's "to an intelligent person a few sensible people are more frightening than a lot of stupid ones" (194b7–8); Diotima's similar distinction between everyone and the knowledgeable among them (202b8–9, cf. 208c2–d2); and Alcibiades' use of the adage, "a medical man is worth as much as many other men together" (214b7). In each case, knowledge is valued above numbers. There is other serious subject matter in the dialogue, mostly spoken by Diotima: the beautiful and the good, the best life for a human being, the human portion of immortality, the method illustrated in Socrates' elenchus with Agathon. All these are weighty matters, but they do not rise to the level of the tragic — in case that should be the expectation aroused by 223d2–5.

I turn now to authors who have no quarrel with the notion that the tragedy of the *Symposium* is played out off-stage, but who take *Alcibiades* to be the tragic figure of the dialogue. After his attempted seduction of Socrates failed, he turned away from philosophy and squandered his promise and great talents, turning traitor to Athens. An important insight of Dover's — that raised Aristophanes' stakes and diminished Diotima's — ignited what is now a widely held view, so I begin there.<sup>33</sup>

Dover argued (1966, 1980) that Aristophanes gives "the only speech in the *Symposium* which strikes a modern reader as founded on observable realities" (1980:113) and, because "homosexual response was the most powerful emotional experience known to most of the people for whom he [Plato] was writing" (1980:5), the ancients too would have found Aristophanes' account more realistic than Diotima's. Dover points beyond *erôs* as desire for orgasm to what he calls "preference" for a single, unique, other person who complements oneself and for whom one's *erôs* persists regardless of seemingly more attractive potential partners, regardless of one's attraction even to the infinitely beautiful; this he sees as Aristophanes' position against Diotima's (1966:47–50). Her account excludes exactly the personal and subjective element in the object of *erôs*, so Dover declares her position formally incompatible with that of Aristophanes.

Martha Nussbaum (1986:197–199), acknowledging Dover's general incompatibility argument, but with her attention on human action, applies it to particular individuals. No one, by her lights, can *prefer* another person in Dover's sense and simultaneously prefer absolute knowledge.<sup>34</sup> The one is "unique passion" for another person, e.g. Alcibiades' desire for Socrates; and the other is "stable rationality" of the Socratic sort that Diotima's way is said to

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<sup>32</sup> Cited by Nussbaum 1986:193.

<sup>33</sup> There are far more issues, perspectives, and complications than the ones relevant to the epistemologically-based interpretation I pursue below; see Vlastos 1973b, Erde 1976:164–167; Kosman 1976, Gagarin 1977, Patterson 1982, Price 1981, 1991, Rowe 1990, 1998a, Scott 2000, and Penner and Rowe 2005:300–307, all of whom are concerned in different ways with Plato's views on interpersonal relations.

<sup>34</sup> That follows trivially from one sense of 'prefer', but her claim is based on more than that. See also Vlastos 1973b.

provide.<sup>35</sup> “We see two kinds of value, two kinds of knowledge; and we see that we must choose. One sort of understanding blocks out the other.”<sup>36</sup> And, “You have to blind yourself to something.” In Nussbaum’s view, “philosophy is not fully human; but we are terrified of humanity and what it leads to. It is our tragedy: it floods us with light and takes away action.” In the dialogue, it is “movingly displayed to us in the person and the story of Alcibiades.” Nussbaum’s Plato’s *Symposium* offers the vulnerable, passionate Alcibiades as an alternative to the “rational stone” Socrates whom she describes as, “in his ascent towards the form ... very like a form — hard, indivisible, cold” (1986:195). Nussbaum concludes that the reader must choose between Alcibiades and Socrates, between poetry and philosophy, between pursuits of personal and objective knowledge.

She cannot be right. Either (a) there really are two distinct and incompatible kinds of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), as Nussbaum says, one personal, one objective; or (b) human beings (i.e. all of us, for it is, she says, “our” tragedy) conceive two kinds of knowledge where really there is only one. If (b), the issue is one of human frailty, the widespread inability to pursue stable, fundamental knowledge simultaneously with pursuing the unstable apprehension of the beloved (including unstable apprehensions of oneself and of the relationship), resulting in the mistaken belief that there are two kinds of knowledge itself. But the prescription for that incapacity is dialectical philosophy, which would result in the recognition that knowledge is stable, and that unstable apprehensions gained through passion — however independently valuable — are not instances of knowledge. It is a result short of what Nussbaum seeks, but it leaves intact a truth that will carry over into the discussion of Lear’s Socrates below: we humans are deeply affected by our closest relationships and should thus exercise great care in how we treat those with whom we are intimate.

But let us also consider (a), which is Nussbaum’s position: there are in fact two incompatible, discrete kinds of knowledge, strictly so called.<sup>37</sup> In Nussbaum’s view, literature has epistemological value of the Alcibiades-poetic-personal type. Because “we cannot all live, in our own overt activities, through all that we ought to know in order to live well” (1986:186),

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<sup>35</sup> In support of the view that personal and objective knowledge are incompatible, Nussbaum 1986:198 notes, “Socrates was serious when he spoke of two mutually exclusive varieties of vision”; but Socrates makes no such pronouncement in the dialogue. Nussbaum may be referring loosely to the vision of the beautiful that appears “all at once” (ἐξάιφνης, 210e4) together with her own description of that process as a “change in vision” (1986:182–183), but let us for now withhold judgment on whether it was Socrates who advocated the experience of the higher mysteries.

<sup>36</sup> Although the *Symposium* is free of the tripartite psyche, one may be reminded of Freud’s early hydraulic model of the psyche, similar to Plato’s stream of *Republic* VI 485d; given a finite quantity of psychic energy, an increase in one streamlet causes a proportional decrease in the others. Or, to borrow the metaphor from *Republic* IX 588c7–589a10, gratification of lust “feeds the beast,” drains psychic energy away from the intellect. Even these metaphors, however, fall short of Nussbaum’s blocking out or blinding. Three millennia of human history argue for the usefulness of tripartition, but I nevertheless take Plato’s several representations of the psyche as useful metaphors, not doctrine.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the innocuous “pieces of knowledge” (αἱ ἐπιστήμαι, 207e6) and knowings or “kinds of knowledge” (τὰς ἐπιστήμας ... ἐπιστημῶν, 210c7–8).

literature offers a kind of compensation. Literature provides knowledge that is required for living well.<sup>38</sup> But if literature extends only personal knowledge, blocking out the objective, we are left with no account of gaining objective knowledge as the result of reading the philosophical literature we call Platonic dialogues. Further, without objective knowledge from somewhere, I cannot assess the value of the instances of personal knowledge that I am supposed to be learning through my unique experience of another person (or at least my reading about such unique experiences that others are having or imagining). I cannot know whether I've got it right. On the other hand, if knowledge from literature bridges personal and objective knowledge, even if the latter is not now on my mind, then personal apprehensions are not incompatible with objective knowledge after all, and the demand that one choose between them is deprived of force. One can have both, and nothing prevents one's moving from one to the other and back again repeatedly.

Regardless of whether literature extends personal knowledge, or bridges the personal to the objective, we are obliged to take the next step and ask the kinds of questions Socrates asks about the poet's epistemic authority. Did Plato experience personally what he writes about Alcibiades, or did he learn from literature, or did he extrapolate from someone else's account? In Nussbaum's own example, one person, Plato, is the master of both the personal and the objective, implying what seems the correct view: no choice is required. Plato is pulling the strings when, "through a lover's intimacy," Alcibiades "can produce accounts (stories) that are more deeply and precisely true" than those of Socrates (1986:191). We are left without an account under which these experiences of imagination, emotion, and so on are instances of knowledge (rather than what they seem to be — and what Socrates in other contexts argues that they are — volatile ephemera). Even if Alcibiades and Socrates were freaks at opposite ends of some knowledge scale, it does not follow without additional premises that choosing a life of passionate commitment to another person renders one's life unsuitable for seeking absolute knowledge, or seeking absolute knowledge passionately, for that matter. If absolute knowledge were as Diotima describes life at the top of the ladder of love — exclusive, pristine (211e1–2) contemplation of divine beauty (e4) — then, indeed, passionate commitment to another individual would be impossible, but it is far from clear that Socrates embraced the mystical initiation talk that occurred after Diotima said she did not know whether Socrates could follow her.

Diotima goes on to describe the promise of the difficult ascent, the seeker's pay-off as "bringing to birth ... true virtue, because he is grasping the truth" (212a2–5).<sup>39</sup> As a result, he will enjoy the love of the gods and such immortality as is available to a human being (d5–7). Even if the ascent leads to virtue, knowledge, and happiness, for I acknowledge close

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<sup>38</sup> Since she says "ought" we are all duty-bound to read literature, if she is right.

<sup>39</sup> Although I would prefer 'excellence' for ἀρετή, the secondary literature for *Symposium* opts almost universally for 'virtue'.

connections among these, it would not be necessary to take Diotima's path. I, for one, would prefer a different route, even if it were longer or more dangerous. The life "worth living for a human being" according to the mystic priestess Diotima, is pure contemplation of the beautiful (*to kalon* 211d2–3); the philosopher Socrates, as we know, had a different conception of the only life worth living for a human being: the examined life (*Apology* 38a5–6), and he spells out what that means in relation to the lives of his fellow human beings.<sup>40</sup>

Nussbaum seems to have conflated philosophy and mystery religion, then drawn conclusions about Socrates; and she has thereby denied that the philosopher can enjoy the varied and rich life that no mystic can touch. The *Symposium* has had the same odd effect on other scholars, obscuring the divide between philosophy and religion. Dover, for example, praises Aristophanes' view as more Christian than Diotima's (citing 1 John 4.8, ὁ Θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν, 1966:48), as does Kosman 1976:67, citing the mystery of incarnation.

In my view, such confusion and conflation are the "mortal nonsense" (φλυαρίας θνητῆς, 211e3) we would do better to avoid if we can. But it is all too common: a species of it relevant here is the notion that there is some transcendent, supernatural realm of forms, a "Platonic heaven" not only distinct but separate from the particulars that can be perceived and measured. I concede that such a "two worlds" view of Plato, divine and human, opens the way for interpretations that sever beautiful particulars from the beautiful itself. According to Diotima, reaching the peak enables the initiate to see that what he previously thought were beautiful particulars were all along mere *phluarias thnêtês*. Contrast this with Socrates' statement, "I simply, naively and perhaps foolishly cling to this, that nothing else makes it [a thing] beautiful other than the presence of (παρουσία), or the sharing in (κοινωνία), or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful" (*Phaedo* 100d4–9, trans. Grube). Whereas the analogy of the divided line provides for deduction from the first principle, by way of formulae (forms), down to conclusions about particulars (*Republic* 511b6–c2), the ascent in the *Symposium* ends at the summit with exclusive contemplation of *to kalon*. Formal knowledge of the beautiful,<sup>41</sup> apparently implying the clarity, truth, and reality of the top segment of the divided line, fails to enhance the ability of the knower — in Diotima's account — to recognize the beauty in particulars. Rather, at the pinnacle of the ascent, the knower looks back on the particulars as a lot of worthless stuff. I would not wish to overstate the point, but the two passages invite comparison between theoretical science and religion, knowledge of the theory of everything (TOE, as it is affectionately known to some physicists),<sup>42</sup> vs. mystical contemplation of the beautiful and the

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<sup>40</sup> The phrases βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπῳ at *Symposium* 211d3 and οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ at *Apology* 38a6 are too similar not to recall one another, and the phrase does not appear elsewhere in Plato.

<sup>41</sup> For reasons not especially important to the current argument, I prefer this way of expressing what others would call "knowledge of the form of the beautiful."

<sup>42</sup> Others call it the GUT, grand unified theory.

good. Insofar as such a vision distracts one from the higher passage to the first principle and consequent deduction — which Diotima knows nothing about — it is inferior. In any case, the other-worldly view attributed to Plato does nothing to turn images, feelings, and appetites — Nussbaum’s personal data — into what she calls personal knowledge.

Jonathan Lear (1998:148–166) shares Nussbaum’s concern for the tender feelings of the young Alcibiades, explicitly taking Socrates’ indifference to Alcibiades as the tragic focus of the dialogue. With the rich theoretical apparatus of psychoanalysis at Lear’s disposal, however, he does not require Nussbaum’s bifurcated epistemology. Instead, he looks at the dialogue in its historical context and, following a suggestion of Blanckenhagen’s,<sup>43</sup> accuses Socrates of failing to prevent Alcibiades from betraying Athens, with consequences for all of western civilization.<sup>44</sup> Lear takes Diotima to have counseled, “beautiful individuals have only instrumental value: they are to be used, stepped on, like rungs on a ladder ... after one has climbed the ladder, the best thing would be to kick it away” (1998:163). An attraction of Lear’s analysis of the *Symposium* is his indignation on behalf of the *erômenos* that the *erastês* has failed him. Correct *paiderastia* in Diotima’s sense (211b5–6) almost always ended with an *erômenos* of fading beauty left behind, an *erastês* attracted to something new. None of that human pain, however, is of concern to a priestess for whom beautiful boys are interchangeable with beautiful statues — just so long as the ultimate result is contemplation of the beautiful. Lear takes Socrates to have followed Diotima’s counsel in his relationship with Alcibiades, and therein lies the blame. In particular, when Alcibiades attempted to seduce Socrates, Socrates was already too abstracted from real life to respond physically, so Alcibiades became the spurned lover who tragically — and some fifteen years later — turned traitor to Athens. As if semen could itself educate,<sup>45</sup> Blanckenhagen (1992:67) had already complained, “Had Socrates slept with Alcibiades not ‘like a father or older brother’ but as a true *erastês*, he might well have channeled the manifold gifts of this most gifted of all Athenians in a classical, a ‘Periclean’, direction and would have made him the best statesman Athens ever had.” Let us then look more closely at the case of Alcibiades.

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<sup>43</sup> Referring to Alcibiades’ attempt to seduce Socrates, Blanckenhagen 1992:67 says, “A rather good case could be made for the theory that the trauma of that night set the pattern of Alcibiades’ neurotic, destructive, and catastrophic character and life.”

<sup>44</sup> I do not pursue here the sense of ‘agency’ required to underpin a claim that Socrates is even in part to blame for actions taken by Alcibiades at such a remove, but I believe it suggests another important problem in the Lear-Nussbaum view. I also do not discuss whether Alcibiades could in fact have succeeded in Sicily, thereby preventing the oligarchy of 411, the resumption of the war, and the events of 404; there are too many variables. Nussbaum mentions the historical context but, on what I regard as inadequate grounds (unsubstantiated fourth-century opinion), privileges fiction, literature, by returning insistently to the desecration of herms, in which Alcibiades had no role (see below n64).

<sup>45</sup> For evidence that this was a myth of the time, and that it is alluded to repeatedly in the dialogue, see Luc Brisson’s and David Reeve’s contributions to this volume. See also Sheffield 2001a:17–18.

The seduction described in the *Symposium* (217a2–219d2) would have been attempted at just about the time of the *Protagoras*,<sup>46</sup> or a little before, to judge from the description in the opening scene, when Hippocrates assumed Alcibiades was Socrates’ beloved (*Protagoras* 309a1–b4). Very soon afterwards, if not already, Alcibiades would be too old to make a play for Socrates because a bearded man was an implausible *erômenos*. So, was Socrates in fact following Diotima’s advice to kick the ladder away? Lear does not claim that Socrates deliberately set out to use Alcibiades, just that Socrates resisted the youth from indifference. But if this is so, it was a reckless and careless indifference: “insofar as Alcibiades is trapped in the human-erotic, he can, from Socrates’ perspective, go fuck himself. It does not matter to Socrates what the human consequences are” (1998:164). A powerful reason to doubt that this could be so — and it is incidentally a reason to decouple Diotima from the Socrates familiar in Plato — is Socrates’ principle of doing no harm. If Socrates understood that horses become worse when they are mistreated, and he did, he could hardly have thought that humans could be stepped on, or kicked away, without suffering harm (*Apology* 25a13–b6); and his life of examining others in an effort to improve their psyches is further evidence that he took his mission seriously. Moreover, in Alcibiades’ account of the night, Socrates treated him like a son or younger brother (*Symposium* 219d1–2), not like a stranger, not with indifference. It was at least three years after the dramatic date of the *Protagoras*, after the siege at Potidaea had ended and the troops were returning home in 429 (Thucydides 2.79.1–7) that Socrates risked his own life to save Alcibiades (220d5–e2, Scott 2000:36). That too tells against indifference.

Not long after saving Alcibiades in battle, however, Charmides became Socrates’ favorite and, according to Alcibiades, was spurned as others were (222b1–2), providing ammunition for Lear’s view that “Socrates kills them all softly, with his words. Socrates is a traumatizing seducer ... if one substitutes intellectual prowess for overtly sexual activity” (2000:102).<sup>47</sup> A different explanation for Socrates’ treatment of his favorites and the other youths — one more compatible with Socrates’ mission of examining himself and others — is not correct *paiderastia*, nor even correct pedagogy, but the correct *psychagogia*, ‘soul guiding’, attributed to Socrates.<sup>48</sup>

Teaching construed in the osmosis (*Symposium* 175d4–8), transmitter-receiver (*Meno* 73c6–8), or pitcher-and-empty-vessel (*Protagoras* 314b) models cannot work for the philosophical project of seeking wisdom and truth dialectically, thus Socrates repeatedly says of himself that he is not a teacher.<sup>49</sup> Thus he has no “teachings” to pass on to “pupils” or “disciples.” Socrates does not truck with the transfer of information, but with the use of a

<sup>46</sup> I.e. before the war began in earnest, about 433/2.

<sup>47</sup> Belfiore 1980:136–137 argues on the contrary that Alcibiades was improved by his beloved Socrates.

<sup>48</sup> See Teloh 1986:2. Sheffield’s 2001a:17–25 account of the process of education in the dialogue is acute, nuanced, and positive about prospects. See now also Rawson 2006.

<sup>49</sup> I.e. not a ‘teacher’ in the sense that term was understood by Athenians (see e.g. *Meno* 81e3–82a3 and *Apology* 33a3–b8). Plato’s dialogues illustrate and pass on the dialectical practices Socrates used, and with the same positive results in prospect, as I have argued elsewhere (Nails 1995:213–235).

method that increases its respondents' intellectual freedom, and therefore their chance of achieving both virtue and happiness by increasing their power to distinguish good from bad.<sup>50</sup> Despite his love of the beautiful itself, or as expressed by beautiful Alcibiades, despite his physical attraction, Socrates may plausibly think gratification of Alcibiades' erotic appetite will not make Alcibiades better and might well make him worse. Beware the soul-doctor who has sex with patients, or the professor with students, for the patient or student's *erôs* is thereby directed not to the proper objects of knowledge but to the pedagogue or *mystagogue* personally — not in addition, but instead. Something Plato apparently understood about the educational process is that it is difficult to know what really is good, and easy to be misled, making “do no harm” a high standard indeed. Often enough even now, the love of wisdom begins with a crush on Socrates. Plato's dialogues manipulate that emotional bond, affect in the service of formal knowledge, much like the *Symposium*'s ladder of love, for one's *erôs*, one's investment of emotion or psychic energy, must be redirected and transformed. So, for example, Plato's Socrates tells Agathon it is truth “that you can't argue with, since there's nothing difficult about arguing against Socrates” (201c8–9).<sup>51</sup> The psychagogical relationship — Socrates as dialectical guide to Alcibiades, Charmides, and others — is a stage that should be outgrown, not abandoned.<sup>52</sup> The erotic arrow must glance off Socrates and strike toward truth.

Plato's dialogues operate on the whole psyche, primarily on the intellect, but without neglecting the emotions. His longer road, his graduate-level course, depends entirely on the reader's or listener's yearning for wisdom rather than for Socrates, craving truth, not a person. When *erôs* is directed to wisdom and truth, Socrates' active participation, or even his presence in the dialogues, can diminish ... and disappear. That Plato can guide so many people in that direction is the mark of his own genius as a philosopher, an educator, and a literary author.

Blanckenhagen had called Alcibiades, “the human sacrifice on the altar of Socratic doctrine” (1992:67). For Alcibiades' plight to appear so tragic, it is necessary for both Nussbaum and Lear to suppress features of Socrates' life and personality that are familiar to us from the dialogues and were familiar to everyone in Plato's audience as well — a methodologically suspect move for anyone who invokes an understanding of historical circumstances. One such suppressed feature is given by Diotima at 208e3–6: there are some men who “turn their attention more toward women” — a phrase that accurately describes the Socrates of Plato and Xenophon. No argument is adduced to support the view that Socrates feels no *erôs* toward Xanthippe, for example, though it has been widely assumed. There is not much basis for arguments either way, but a few premises might be mentioned. First, it is not necessary to deny Socrates' attraction to Charmides (*Charmides* 155d3–e2) or his frequent remarks about beautiful boys and young men, to hold that his erotic drive embraced women

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<sup>50</sup> See, again, Sheffield 2001a; cf. Gagarin 1977.

<sup>51</sup> “Give but little thought to Socrates and much to truth” (*Phaedo* 91c1–2). The point is made often in the dialogues, and not always by Socrates. Cf. *Phaedrus* 275b, *Republic* I 349a–b, *Gorgias* 473b.

<sup>52</sup> So with the transference relationship in psychoanalysis.

more than men, as Diotima puts it. It is not only Alcibiades and Charmides, but Euthydemus and others (*Symposium* 222b1–2) whose amorous overtures were declined by Socrates. The second bears on the nature of his attraction to Alcibiades, with whom he was associated in the popular imagination well into the fourth century.<sup>53</sup> In *Protagoras*, Socrates measures their relationship by the standard of Alcibiades’ success at argument, and admits to being distracted from Alcibiades by Protagoras’ wisdom (309b7–9). The description is confirmed by Alcibiades at *Symposium* 216d7–e6.<sup>54</sup> Third, Plato provides no support for Xenophon’s view that Xanthippe was unlovable; rather, he represents her sympathetically in the *Phaedo* (her remark at 60a5–8 is selfless). Historically, it can be added that Socrates was still sexually active and begetting children as he approached the age of seventy. Thus Lear (1998:159) and Nussbaum (1986:195) need not be so concerned that Socrates was not sexually aroused when Alcibiades was. It is not as if Socrates was an ascetic, some celibate moralist; we know that he was not. Nor, judging from Socrates’ active social life and the enthusiasm with which others sought his company, does it seem justified to call him a rational stone. Rather, Socrates appears to have been the happiest of men, thoroughly enjoying even the relationships that were not consummated physically; he grew old with dear fellow demesmen and friends from childhood, surrounded by many newer friends, with a wife and children; and he faced death with a tranquility that was a wonder to them all. The philosopher’s life really does seem to be the best of all lives and Socrates the happiest of men because what he really wanted, and what he thought he wanted, really was good. He was not the philosopher of the digression in the *Theaetetus*.

By paraphrasing the philosopher of the digression (173e2–5) in his description of the indifferent Socrates, Lear makes the fault line in his account clearer.<sup>55</sup> He says Socrates “has become as divine as humanly possible, and though he remains in the human realm, he is no longer part of it” (1998:164). This would be the Socrates misunderstood and seemingly defective in the eyes of Athenians — like Nussbaum’s freak — a philosopher at odds with practical life in the real world, perhaps at odds with his own body as he pursues death. But this is not the human Socrates of Plato’s dialogues. “In contrast to the philosopher of the digression,” Ruby Blondell (2002:299–300) argues, Socrates

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<sup>53</sup> *Alcibiades I*, a dialogue written not by Plato but very likely in the days of the initial Academy, shows the early interest in Socrates’ relationship with Alcibiades: Socrates calls himself Alcibiades’ *erastês* (103a2). The dialogue is “Platonic” in the sense that the earliest accretion of academic writing around a core of genuine texts is interesting in illuminating the preoccupations of the Academy at that time. Cf. Thesleff 1982:85.

<sup>54</sup> If Alcibiades were impartial in the matter, these same lines might be persuasive evidence that the *real* Socrates was like Diotima or an initiate into the higher mysteries in his attitude toward beautiful young men. But it would simultaneously raise questions why e.g. Socrates reports in a dialogue he narrates (*Charmides* 155d3–e2) that he *does* feel overwhelming erotic attraction. If one takes the *Symposium* as an aesthetic unity that recommends mystery religion as a route to virtue and knowledge — as the *Phaedrus* recommends rhetoric and the *Theaetetus* mathematics — one does not thereby deny that metaquestions about the dialogues can be addressed.

<sup>55</sup> Reading Lear 1998, in particular his emphasis on what happens after the dialogue ends, prompted my inquiry into what is tragic about the *Symposium* and my writing of this paper. Even when one disagrees with Lear, his provocations and insights make potent sparks.

serves as an embodied exemplar for other embodied persons. His ideal is unattainable precisely because it is detached from the circumstances of human life as actually lived. Sokrates therefore resembles his own *paradeigma* not through superficial slavish imitation (which would be impossible for any embodied human being), but by pursuing the same central values in a manner that is both possible and appropriate for a person whose concrete situation diverges radically, and fundamentally, from that of the ideal in question — that is, by means of structural imitation. Unlike the philosopher, he can speak about the material and social world.

The life of the real-world philosopher, according to this view, does not inevitably cause tragedy, nor must it be tragic. It may seem so, however, if the ends of Platonic philosophy are conflated with those of mysticism (Nussbaum), or if the philosophical paradigm is conflated with a flesh-and-blood philosopher (Lear). I suspect, however, that there is rather more going on than mere conflation, that a deeper concern draws the attention of not only the two contemporary scholars, but Plato's in the central section of *Theaetetus*. What is at stake is nothing less than how we philosophers ought to live our lives, and why.

Is it not inevitable that the person who responds to the desire to know the highest truths will seem ridiculous to other people and will risk both personal animosity and injustice?<sup>56</sup> Philosophers of the Socratic sort will indeed seem ridiculous to the great majority of people but will rarely give it a thought. Approbation and honors awarded by cave dwellers, the great majority of the great majority, are utterly worthless — despite the great worth of each individual cave dweller. The harder case arises from the philosopher's attachments to other people who, try as they might, cannot fathom the life of the philosopher.<sup>57</sup> That less common, but more poignant, case is seen in *Crito* where Socrates' childhood friend continues to urge Socrates to escape, despite the most sustained argument we ever hear from Socrates: that it is never right to do wrong. Some philosophers will be impelled by their knowledge of good and bad to take risks because the results of ignorance are so often disastrous, education is our defense against ignorance, and philosophical education (the elenchus, dialectics) is the most effective form of moral education. Others may simply calculate that responding to the desire to know the highest truths is a surer path to right action and thus to *eudaimonia* than any proffered alternative. The degree of risk philosophers face is usually a matter of political and social circumstances over which an individual has little influence. The greater the role a

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<sup>56</sup> This is the problem Jim Leshner set for me in 2004 and that has been the stone in my boot ever since. I am all too aware that I have not yet met his challenge adequately.

<sup>57</sup> The notion of attachment, together with the commitment to education that will emerge below, reflects the broad sense of *erôs* found in the writings of the Russian anarchist (and prince), Peter Kropotkin (1924:94): "Plato understood by Eros not only a mutual attachment of two beings, but also the sociality based on the accord between the desires of the individual and the desires of all the other members of society. His Eros was also what we now call sociability, mutual sympathy, the feeling which, as can be seen from the previously mentioned facts taken from the life of animals and of human beings, permeates the whole world of living creatures and which is just as necessary a condition of their lives as is the instinct of self-preservation."

<i>celebrating Agathon's victory</i>	<i>later accused of</i>	<i>accused by</i>	<i>outcome</i>
AGATHON, son of Tisamenus*			
PAUSANIAS of Cerameis*			
PHAEDRUS of Myrrhinus, son of Pythocles*	profaning the mysteries	Teucus, metic	fled into exile
ERYXIMACHUS, son of Acumenus*	desecrating herms	Teucus, metic	unknown
(Acumenus, Eryximachus' father)	profaning the mysteries	Lydus, slave	fled into exile
ALCIBIADES of Scambonidae, son of Clinias*	profaning the mysteries	Andromachus, slave	trial postponed, embarked to Sicily†
	profaning the mysteries	Agariste, wife of Damon	recalled, defected to Sparta
SOCRATES of Alopece, son of Sophroniscus*	impiety ( <i>asebeia</i> )	Meletus, Anytus, Lycon	executed
ARISTODEMUS of Cydathenaeum			
ARISTOPHANES of Cydathenaeum, son of Philippus			
<i>usually in Alcibiades' company</i>	<i>later accused of</i>	<i>accused by</i>	<i>outcome</i>
ADEIMANTUS of Scambonidae, son of Leucolophides*	profaning the mysteries	Agariste, wife of Damon	shared exile with Alcibiades
AXIOCHUS of Scambonidae, son of Alcibiades	profaning the mysteries	Agariste, wife of Damon	shared exile with Alcibiades
ALCIBIADES of Phegous	fraud	Diocles, blackmailer	shared exile with Alcibiades
<i>spurned by Socrates, 222b1-2</i>	<i>later accused of</i>	<i>accused by</i>	<i>outcome</i>
CHARMIDES, son of Glaucon*	profaning the mysteries	Agariste, wife of Damon	fled into exile, returned by 404
EUTHYDEMUS, son of Diocles			
* Present also in <i>Protagoras</i> , set c. 433/2 at the house of Callias of Alopece, son of Hipponicus.			
† Alcibiades assisted the Spartans and Persians until the oligarchy of 411 collapsed; he then accepted command of the Athenian fleet in the Hellespont and returned to Athens for four months in 407, but was dismissed that year from his command and was killed in 404. Adeimantus was chosen (not elected) general in 407/6, and served again in 406/5 and 405/4. Axiochus was active in Athenian politics again in 407.			

Figure 2. Historical incidents in the aftermath of Plato's *Symposium*: central story, 416, and dramatic frame, 399.

philosopher takes in the education of the young, perhaps, the greater the risk of animosity and injustice, but fear of retaliation does not motivate the real-world philosopher. Both Socrates and Plato put the education of the young first in their activist philosophical lives, and although both suffered, neither gave up. Even if it were absolutely certain that philosophers would always be misunderstood, despised, and treated unjustly, *erôs* aimed at truth is not satisfied with simulacra. Philosophy is thus the only way of life for the real-world philosopher, who is as bound to truth-seeking as to drawing breath.

### ***Off-stage tragedy: profanation of the mysteries***

The tragedy of the *Symposium* is not in the *Symposium*; it is not Agathon's speech<sup>58</sup> or that of Pausanias,<sup>59</sup> not Aristophanes' folktale,<sup>60</sup> not Alcibiades' disappointment at having failed to consummate his attraction to Socrates, not ours from being forced to choose between incommensurable types of knowledge, not played out off-stage as the result of Socrates' mistreatment of Alcibiades, and not Alcibiades' having betrayed Athens — or so I have tried to show. The two tragedies of the *Symposium* correspond to its two dramatic dates, the events of the months after 416 (religious hysteria) and 399 (religious backlash).<sup>61</sup> Thoughtless religious fervor is dangerous, a persistent and insidious kind of ignorance that leads to error and that can be perpetuated by priests and priestesses. In this context, Diotima is an ambiguous character.

### **Figure 2. Historical incidents in the aftermath of Plato's *Symposium*: central story, 416, and dramatic frame, 399.**

In the summer after Agathon's celebration, Alcibiades — always in quest of honors and glory — set an unprecedented Olympic record, entering seven teams in the chariot race, and finishing first, second, and fourth.<sup>62</sup> As spring rolled around again, he had determined that he

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<sup>58</sup> The tragedian Agathon's speech (194e4–197e8) is tragic in style, having the rhetorical structure of an encomium, embellishments, and studied poetic meters, even while it adds something playful (παιδιᾶς combined with σπουδῆς μετρίως). Dover 1980:123–124 catalogues the variety of meters in Agathon's peroration (197d1–e5); cf. Hunter 2004:73.

<sup>59</sup> Corrigan 1997:61 remarks on the “terrifying reality of Pausanias' speech” with its “thorough-going immoralism.” What immoralism? Corrigan goes on to say that all the speeches before Socrates' have “prismatic, deconstructive ambiguity” — which sounds scary, but not tragic.

<sup>60</sup> Waterfield 1994:81, 95 remarks on the “sadness of Aristophanes' doctrine,” a “tragic tale of man's original sin and its consequences.” The human condition is “unfulfilled and unfulfillable longing” for “wholeness” through sex which, by its nature, offers only a sporadic, partial, and temporary respite. Wardy 2002:20 expresses some sympathy when he locates the tragedy of the *Symposium* in the fact that “All lovers would immediately take up Hephaestus' offer to weld them together inseparably, realizing that permanent unification was what they had desired all along (192e5–6).” This view seems better characterized as pathetic.

<sup>61</sup> See Furley 1996. Halperin (2005:56) says, “We read the *Symposium* possessed of a tragic knowledge that is denied the characters at the moment of their speaking. They are surrounded by deep shadows of which they are unaware.”

<sup>62</sup> It was in all the papers: Thucydides 6.16.2, Isocrates *On the Team of Horses* (fr. 16) 34, Demosthenes *Against Meidias* 21.145; but his son was still being sued in 397 because Alcibiades did not own one of the teams he had entered. See Nails 2002:s.v. and Excursus 1.

should lead Athens on an invasion of Sicily and persuaded the Assembly of it over Nicias' objections.<sup>63</sup> Both men were elected to lead, with a third general as well, Lamachus, to settle disagreements between Alcibiades and Nicias. The story becomes complicated at just this point (see Figure 2) when it becomes important to understand the sequence of events. Preparations for the invasion began. When nearly complete, almost all the city's herms were desecrated in a single night. Hermes being the god of travel, the act was viewed as a terrible omen, and rumors spread that there was a plot against the democracy. A commission was appointed that offered rewards for information about any act of *asebeia*. When the fleet was at the point of embarking, a slave named Andromachus accused Alcibiades and nine others of having profaned the Eleusinian mysteries in a private home some time before. One of the accused was caught and executed, eight escaped capture by fleeing the city and forfeiting their property and citizenship. Alcibiades demanded a trial, but his enemies prevailed.<sup>64</sup> The fleet sailed. The commission then heard testimony, provided by the metic Teucrus, that Phaedrus and others had profaned the mysteries. Teucrus also testified that Eryximachus and others had desecrated herms;<sup>65</sup> all fled the city.<sup>66</sup> Phaedrus' house was occupied by Diogiton and three orphans, and his new wife went back to her family. Tensions rose. A third accuser, Agariste (wife of Damon, known from *Republic* and *Laches*) charged Alcibiades and two of his companions with profaning the mysteries in the house of Charmides, Plato's uncle; swift state triremes were sent to bring Alcibiades back to Athens for trial, so he jumped ship at Thurii and defected to the Spartans, giving them useful advice for defeating the Athenians in Sicily and at home. Eryximachus' father, Acumenus, was accused of profaning the mysteries by the slave Lydus; and a third of Alcibiades' friends was accused of aiding blackmail. Finally, the real herm-smashers were identified (a drinking club) and executed,<sup>67</sup> so some prisoners awaiting trial (including Plato's cousin Critias), were released.

That period of months was a time of mass religious hysteria in Athens. In addition to tortures and summary executions in the early days (some in error), and regular executions later, there were about fifty men who fled Athens and were sentenced to death *in absentia*. All lost their property and citizenship, all their families were affected, and none returned before 407, if then. Moreover, it cost Athens Alcibiades' leadership, to which the Athenian defeat in Sicily is sometimes attributed and for which Socrates has sometimes been blamed.

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<sup>63</sup> Thucydides 6.8–26. The Sicilian invasion was to be the most complete and disastrous failure of the war, costly of men and morale, and toppling the democracy briefly in 411.

<sup>64</sup> Our source for the claim that eight men fled is Andocides 1.16, who provides the evidence in 400. As Dover 1970:280n1 points out, citing Thucydides 6.53.1, some of them (e.g. Alcibiades' three known comrades) may in fact have remained free under Alcibiades' protection until they all fled together from Thurii.

<sup>65</sup> See Mark McPherran's contribution to this volume for a number of insights into Eryximachus' important role in the dialogue as a whole.

<sup>66</sup> Teucrus also implicated himself, but in exchange for the immunity granted all who testified; he was later honored with a reward at the Panathenaea. Phaedrus was never accused of desecrating herms, though the erroneous view that he did has spun out of control since Dover 1970 (see Nails 2002:233–234).

<sup>67</sup> See Thucydides 6.60–61, 6.88–93. Dover argues that, while Thucydides seems skeptical of Andocides' testimony, the Athenian jury was in a position to know and to confirm what he claimed.

I focus on the profanations because the *Symposium* does, explicitly illustrating how the accusations could have come about from slaves and a woman, and foreshadowing what will happen to the happy party in the following months. To profane the mysteries, punishable by death, was to give away secrets about them, whether by acting them out, parodying them, or talking about the parts that only initiates were allowed to hear. Agathon's slaves were coming and going at their tasks, catching bits of what was going on, and the women were elsewhere in the house — probably in an adjacent room. Two particular speeches are telling. Diotima's of course. She not only tells about the higher mysteries, she first announces that she will (209e5–210a3), and then uses the appropriate technical vocabulary as she does so. The other is Alcibiades'. Half drunk, he says exactly what would cause any slave or woman overhearing the men to pay closer attention: “you wouldn't have heard it from me, if first of all — as the saying goes — the truth weren't in the wine, whether without slaves present or with them” (217e2–4), and “You slaves — and anyone else here who's uninitiated [βέβηλος] and a boor — fit some biggish doors to your ears” (218b6–8). Plato makes it easy to imagine that this is something Alcibiades may have said on other occasions. But when there is a reward for reporting what one has overheard, or if one thinks the gods will punish Athens if those guilty of *asebeia* are not rooted out, there is a motivation to accuse.

Who escaped unscathed? Socrates for a while. Agathon and Pausanias, but they left Athens together permanently and joined the court at Macedonia in about 408. Aristophanes was unscathed, and his *Frogs* of 406 updated the subject, lamenting the city's loss of Agathon's poetry (83–85), and bringing onto the stage a whole chorus of Eleusinian initiates (from line 316). The play was first performed following the naval disaster at Aegospotami, when the Athenians feared the Spartans would sail into the harbor and massacre them all; Aristophanes adapts a line from tragedy to describe how the Athenians even then pinned their hopes on Alcibiades, banished but still alive: the city “yearns for him, detests him, and wants to have him” (1425).<sup>68</sup> But even then Aristophanes was still assaulting Socrates,<sup>69</sup> the only other guest from Agathon's celebration still known to be in the city besides Aristophanes himself:

So what's stylish is not to sit  
beside Socrates and chatter,  
casting the arts aside  
and ignoring the best  
of the tragedian's craft.  
To hang around killing time  
in pretentious conversation

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<sup>68</sup> Dionysus, speaking to Aeschylus in the underworld, ποθεῖ μὲν, ἐχθαίρει δέ, βούλεται δ' ἔχειν, adapted from *Ion Guards* fr. 44.

<sup>69</sup> He had attacked Socrates in 414 in *Birds* too (1280–1283, 1553–1555).

and hairsplitting twaddle  
is the mark of a man who's lost his mind.

Aristophanes *Frogs* 1491–1499, trans. Henderson

### ***Off-stage tragedy: Socrates' execution***

The *Symposium* frame shows a flurry of interest in the story of that long-ago banquet, probably precipitated by news of Socrates' indictment: the spring of 399, between the preliminary hearing Socrates attended after the *Euthyphro*, but before his trial, is the dramatic date of the frame.<sup>70</sup> Some months were required between Meletus' initial accusation and Socrates' execution, almost all of the period after notice of the accusation against Socrates had been published on whitened tablets in the agora and a date set for the pre-trial examination (ἀνάκρισις). Both the *Theaetetus* and the *Symposium* mention fact-checking with Socrates to get stories straight during that interim.<sup>71</sup>

Other things had been going on in Athens, things overshadowed by — though also brought on by — defeat in Sicily, revolt of the subject allies, rule of the Four Hundred, Spartan victory, rule of the Thirty, civil war, and the failed reconciliation agreement. A commission established in 410 had completely rewritten the laws by 404, for example, and a board established in 403 was assisted by the Council in adding new laws in response to the city's recent history. A new legal era was proclaimed from the archon year 403/2, at the same time an official religious calendar was adopted and inscribed, and after which all litigation was limited to laws inscribed 410–403. Proposing any change to them was criminalized, so Socrates had no legal standing to challenge the one-day trial law (*Apology* 37a7–b2), much less the *asebeia* law under which he was charged. His accusers had only to prove that Socrates had at some time in his seventy years committed *asebeia*.

The rise in the number of *asebeia* cases in Athenian courts at the turn of the century resulted from a religious backlash against what many Athenians saw as the insidious effects of sophists and natural philosophers who had caused the city's youths to question tradition and the role of the gods in Athens' affairs. Aristophanes' *Clouds* had illustrated it: chop-logic and hairsplitting instead of respect for custom, naturalistic explanations for divine phenomena. But so do Plato's dialogues illustrate Socrates' naturalistic explanations and interests (*Theaetetus* 152e, 153c–d, 173e–174a; *Phaedo* 96a–100a); Socrates says outright that he doesn't accept the poets' stories of the gods' wrongdoing (*Euthyphro* 6a–c) although the quarreling gods of the poets were the gods of Athens; Socrates' questioning of Meletus would not be easy for the average jurymen to distinguish from cross-questioning by sophists or those trained by sophists to win court cases whether innocent or guilty (*Apology* 26e6–27a7); and Socrates'

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<sup>70</sup> No sooner had I committed myself to the vague dramatic date of about 400 for the *Symposium* frame (Nails 2002:314), than David O'Connor persuaded me of this more precise date.

<sup>71</sup> This is evidence in the dialogues for the composition of Socratic *logoi* before the death of Socrates.

defense of his *daimonion* (31d1) and claim that Apollo commanded his practice (20e–23b) appear only to have intensified the jury’s misunderstanding of who he was. It would have been one thing if Socrates had kept it all to himself while performing his religious civic obligations as always, but youths found him irresistible.<sup>72</sup> In an anti-intellectual climate of religious intolerance, things become worse for such philosophers. What was harmlessly ridiculous in 416 was criminally impious by 399.

The *Symposium* is one of the dialogues in the series, beginning with the death of Socrates’ look-alike in the *Theaetetus* and moving with the Greek tragic sense of inevitably to Socrates’ death in the *Phaedo*. We don’t see that at first. With an emotional attachment to Socrates, most of us blame the Athenians and consider Socrates innocent when we first read the dialogues. In the longer run, foreknowledge of that cup of hemlock refines and heightens our intellectual response along with our emotional attachment, and we finally see all the condemning evidence against Socrates laid out before us in the dialogues themselves. Socrates does not blame the Athenians, however, and for a familiar reason: they did not willingly do wrong. As we know, Socrates says he should be taken aside and instructed, not dragged into court, for corrupting the youth because, if he corrupted them, he did so unwillingly (*Apology* 25e6–26a4, 30b5–7). Likewise, he says of the Athenians, “Whatever word it [the state] applies to it [the good], that’s surely what a state aims at when it legislates” (*Theaetetus* 177e4–6, tr. McDowell). The Athenians thus ought not to be blamed, but to be understood and instructed. Their instruction was Socrates’ life’s work. There was no evil conspiracy against the good Socrates. More profound and more tragic, his ordeal resulted from a catastrophic mistake, a misunderstanding that could not be reconciled in the single day the law allowed for his trial.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Socrates diagnoses his predicament correctly at *Euthyphro* 3c7–d2; cf. 2c–d.

<sup>73</sup> This paper is shorter and clearer than the version I presented at the Center for Hellenic Studies Conference on Plato’s *Symposium* in August 2005. I deeply appreciate the participants’ comments and conversations, which benefited my understanding as well as my paper; but I feel a special debt — a joyful one — to Ruby Blondell, Jim Leshner, William Levitan, Frisbee Sheffield, and the Center’s anonymous readers for their telling criticism and helpful suggestions. A later version of part of the paper was presented to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ottawa in April of 2006.