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# Alcibiades the Profane: Images of the Mysteries in Plato's Symposium

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*Alcibiades the Profane: Images of the Mysteries*

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

**I. The Vision of the Beautiful and the Problem of Alcibiades**

*Suddenly* he will see something beautiful in its nature, this is that thing, Socrates, on account of which all his previous toils have been. . . .

And *suddenly* a banging on the courtyard door presented a huge noise as of revelers, and they heard the sound of a flutegirl. . . . and not long after they heard the sound of Alcibiades in the courtyard, very drunk and bellowing loudly, asking where Agathon was and demanding that they take him to Agathon.

(*Symp.* 210e 4–6; 212c5–7, d3–5)

Just as the vision of the Beautiful itself *suddenly* flashes in upon the philosophical lover after long explorations of *Erōs*, so too another vision *suddenly* appears to the symposiasts after a long evening's worth of explorations into *Erōs*. Right after Socrates' speech, where the prophetess Diotima describes the mysteries of *Erōs*, comes the speech of a man notorious for the profanation of mysteries. Alcibiades also makes use of references to sacred mystery rites in his drunken, rambling, and passionate speech about the love of Socrates. Plato uses this juxtaposition of mystery ritual imagery to elucidate not only the philosophical nature of the encounter with the Beautiful itself, but also the problem of Alcibiades.

The spectacular disaster of the life of Alcibiades was a problem to which Plato, and many other Socratic thinkers, returned repeatedly. Why should this brilliant aristocrat, possessed of every excellence from courage to intellect, the ward of Pericles and follower of Socrates, the bold and cunning general who transformed the course of the Peloponnesian War so many times, why should he have gone so wrong, dying at the hands of assassins after betraying every side on the war multiple times, cuckolding the king of Sparta, and profaning the most sacred rites of Athens?

The association with Alcibiades was assuredly a factor in the trial and execution of Socrates after the war; he was perhaps the most outstanding example of a youth whom Socrates was accused of corrupting.

The problem remains in modern scholarship. Why did Alcibiades' famous relationship with Socrates not produce the ideal philosophic leader? Was Alcibiades simply unfit for philosophy, too obsessed with pleasure and honor to comprehend the lessons of philosophy? Or is Socrates' inhuman indifference to this appealing figure to blame, a "failure of love," as Vlastos has notoriously labeled it?

In the *Symposium*, Plato deploys the imagery of mystery rituals and the idea of Alcibiades as a profaner of mysteries to provide at least a partial answer to this vital question. Far from being fundamentally unfit for philosophy, Alcibiades engaged in his weird relation with Socrates precisely because he was, as a brilliant youth full of potential, able to perceive the beauty in Socrates. But because he failed to understand that the beauty he perceived was not a possession of Socrates (or even something that could be possessed), he tried to take possession of that beauty for himself, just as he tried to appropriate the Mysteries of Eleusis for himself. His *pleonexia*, his overreaching to take possession of the divine beauty he sees in Socrates, is echoed in the dialogue by the reminders of Alcibiades' future as a profaner of mysteries.

In this chapter, I argue that misunderstandings of the nature of ancient Greek mystery rituals and the Eleusinian Mysteries in particular have obscured the resonance these images would have had for Plato's audience. Modern scholars frequently imagine that mystery rituals involve the transmission of secret teachings, often as part of a tripartite structure of purification, instruction, and revelation, rather than an experience that brings the worshipper into an encounter and continuing relationship with the divinity. So too, modern scholars mistakenly assume that Alcibiades' profanation of the mysteries involves a comic parody of the rites, a mocking display of contempt for Athenian traditional beliefs, rather than an arrogant appropriation for himself of one of the most authoritative religious symbols of the Athenian community. These misunderstandings occlude the serious work that Plato is doing with the imagery of the mysteries in the *Symposium*.

## 2. The Mystery of the Mysteries

It is worth beginning by reconsidering the nature of the mystery rituals themselves, since misconceptions about these rituals have obscured the

way Plato employs the imagery. First, the imagery of mystery rituals in the *Symposium* is not limited to the Mysteries of Eleusis, but includes other rites, such as those of the Corybantes, the Orphica, and Dionysos, all of which, like the Eleusinian rites, could be called *telea* or *teletai*. Second, the Eleusinian Mysteries did not consist of a neat sequence of preliminary purification, followed by the Lesser Mysteries, and culminating in the Great Mysteries, but the Mysteries at Eleusis could be experienced either as an ordinary mystes or as an epoptes. Most importantly, the impact of such rites does not come from the imparting of some mystic doctrine but rather from the extraordinary experience itself.

The words for such rituals, *telea* or *teletai*, are often misleadingly translated as “initiations” but “perfections” would be more accurate, since such rites serve not to introduce the worshipper into a group of other worshippers but rather to improve or perfect the worshipper’s relationship to the god.<sup>1</sup> Mysteries may be considered a special class of such rituals that are performed, not in public view, but with an audience limited only to the performers.<sup>2</sup> The term “mysteries” may derive originally from the name of the festival at Eleusis for the goddesses Demeter and Kore, but such was the prestige of these rites that “mysteries” becomes a general term in ancient (and especially modern) sources for all rites of this kind.<sup>3</sup> In the *Symposium*, the scene with Alcibiades abounds with allusions, not just to the Eleusinian Mysteries but to a number of others. As many commentators have noted, Alcibiades’ appearance, drunk with wine and wreathed in ivy, in company with flutegirls and revelers, evokes the epiphany of the god Dionysos, and he refers to the Bacchic frenzies, which he and others of the company have undergone in the presence of Socrates:<sup>4</sup>

And then again I see the Phaedruses, Agathons, Eryximachuses, Pausaniases, Aristodemuses, and Aristophaneses – and why is it necessary even to mention Socrates himself? – and all the others. For you all have shared in the madness and bacchic rites of philosophy.<sup>5</sup> (218b)

He then proceeds to quote the familiar opening tag of the Orphic poems, bidding the profane to “close the doors of your ears” (218b). He describes his own reactions to Socrates as being those of someone undergoing the

<sup>1</sup> On these terms, see Dowden 1980, as well as Edmonds 2013: 211–7.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Strabo 10.3.9 on the types of rites, where the difference between mystic, secret rites and public ones is only one of a number of distinctions.

<sup>3</sup> As Graf 2008 suggests.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Agathon claiming that Dionysos will judge between him and Socrates before the night is out. *Symp.* 175e.

<sup>5</sup> The explanation of these plurals in Gallop 2004 is not convincing, but the puzzle remains.

Corybantic rites, stirred up to leaping frenzy. The images of the *teletai* pervade the scene, reinforcing the connection, so natural to any fourth-century reader of Plato, between Alcibiades and these rites.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.1. *The Mystery of Eleusinian Mysteries*

It is the Mysteries at Eleusis, however, that loom largest in the background of Alcibiades' entrance, since his conviction for profaning these mysteries occurs little more than a year after the date in which the dialogue is set. The resonances of the allusions to the Eleusinian Mysteries have been misunderstood by scholars, however, because of misconceptions about what actually went on in these rites. The ancient sources respect the idea that the Mysteries are to be kept secret, so no description of the rituals survives, except for those of the early Christian apologists, whose confused and contradictory polemical accounts do not inspire confidence in their accuracy. Various attempts have been made to reconstruct the rituals, but the tripartite schema most recently expounded by Riedweg seems to be most influential in the interpretations of the *Symposium*.<sup>7</sup>

Riedweg, in his study of mystery terminology in Plato, sees the references in the *Symposium* to the Greater and Lesser Mysteries as reflecting an actual sequence of initiations focused on imparting secret doctrines to the initiates. Plato, in his view, constructs Diotima's account of *erōs* along the model of the Eleusinian Mysteries, following a tripartite pattern that would have been familiar to the Athenians of Plato's day as the sequence of the Mysteries. Riedweg's pattern has been influential in recent discussions of the passage, but it unfortunately misrepresents the Mysteries, providing an overly simplified schema based on the systematizations of later Christian and Neoplatonic writers. The tripartite schema is simple and appealing to use, but, as H. L. Mencken famously said, for every complicated problem, there is always an easy solution – "neat, plausible, and wrong."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Not only was Alcibiades infamous for his profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries, but he is associated with the rites of Korytto in testimonies to Eupolis' *Baptai*, see Furley 1996: 131–133 on Kassel-Austin PCG V: 331–42. The contention of Hatzfeld 1951: 178–181 that his indictment for profanation involves these mysteries instead of Eleusis has not convinced many.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the attempts in Mylonas 1961, with the more recent "thin description" in Bremmer 2014. Sattler 2013 provides an overview of the pre-Platonic evidence for the elements of the rituals. Clinton 2003 attempts to rework the evidence discussed in Dowden 1980, but he still tries to stick with a tripartite scheme set up by Clement and Theon. Better reconstructions may be found in Sourvinou-Inwood 2003 and Bowden 2010: 26–48.

<sup>8</sup> H. L. Mencken, "The Divine Afflatus," New York Evening Mail, 16 November 1917.

Riedweg divides up the schema into three stages: a preliminary purification, a teaching of the mystery, and a final revelation, and he argues that these three stages reflect the stages of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the preliminary rites of purification, the Lesser Mysteries, and the Greater Mysteries. The basis for this neat tripartite schema is in fact the Christian author, Clement of Alexandria, who creates it as part of his project of bashing the Greek mysteries as a whole:

It is not then implausibly done that purifications start off the mysteries among the Greeks, just as also among the barbarians the washing. After these are the small mysteries, which have some foundation of instruction and of preliminary preparation for what is to come after; and the great mysteries, in which nothing remains to be learned of the universe, but only to contemplate and comprehend nature and things. (*Stromata* 5.11.71.1–2)

This neat progression of a mystic curriculum is reinforced by other late evidence, primarily from systematizing Neoplatonists who are taking the prestigious ancient Mysteries, no longer performed in Eleusis, as authorization for their own Academic curricula.<sup>9</sup>

As Dowden has shown, however, these three stages do not in fact reflect the practice of the rituals at Eleusis. Rather, the ancient evidence consistently makes a distinction between the *muēsis* and the *epopteia* as two kinds of experience of the Eleusinian Mysteries; the performance of the former ritual makes one a *mustēs*, while the latter is a further experience open only to those who have already undergone *muēsis*. While the precise nature of the *epopteia* remains a mystery, the evidence suggests the revelation of some kind of image that has a profound impact on the *epoptēs*, the one who “looks upon” it.<sup>10</sup>

A passage from Plutarch that describes the way Demetrius sought to undergo the whole experience of the Eleusinian Mysteries during his brief stay in Athens lists the Lesser Mysteries, the Greater Mysteries, and the *Epopteia* as the rites involved, but the Lesser Mysteries at Agra appear to have been a different ritual than the Great Mysteries at Eleusis, while the *epopteia* takes place as a higher level of participation in the Greater Mysteries (*Demetrius* 26.1–2). Dowden points out how the pair of the Lesser Mysteries at Agra and the Greater Mysteries at Eleusis, two different

<sup>9</sup> As Dowden 1980: 419 wryly remarks, “Scholarly tidying up of the untidy historical facts has occasionally been assisted on the path to perdition by a curious passage of Theon of Smyrna” (*De Util. Math.*, 14–15 Hiller).

<sup>10</sup> Dowden 1980: 425 suggests that only the *epoptai* entered the *Telesterion* for this final revelation, given the size of the building at Eleusis and the number of participants each year. Other scholars suggest that the *mustai* were blindfolded; see, e.g. Clinton 2003.

festivals, become conflated with the *muēsis* and *epopteia* in the (Greater) Eleusinian Mysteries, leading scholars ancient and modern to see the Lesser Mysteries as standing in the same relation to the Greater as the *muēsis* to the *epopteia*.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Diotima's reference to the *epopteia* has been construed as an allusion to the Greater Mysteries, while the erotic interactions she has described previously are imagined as Lesser Mysteries:

With respect to these erotic matters, Socrates, you might perhaps be made a *mustēs*, but with respect to the rites and *epoptika*, on account of which these matters also are, I don't know if you would be capable. (201a)

This confusion has led scholars to map the elements of Diotima's speech onto Clement's tripartite schema. The *elenchos* becomes seen as the preliminary purifications, while the Lesser Mysteries are seen as the occasion for the transmission of the teachings, the secret doctrines of the Mysteries.<sup>12</sup>

This schema helps perpetuate one of the most serious misconceptions in modern scholarship about the nature of the mystery rites, the assumption that the "mystery" is a secret doctrine imparted to the initiates in the ceremony, and that this knowledge is the key benefit the initiate derives from the rite. On the contrary, the key aim of all the *teletai*, including the Eleusinian Mysteries, was to improve the worshipper's relation with the god through a closer contact and experience of the deity. Aristotle famously says that "for those undergoing the *teletai* it is not necessary that they learn anything, but rather that they experience something and transform their disposition, becoming clearly accustomed" (fr. 15 Ross = Synesios, *Dion* 8.43). The "something (*ti*)" that is experienced is understood as a kind of contact with the divine, perhaps even, as in Euripides' *Bacchae*, a face-to-face encounter with the deity (470–474). Lucius, in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, likewise describes his initiation into the mysteries of Isis as culminating in an act of worshipping the gods face to face (*Met.* II.23). Lucius' description of the process, like that of Plutarch (fgt.178 Sandbach), is full of imagery of light and darkness in bewildering succession, fear and confusion before the final revelation.

<sup>11</sup> The reference in Plato's *Gorgias* 497c further complicates matters, since Socrates seems to suggest that one cannot do the Greater Mysteries before the Lesser. "You are fortunate, Callicles, in that you have become a *mustēs* in the greater things before the lesser. I didn't think that was permitted." However, this passage may not be referring to the Lesser Musteria at Agra and the Greater Musteria at Eleusis but more generally to mysteries, since it is unclear when the rites at Agra became associated with the Eleusinian ones.

<sup>12</sup> Riedweg 1987: 21 sets out a sequence of *elenchos*, *didachē* + *muthos*, and *epoptika*, which he finds parallel to *Symposium* 199c3–201c9, 201e8–209e4, and 209e5–212a7, respectively. This division has been picked up by other commentators, for example, Belfiore 2012: 141.

The *teletai* in the mysteries provide the ultimate kind of contact with the deity, a step beyond the kind of interactions involved in normal religious ritual such as prayer and sacrifice. Such interactions are perhaps most concisely described in the *Symposium* itself, in Diotima's description of the work of the daimonic in connecting mortals and gods:

Interpreting and transporting human things to the gods and divine things to men; entreaties and sacrifices from below, and ordinances and requitals from above: being midway between, it makes each to supplement the other, so that the whole is combined in one. Through it are conveyed all divination and priestcraft concerning sacrifice and ritual. (202e)

All ritual works to bring together gods and mortals; the mortals provide sacrifices and honors for the gods, while the gods provide, through their superior power, things that mortals cannot obtain without their help. Diotima tendentiously proclaims that a daimonic intermediary is necessary, since gods and mortals cannot mix, but even still the connection between the two can be more or less close, and much of the practice of Greek religion is involved in building closer and more positive relations with the gods. Historians of religion have analyzed the reciprocal pattern of relationships between gods and mortals in Greek practice, comparing the Greek hospitality code (*xenia*) and its reciprocal (though not always equal) gift exchanges.<sup>13</sup> The bonds of obligation between gods and mortals resemble those of host and guest, and they can be built up more closely through the exchange of favors over time as well as by special occasions in which particularly significant favors are exchanged.

The performance of a mystery ritual is one such special occasion, differing not so much in kind from the normal practices of religion (prayer and sacrifice, etc.) as in intensity. By performing the special rituals of the *teletē*, the worshipper does special honor to the deity and thus brings himself into a special relationship with the deity where the deity will respond with special favors. As the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* proclaims:

Blessed is he among men upon earth who has seen these things; but he who is uninitiate and who has no part in the rites, never has a share of such things when indeed he is perished in the shadowy gloom. (480–482)

The blessings for mortals in the Mysteries are contingent on the proper payment of honors to the goddess, since, as Hades tells Persephone, “there will be a recompense for all time for those doing you wrong, whoever does

<sup>13</sup> See especially Parker 1998, as well as Pulleyn 1997 on prayer and Naiden 2013 on sacrifice.



not sacrifice and appease your wrath, reverently performing rites and paying fit gifts” (367–369). Those who do offer the special honors receive special blessings, both in life and after death when they are in the special care of Persephone; the happy afterlife of the Eleusinian initiates is not a special secret revelation but a benefit resulting from their special relationship with the Queen of the Dead.<sup>14</sup>

Such rituals bringing the worshipper into closer contact with the god could be repeated, by some perhaps once or twice in a lifetime, by others on a frequent basis. The sacrifices and rituals involved in such experiences require a certain investment of time and energy, not to mention expense, but not every person would choose to devote such attention to improving his relations with the deity. The Eleusinian Mysteries involved the daylong procession along the Sacred Road, a hike of twenty kilometers or so, not to mention other expenditures of time and money in the preparations.

Making use of more familiar Christian parallels is always dangerous, but undergoing such *teletai* was more analogous to performing a pilgrimage than receiving baptism. As with pilgrimage, some people might choose to do it more often, like the superstitious man caricatured by Theophrastus, who goes to the Orpheotelest for a *teletē* once a month, bringing his kids along with him (*Characters* 16). Likewise, performing a *teletē* for one deity by no means precluded doing so for another, any more than taking a pilgrimage to Canterbury precluded going to Compostela or Jerusalem. Each performance of the ritual was a service to the deity, and earning the favor of multiple deities through multiple *teletai* was a sign of a pious disposition (as well as an indicator of sufficient wealth and leisure to indulge in the practice).<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2. The Extraordinary Experience

One consequence of understanding mystery rituals as repeatable occasions for coming closer to the deity is that it becomes easier to understand that they did not hinge upon the imparting of special knowledge, which would make multiple repetitions pointless, but upon the experience itself, the

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Crinagoras, *Greek Anthology* II.42. Bowden 2010: 23 notes that the descriptions of the happy afterlife, while different from the traditional gloomy Hades of *Odyssey* II, nevertheless resemble the fate promised Menelaus as a benefit of having Zeus as his father-in-law: “The afterlife promised to initiates looks very similar to that of Menelaus, and the explanation of it is the same: like Menelaus, initiates have been in close contact with a god.” For further on the lively afterlife, see Edmonds 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Apuleius *Apologia* 55 boasts of having performed the rites of many Greek mysteries and of preserving the tokens in his house.

encounter with the divine. Such an understanding helps to clarify how Plato uses the imagery of the mysteries to describe the experience of philosophy, not as the one time imparting of secret knowledge but as an ongoing lived experience.<sup>16</sup> The culminating experience of Diotima's ascent to the Beautiful itself is not an explanation of the Theory of Forms or even the secret knowledge that the phenomenal world is a reflection of the true world of the Forms; rather it is an encounter with the Beautiful itself, where the philosopher contemplates the Beautiful itself, face-to-face as it were:

She said, "What do we think, if for someone it should be possible to see the Beautiful itself, simple, pure, and unmixed, and not filled up with human flesh and colors and all that other mortal rubbish, but if it were possible to behold in single form the divine Beauty itself? Do you think," she said, "that a man there would have a worthless life, while he is looking at it, by that which it is necessary for him to behold it, and while he is together with it?" (211e–212a)

Historians of religion, drawing on the work of the anthropologist Whitehouse, have recently started to employ a distinction between two modes of religious experience to help make sense of the patterns of Greek religion and the mystery cults in particular.<sup>17</sup> Whitehouse, drawing on his work in Melanesia, distinguishes between doctrinal religion, where worshippers engage in the frequent repetition of texts or rituals that impresses the central ideas and practices upon their memory, and imagistic religion, where particular intense experiences impress themselves on the worshippers' memories. In imagistic religious contexts, Whitehouse argues, "virtually no attempt was made to communicate religious ideas as bodies of doctrine. Revelations were codified in iconic imagery, transmitted primarily through the choreography of collective ritual performances. Religious representations were structured as sets of revelatory images connected by loose (and somewhat fluid) thematic associations, rather than as cohering strings of logically connected dogma" (Whitehouse 2000: 14).

Such experience of revelatory images matches the testimonies for the mystery cults quite well, and the category of imagistic religion helps us understand the kind of experience Plato's audience would have thought of when faced with Plato's imagery of mystery rituals as a metaphor for philosophy.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Epist.* 7, 341c5–d2.

<sup>17</sup> Bowden 2010 provides a good overview of the Mystery Cults engaging with this idea. See further the studies in Martin and Pachis 2009 and Whitehouse and Martin 2004.

Accustomed as modern scholars are to doctrinal forms of religion, with complex theologies, orthodoxies, and catechisms, we expect doctrinal accounts rather than revelatory imagery, but Plato provides his readers, not with a Theory of Forms (ever), but rather with references to divine visions, experiences that can never be adequately described, like the Beautiful itself which can only be indicated by a series of negatives:<sup>18</sup>

It neither comes to be nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and in part ugly, nor is it such at such a time and other at another, nor in one respect beautiful and in another ugly, nor so affected by position as to seem beautiful to some and ugly to others. Nor again will the beautiful appear to him like a face or of hands or any other portion of the body, nor as a particular description or piece of knowledge, nor as existing somewhere in another substance, such as an animal or the earth or sky or any other thing, but itself by itself with itself existing forever in singularity of form. (*Symp.* 211ab)

Such an experience is *arrhēton*, not to be spoken of or ineffable, not because it is a secret that must be kept, but because no account of the experience can capture the experience itself.<sup>19</sup>

So too, such an experience is repeatable; the revelation of the beautiful itself is not a one-time disclosure of the hidden nature of the cosmos, but rather a special perception of existing reality. Much ink has been spilled in scholarly debates as to where Socrates stands on Diotima's ladder – has he attained the final vision or is he merely working his way up the ladder, enjoying the beauties of laws and customs now that he has moved beyond bodies and souls? While various scholars have argued for particular stages of development, Blondell suggests that Plato depicts Socrates simultaneously at various stages, while Lowenstam argues that Socrates oscillates, like *Erōs*, between the bottom and the top.<sup>20</sup> Such explanations become even more convincing if the progression described in Diotima's speech is not thought of as a once-and-for-all climb up the ladder analogous to passing through the curriculum of the mysteries imagined in a three-part sequence, but rather as the renewed participation in a rite involving different levels of engagement with the deity. Like an *epoptēs* who has gone through the Eleusinian Mysteries before and performs the rite again with the experience of the *epopteia* in his mind, Socrates can experience once again the beauty of bodies or souls or even laws, recalling his

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Phdr.* 247c, as well as *Epist.* 7 341c5–d2.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Bremmer 2014: 18; Bowden 2010: 22.

<sup>20</sup> Blondell 2006: 177: "Socrates is everywhere, and therefore nowhere. We cannot pin him down or plug him into an orderly sequence." Cf. Lowenstam 1985: 94–98.

experience of the Beautiful itself as he does so. Perhaps at moments he can again experience the sublime revelation of the Beautiful itself, but, like the climax of the Mysteries at Eleusis, such an experience is momentary, even if the recollection of that experience affects his understanding of the rest of his life.<sup>21</sup>

It is worth noting that later Platonists understood the ascent up Diotima's ladder in precisely this way. Porphyry tells us that his master Plotinus, following the methods described in the *Symposium*, ascended to union with the divine four times, while Porphyry himself achieved this feat only once, in his sixty-eighth year (*Vit. Plot.* 23). The idea in modern scholarship of a single ascent and revelation would have been nonsensical to these Platonists, just as the idea that a mystery rite could only be experienced once would have seemed nonsense to Plato's audience. The mystery of the mystery rite lay not in some secret revealed but in the extraordinary experience of that special ceremony, which could not be spoken of without failing to do it justice, without reducing the honor due to it.

### 2.3. *The Nature of Profanation*

If we need to adjust our understanding of what a mystery rite is and how Plato and his audience would have understood it, what impact might that have upon the way we understand the profanation of the Mysteries of which Alcibiades was accused? If there is no secret to reveal, why should the Athenians become so overwrought about Alcibiades' behavior? Modern accounts of the profanation scandal struggle with the problem of what seems the disproportionate response of the Athenian people to Alcibiades' profanations of the Mysteries, but a better understanding of the nature of the profanation can not only help explain their reaction but also help illuminate the effect of Plato's use of mystery imagery in the *Symposium*. Alcibiades' profanation was so disturbing, not because he offended the simple piety of the Athenians by revealing the secrets of the Mysteries to the uninitiate or because he showed his rationalistic contempt of that simple piety by making a mockery of the rites, but precisely because Alcibiades performed the rituals *pro-fanum*, outside their proper place in the Eleusinian sanctuary, appropriating the rites properly performed by the whole city for himself in a private home.

<sup>21</sup> Ionescu 2007 makes some good suggestions about the ways in which ideas of recollection that make a greater appearance in the *Phaedrus* appear within the *Symposium*, although her account is troubled by reliance on the model of the Lesser and Greater Mysteries.

Many modern accounts of the profanation are inclined, following Dover, to regard Alcibiades' performance of the rituals as a parody or mockery: "Athenian society in the late fifth century embraced a wide variety of opinions on the existence and nature of the gods, on the value and efficacy of ritual, and on the extent to which supernatural beings could take a joke. Alcibiades and his friends are not likely to have cherished simple piety; parody of the mysteries at a private entertainment could no doubt be exceedingly funny; and no more need be said on the question of whether, or why, the mysteries were parodied" (Dover 1970: 283).<sup>22</sup>

Alcibiades and his set, on this account, are dissolute, immoral aristocrats, products of the sophists' rationalist teachings, making fun of the simple piety of their less sophisticated fellow Athenians.<sup>23</sup> The party atmosphere, enlivened by wine, causes them to forget the discretion that intellectual elites must employ to conceal their true contempt of the ordinary folk of the city, and, as a result, they suffer from the backlash.<sup>24</sup> The common folk resent doubts being cast upon their cherished beliefs and overreact with tragic results in the time of crisis on the eve of the Sicilian Expedition. "The cause of both calamities," claims Nails, "was the ignorance – superstition and religious hysteria – of the Athenians" (2006: 180).<sup>25</sup>

While the mistreatment of intellectuals by the ignorant masses is a perennially favorite idea among scholars, such a reading fails to explain the situation in many respects. All the sources, starting with Thucydides, who of all ancient authors would be most likely to condemn the thoughtless superstitions of the masses, treat the profanations as an indicator of political conflict; Alcibiades was suspected of aiming at a tyranny. "It is not at first easy to see," comments Dover, "why such impieties should have been taken as evidence of a political conspiracy" (1970: 284). Yet Thucydides brings a long digression on the story of the tyrannicides, and Plutarch is clear that the Athenians immediately thought that the mutilation of the Herms and profanations of the Mysteries were both signs of a conspiracy to overthrow the democracy.

<sup>22</sup> MacDowell 1962: 211 points to the presence of comic poets among the group.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Murray 1990: 158–159. Murray draws parallels with the groups of young aristocrats mentioned in the Demosthenic speech against Konon (54), the *Ithyphalloi* (the Erections) and *Autolekythoi* (the Wankers), as well as the *Kakodaimonistai*, in Lysias fr. 5 = Athen. 12. 551d–552b, who deliberately meet on ill-omened days in defiance of popular beliefs.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Aurenche 1974: 165.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. "Thoughtless religious fervor is dangerous, a persistent and insidious kind of ignorance that leads to errors and that can be perpetuated by priests and priestesses" (Nails 2006: 201).

So too, all of the evidence points not to a comic mockery of the rituals but rather to a comprehensive performance of the Mysteries, not once for a laugh, but repeatedly with different groups of participants under the direction of Alcibiades in the role of Hierophant.<sup>26</sup> Hence the formal indictment preserved in Plutarch,

Thessalus, son of Cimon, of the deme Laciadae, impeaches Alcibiades, son of Cleinias, of the deme Scambonidae, for wronging the goddesses of Eleusis, Demeter and Kore, by performing the mysteries and showing them forth to his companions in his own house, wearing a robe such as the Hierophant wears when he shows forth the sacred secrets to the initiates, and calling himself Hierophant, Poulytion Dadouchos (Torch-Bearer), and Theodorus, of the deme Phegaea, Keryx (Herald), and hailing the rest of his companions as Mystae and Eoptae, contrary to the laws and institutions of the Eumolpidae, Kerykes, and Priests of Eleusis. (*Alcibiades* 22.3–4)<sup>27</sup>

As Graf argues, the problem is not that they are being parodied, but that the rites are being performed by the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time (2000: 124).

Herein lies the key to understanding the political panic that the scandal generated. The performance of the Eleusinian Mystery ritual by Alcibiades in a private home was understood, not as the frivolity of a drunken aristocrat, but as a symbolic appropriation of the rites of the whole community for his own private use, just the sort of appropriation of public things for private use that marked the tyrant. In the same vein, Plutarch relates an accusation that Alcibiades used the gold and silver ceremonial utensils that belonged to the city for his daily meals, another tyrannical appropriation of the ritual things of the city for his own private ends (*Alc.* 13.2).<sup>28</sup> The Eleusinian Mysteries were one of the most potent symbols of Athenian identity, cited in Athenian imperialist propaganda as one of the great benefits that Athens brought to the world.

<sup>26</sup> Murray 1990: 155: “There is no evidence whatsoever that the Mysteries were parodied: all our evidence shows that they were performed, that the ritual was followed accurately. Nowhere is there any suggestion, as a possible defence, that the occasions were jokes or ritually unreal in any way, that the Mysteries were not actually divulged – the performances were illegal, sacrilegious, and immoral, but not unreal.” Pace Hunter 2004: 14, n.15, who adduces Plut. *QC* 1.4 621c and Heraclitus *QH* 76.7 to claim that the performances were sympotic entertainment. The Heraclitus passage does use *paizonta* for the performance of the rites, but in parallel with playing the role of rebel and founder, so not in a frivolous sense, while the Plutarch passage actually critiques Alcibiades for turning a symposium into a teleston.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. [Lysias] 6. 51.

<sup>28</sup> There is, perhaps, less reason to believe this charge than the accusation that he performed the Mysteries, but it nevertheless indicates the way in which Alcibiades’ contemporaries imagined him as a potential tyrant.

In Herodotus' tale of the phantom Eleusinian procession that betokened the defeat of Xerxes at Salamis, the mysteries represent the continuing existence of the Athenian community despite the sacking of the city itself by the Persians, so their appropriation by an individual would be a shocking seizure of authority over the whole polis (Herodotus 8.65). By taking the role of the Hierophant for himself and performing the rituals, not in the sacred space hallowed by the tradition of the community but in a private house, Alcibiades lays claim to authority over the whole community, acting like a tyrant.

Indeed, subsequent events reinforce this association. When Alcibiades returns from exile and is welcomed in triumph back to Athens, one of his first acts is to lead the mystery procession from Athens to Eleusis, part of the ritual that the Athenians had been unable to do for years because of the Spartan occupation of Decelea. This act has been seen as his repudiation of the charge of blasphemy, of not taking the Mysteries seriously, but the reactions of his contemporaries shows how it was understood. Plutarch writes:

When he had determined upon this course and made known his design to the Eumolpidae and Heralds, he stationed sentries on the heights, sent out an advance-guard at break of day, and then took the priests, *mustae*, and mustagogues, encompassed them with his men-at-arms, and led them over the road to Eleusis in decorous and silent array. So august and devout was the spectacle which, as general, he thus displayed, that he was hailed by those who were not unfriendly to him as Hierophant and Mustagogue. No enemy dared to attack him, and he conducted the procession safely back to the city. At this he was exalted in spirit himself, and exalted his army with the feeling that it was irresistible and invincible under his command. People of the humbler and poorer sort he so captivated by his leadership that they were filled with an amazing passion to have him for their tyrant, and some proposed it, and actually came to him in solicitation of it. (*Alc.* 34.5–6)<sup>29</sup>

The clamor by the people to have Alcibiades as tyrant after this public performance in which he is acclaimed as Hierophant is of course precisely what his aristocratic enemies feared when rumors of the profanations first circulated; Alcibiades' attempt to appropriate the position of leader of the Eleusinian Mysteries indicates his potential to become tyrant.

<sup>29</sup> As Wohl 1999: 372 comments, "The demos' response to his charisma – a charisma that is always implicitly or explicitly sexual – is the desire to be ruled by him; they long to be ruled by him as a tyrant."

The contrast between the celebration at his return and the outrage at his earlier profanations points to Alcibiades' fundamental problem – something like the Eleusinian Mysteries cannot really be appropriated privately; attempting to take them for himself is a failure. The rites only have their full impact and meaning when performed by the right people in the right place at the right time, so any private appropriation is doomed to failure. Alcibiades can only take for himself the trappings of the Hierophant, only take over the words and actions of the rite; he cannot actually exclusively possess the Eleusinian Mysteries. His error is to think that by appropriating the symbols and trappings, he can possess what they indicate, the Mysteries themselves. In the *Symposium*, Plato exploits this gap between symbol and reality to explain Alcibiades' problematic relation with Socrates and his ultimate failure to live philosophically, depicting Alcibiades as someone who continually seeks to inappropriately appropriate, to possess things that cannot be possessed.

### 3. The Profanity of Alcibiades

Right from his entrance, Alcibiades appropriates authority in the gathering, naming himself the Master of the Revels and changing the rules of the game the symposiasts have been playing all evening. In place of the sober encomia to *Erōs*, he puts forth a revelation of the mystery of Socrates. He frames his revelation with the tag from the Orphic poems, “close the doors of your ears, ye profane,” a line that signals that the following discourse is marked with special authority (*Symp.* 218b).<sup>30</sup> Like Orpheus, Alcibiades will sing for those of understanding, revealing the sacred mysteries of his erotic relations with Socrates. Alcibiades' arrogant assumption of this hierophantic role contrasts sharply with Socrates, who has presented himself as being warned by Diotima that he may not be capable of handling *ta telea kai epoptika* of *erōs* (210a).

Alcibiades claims that he alone has seen the divine images concealed within Socrates, pierced the veil of his irony and opened him up like one of the Silenus statues.

I'd say that he is most like the *silenoī* sitting in the herm-makers' shops, which they've made holding a syrinx or a flute, the ones that, when you open them up, have statues of gods within. . . . When he is being serious

<sup>30</sup> This text is the earliest attestation of the line that becomes almost a regular *sphragis* to mark Orphic poetry (as the address to Kyrnos marks Theognidea). See Bernabé for the attestations. Cf. Edmonds 2013: 75.



and opened up, I don't know if you have ever seen the statues within him. But I saw them once, and they seemed to me so divine and golden and totally beautiful and amazing, so that, in a word, whatever Socrates wished must be done. (215a–b, 216e–217a)

Alcibiades' experience of this encounter with the divine is, like the experience of the mysteries, a powerful imagistic experience that he cannot adequately frame in words, one that kindles his desire for the beauty that he has seen and impels him to action.

Alcibiades, however, reacts in a characteristically wrong fashion to this experience, attempting to appropriate rather than to adore. Amazed by the beauty he perceives, he tries to take it for his own, offering his own golden bloom of youth in exchange for those golden divine statues. Socrates warns him of his error, pointing out two problems. First, if youthful beauty could be exchanged for wisdom it would be as bad a bargain as the famous Iliadic exchange of bronze armor for gold. Second, however, Alcibiades is mistaken in thinking that the beauty he sees *in* Socrates is actually the beauty *of* Socrates, a possession of Socrates' that he can hand over:

My dear Alcibiades, you are perhaps in truth a man of no mean ambition, if indeed it turns out to be true, the things you are saying about me, and there is some power in me through which you might become better. You would be seeing an incomparable beauty in me and one wholly different from your own fair form. However, if having discerned this you are trying to share it with me and to exchange beauty for beauty, you are intending to overreach not a little, it seems to me, but rather you are trying to possess the truth of beauty instead of the appearance and, in truth, you think to exchange gold for bronze. But, blessed boy, examine this better, lest it escape your notice that I am nothing of the sort. (*Symp.* 218e–219a)<sup>31</sup>

Socrates rebukes Alcibiades' characteristic overreaching (*pleonexia*), but more importantly he reaffirms the point he made earlier to Agathon that wisdom is not the sort of thing that can be passed from one person to another and that any wisdom he might appear to have is as evanescent as a dream, a version of his characteristic claim to know nothing (175d–e).<sup>32</sup>

The divine golden statues that Alcibiades sees in Socrates are thus not really *in* Socrates, but, like the images in a dream, signs that point to something else. They are, in fact, like other *agalмата*, statues of gods set up

<sup>31</sup> The reference is to the scene in *Iliad* 6.232–6.

<sup>32</sup> Agathon claims of the wisdom Socrates found while meditating on the porch, "it is clear that you found it and have it," but Socrates denies that he has anything that can be possessed and exchanged in the way that, e.g., Pausanias suggests in erotic relations.

for worship in the temples, representations of the divine, not the divine thing itself. Alcibiades can no more take possession of Socrates' wisdom by sleeping with Socrates than he can take possession of the gods by appropriating their statues from the temples. Nevertheless, just as Alcibiades tries to appropriate the divine favor of the Eleusinian goddesses by taking possession of the trappings and symbols of the Mysteries, so too Alcibiades tries to appropriate the wisdom of Socrates, trying to snatch the golden statues within the man whom he imagines as a statue himself.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.1. *The Potential of Alcibiades*

As Nails notes, "often enough even now, the love of wisdom begins with a crush on Socrates," but Alcibiades spectacularly fails to move beyond this beginning (2006: 196). Various scholars have rightly pointed out Alcibiades' error in directing his attention to Socrates rather than the wisdom, but without a clearer understanding of the way Plato uses the imagery of the profanation of the mysteries it becomes harder to explain how Plato can be placing the blame for the failure on Alcibiades and not, at least to some extent, on Socrates' idea of love.<sup>34</sup> Plato uses the imagery of the Corybantic rites to indicate that Alcibiades is fit for, and indeed in great need of, philosophy, while he manipulates his audience's ideas of Alcibiades' profanations, the mutilation of the Herms and the appropriation of the Mysteries, to show that the problem lies in Alcibiades' overreaching appetite, not in Socrates' indifference to him.

Some commentators have dismissed Alcibiades as a drunken fool, so corrupted by pleasures as to be unfit for philosophy.<sup>35</sup> The reason, however, that the failure of Alcibiades to live philosophically is such a problem for Plato is that Alcibiades in fact was so well qualified to excel in philosophy and yet still failed so spectacularly.<sup>36</sup> The ancient biographical tradition emphasizes Alcibiades' intelligence and capacity, and Plutarch

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Nussbaum 1986: 196: "There is a strong possibility that Alcibiades wants Socrates to be a statue – a thing that can be held, carried, or, when necessary, smashed."

<sup>34</sup> Reeve 2006: 98, "It follows that Socrates' apparently virtuous failure to succumb to his seduction is also a less virtuous failure to make him virtuous." Cf. Rosen 1987: 279: "The unsatisfactory character of the love affair between Socrates and Alcibiades is a necessary consequence of the peculiarity of Socrates' *Erōs*, which can only desire divine things or beings." The debate ultimately goes back to Vlastos' critique of Platonic *erōs* in Vlastos 1973.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Rosen 1987: 281–2.

<sup>36</sup> Sheffield 2006: 202: "Alcibiades was a particularly promising associate, a talented man of the city who was clearly attracted by what Socrates had to offer. Why did philosophical *erōs* fail to get a firm hold on Alcibiades?" Cf. Destrée 2011: 194; Dover 1980: 164.

explicitly claims that he took up with Socrates because he recognized, through his own innate talents, the value of Socrates (*Alc.* 4.2.).<sup>37</sup> In the *Symposium*, Plato has Alcibiades himself indicate his readiness for the mysteries of philosophy through the image of the Corybantic frenzies. Alcibiades claims that the words of Socrates are like the tunes of Marsyas, the tunes attributed to Olympos that are used in the Corybantic rites:

They alone possess the soul and reveal those who have need of the gods and mysteries, because they are divine. . . . For my heart leaps within me more than that of any Corybantic reveler, and my eyes rain tears when I hear them. (215c, e)<sup>38</sup>

Commentators have puzzled over how such tunes might reveal those in need of *teletai*, since the limited evidence for the Corybantic rites (much of which is indeed from Plato) suggests frenzied dancing spurred on by music in the Phrygian mode.<sup>39</sup> A passage from the *Phaedrus* suggests that such frenzy (*mania*) may serve to indicate those who need to engage in special ritual connections with the gods, either to appease their wrath for some wrongdoing committed by themselves or their ancestors or for some other reason:

Moreover, when diseases and the greatest troubles have been visited upon certain families through some ancient guilt, madness has entered in and by oracular power has found a way of release for those in need, taking refuge in prayers and the service of the gods, and so, by purifications and sacred rites, he who has this madness is made safe for the present and the after time, and for him who is rightly possessed of madness a release from present ills is found. (244d–e)

The mad frenzy of Corybantic possession thus signals an individual who should perform *teletai* to gain a better relationship with the divine. By using this Corybantic imagery, Alcibiades describes himself as one of those people whose need for the mystery rites of philosophy is signalled by his response to the words of Socrates.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Cf. 6.1. The Platonic *First Alcibiades* 104ac likewise makes the point that Alcibiades has every advantage, not just of family and position, but of natural talents as well.

<sup>38</sup> The parallel passage in the Platonic *Minos* 318b–c is clearly derivative of this one and offers no further insights.

<sup>39</sup> The fundamental study remains Linforth 1946, who is, however, too apt to compare the rites to a psychological treatment. See further Edmonds 2006.

<sup>40</sup> As Destrée suggests, “these *logoi* that make Alcibiades feel like a corybant may be understood as another image for the cathartic refutation Alcibiades has just alluded to” (2011: 196). Such a reading, however, depends too heavily on the imagined tripartite schema and misses the resonances of the Corybantic rituals for Plato’s audience.

Alcibiades, then, is not one of the completely ignorant described by Diotima, who do not even know that they are in need (204a).<sup>41</sup> As Destrée points out, Alcibiades not only responds passionately to the divine golden images in Socrates, he sees those same *agalmata* in the words of Socrates as well (221e–222a).<sup>42</sup> He responds with desire to the allure of wisdom that he sees in Socrates and his words, but he ultimately fails to live philosophically, as a true lover of wisdom, not because he is immune to the siren call of the siren Socrates but because he fails to understand how to love properly. Rather than adoring the wisdom he sees in Socrates, he tries to possess Socrates, seeking to appropriate the mystery for his own instead of joining in the celebration.

### 3.2. *The Problem of Alcibiades*

Other scholars have connected Alcibiades' failure with the imagery of the profanation so abundant in this section of the dialogue, but inaccurate understandings of the ancient Greek *teletai* in general and the Eleusinian Mysteries in particular undermine their arguments. Reeves suggests that Alcibiades' focus on physical sexual relationships amounts to a perversion or profanation of the mysteries of *erōs* (2006: 140). More insightfully, Sheffield identifies Alcibiades' "idolatrous attachment" to Socrates with his profanation of the mysteries, "Socrates' reaction here suggests that Alcibiades' profanation of the Mysteries of philosophy was to misidentify its real object" (2006: 204). However, the imagery of profanation goes beyond the intellectual error of misidentifying the object; it involves the kind of action Alcibiades engages in while trying to satisfy his desires.

In her analysis, Sheffield follows the problematic division of the Eleusinian Mysteries into Greater and Lesser, arguing that the distinction in the philosophic mysteries of *erōs* depends on the object, "those in the lower mysteries desire honor (208c3), whilst those in the higher mysteries make virtue their goal" (2006: 95). This model of a sequential set of mysteries, however, distorts Plato's imagery in the dialogue and provides a confused picture of how Alcibiades might profane the mysteries. Alcibiades does not profane the great mysteries of philosophy simply by remaining stuck in the lesser rites, nor does his speech profane the

<sup>41</sup> Again, the Platonic *Alcibiades* I develops this idea (starting with 118b). Cf. Belfiore 2012: 181.

<sup>42</sup> "Even if Alcibiades is talking about Socrates' speeches, as we are used to them from the early dialogues, and not about Diotima's teaching, he seems to have really seen the importance of their 'inner' message, and he seems to have understood them" (Destrée 2011: 202).

mysteries by providing a comic (or even satyric) representation of them.<sup>43</sup> As the analysis of the ancient evidence for the scandal of Alcibiades' profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries shows, comic parody is not at issue here, but rather arrogant appropriation.

Like Sheffield, Steiner sees Alcibiades' problem as an excessive idolatry of Socrates, but she links it with the other profanation scandal in which Alcibiades is reputed to be involved, the mutilation of the Herms. Even if this outrage was more likely the work of a different oligarchic faction, Plato's fourth-century audience would have lumped the mutilation of the Herms together with the profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries as crimes of which Alcibiades was guilty.<sup>44</sup> The violent image in the allusion to the flaying of Marsyas evokes the violence done to the Herms, and Steiner compares Alcibiades' relationship with the Socrates whom he describes as a silenus statue to other stories of individuals who attempt sexual relationships with statues, always an unfortunate affair (Steiner 1996: 92).<sup>45</sup> Such relations mistake an image for the reality, the sign for the signified, just as Alcibiades mistakes the golden images within Socrates (and his words) for the divine beauty to which they point.<sup>46</sup> Alcibiades tries to satisfy his desire for wisdom as though it were an appetite that could be terminally gratified, like thirst with a drink of water or lust with sexual intercourse, but since wisdom, like the Good and the Beautiful or any divine thing, cannot be possessed by a mortal, his desire must remain an ever-renewing longing.<sup>47</sup> His attempts to appropriate the golden images of wisdom through sex with Socrates are just as fruitless and perverse as

<sup>43</sup> As Sheffield 2001: 201 suggests. The reading of Alcibiades' speech as a satyr play version of the serious speech of Diotima nevertheless provides many insights into the relation between the speeches. See Sheffield 2001 and Usher 2002 for such readings, which do not, however, help us understand the imagery of profanation as much as the theme of comic, tragic, and satyric poetry. Plato, as usual, plays with multiple levels of imagery simultaneously.

<sup>44</sup> As Steiner writes: "Had Alcibiades only followed Aristodemus' example, and left the image standing on the neighbouring porch (*prothuroi*, 175a) unmoved, he might never have been implicated in the episode which contributed to the blackening of his reputation" (1996: 100).

<sup>45</sup> Kindt 2012 examines a number of stories about interactions with religious statues, including the problem with *agalmatophilia*; see also Edmonds (forthcoming) for Plato's use of sexual assault upon an image in the *Phaedrus*.

<sup>46</sup> Reeve 2006: 128 (likewise Reeve 2004: 97) mistakes the nature of the *agalmata* as signs when he imagines them as the embryos with which Socrates is pregnant. Like statues in temples, the golden *agalmata* that Alcibiades sees as representations of the divine beauty he longs for. He does not imagine that he himself can be made pregnant with them through some process of sexual transmission; he wants to take them for himself.

<sup>47</sup> In Halperin's terms, Alcibiades acts as if his desire for Socrates were appetitive, rather than a truly erotic desire (1985: 176).

any assault upon a statue or any attempt to take over the Athenian community's Mysteries of Eleusis by means of private celebrations.

Scholars who see Socrates as indifferent or even hubristically contemptuous of Alcibiades make the same error as Alcibiades in imagining that the wisdom Alcibiades desires is something Socrates has and can transmit. Gagarin, for example, sees the episode as indicative of Socrates' failure as a teacher, while Lear goes so far as to blame Socrates' indifference for the collapse of one of the world's great civilizations.<sup>48</sup> Plato, however, does not bring in the famous figure of Alcibiades the profane to critique Socrates as a callously cold and indifferent teacher.<sup>49</sup> The imagery of the mysteries – ignored, belittled, or misunderstood by these modern commentators – provides for Plato's readers, more familiar than modern readers with the phenomenon of such rites, an understanding of how Alcibiades goes wrong. The point of the metaphor is that the philosophy Alcibiades desires is not some piece of information that he can learn (*mathein*) and keep for himself, but rather an experience he must undergo (*pathein*), like a ritual of the mysteries. Alcibiades' speech recounts his own profanation of the mysteries of the love of wisdom, his attempt to appropriate the divine for himself by taking possession of the sacred things and using them for his own benefit, and Plato's ancient audience would see the parallels, not just between the mysteries of *Erōs* and of Eleusis, but between Alcibiades' profane attempts to appropriate them both. Alcibiades thus becomes a figure for all the promising young aristocrats who attempt to appropriate the power of philosophical reasoning to serve their own appetite for power – Calicles, Critias, Charmides, perhaps even Glaucon and Adeimantus, or Phaedrus and Eryximachus. They all see in Socrates something valuable, something desirable, something beautiful, but they all fail to comprehend it.

The close encounter with the divine in the Mysteries is a powerful affective experience that can be repeated, just like erotic encounters with beauty in its various manifestations, but the revelation of the Beautiful

<sup>48</sup> Gagarin 1977: 37: "As a teacher of others, Alcibiades reveals, Socrates is a failure, in Vlastos' words, 'a failure of love.'" Lear 1998: 164: "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 consequences are. From the vantage of Athenian culture, this encounter between Alcibiades and Socrates must be judged a failure of inestimable cost. Nothing less is at stake than the future of one of the world's great civilizations." Likewise Blanckenhagen 1992: 67: "Had Socrates slept with Alcibiades not 'like a father or older brother; but as a true erastes, 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."

<sup>49</sup> Nails 2006: 196 rightly defends Socrates' choice not to go along with Alcibiades' plan.

itself, like the *epopteia* in the Mysteries, is a profound experience which alters the way one understands, not just future encounters with the beautiful but past ones as well. Alcibiades' scandalous failure in philosophy is illuminated by the parallel with the Mysteries he scandalously fails to treat with proper respect. The beauty, power, and magnificence of the most holy of Athenian rituals do not transform Alcibiades the profane into a pious person; they cause him to desire to appropriate them, and he reacts in the same way to the beauty, power, and magnificence of Socrates' philosophy. In the *Symposium*, Plato uses the imagery of the Mysteries to elucidate the nature of philosophy, both in the metaphor of the *epopteia* of Diotima the prophetess and in the profanations of Alcibiades the profane.

# PLATO'S *Symposium*

A Critical Guide

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