Hybristes Eι: Socrates, Alcibiades, and Agathon

Elizabeth Belfiore
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, esb@umn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp

Part of the Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons, Ancient Philosophy Commons, and the History of Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.
1. Introduction

The Symposium contains a vivid and memorable portrait of Socrates. The philosopher, however, is characterized in confusing and apparently inconsistent ways. The multiple layers of narration constantly remind the reader that the dialogue cannot be accepted at face value as a historically accurate transcription of the “words and deeds” of Socrates, but is fiction, requiring critical evaluation by the reader. Moreover, the many different narrators represent Socrates as having a puzzling variety of characteristics. He is presented as an expert on erotic matters (177d7-8), an erastes and eromenos (222b3-4), and as a figure who resembles the Eros of Diotima’s speech. Socrates is also portrayed as both hubristic and virtuous, comic and serious. According to Alcibiades, Socrates spends his life playing, but is also capable of being deeply serious (216e4-6). The philosopher has the virtues of courage, moderation (sophrosyne), understanding (phronesis) and endurance (219d4-7), but is also guilty of disdain, mockery, hybris and arrogance (219c3-6; hybris: cf. 215b7, 222a8).

It is difficult for the reader to interpret this perplexing, composite portrait of the philosopher who is said to play roles--erotic, ethical, and dramatic--that are usually thought to be incompatible. One suggestion about how to understand Socrates is given by Alcibiades, in his representation of the philosopher by means of comic images (214e4-5, 215a5) that have the serious purpose of revealing the truth (215a6). Socrates, he says, resembles the hollow statues of sileni that open up to reveal images of the gods (215a6-b3, 216e5-217a1); he is like a ridiculous, hubristic, and lustful satyr, who plays divine tunes on the aulos (215b7-c6, 216d2-4). On the outside, his words are like the skin of a hubristic satyr, but on the inside they are most divine and contain the most images of virtue (221d7-222a6). Modern scholars often take Alcibiades’ image to represent what Plato considered to be the truth about his Socrates: that the outer satyr is a deceptive appearance concealing the inner truth. This is a plausible interpretation of Alcibiades’ opinion of Socrates, but Alcibiades does not necessarily speak for Plato. The dialogue gives the reader many reasons for questioning the account given by the drunken young man, whose veracity is open to doubt, and who admits that Socrates reduces him to perplexity (219e3). The image itself requires opening up by the reader, who has more information about Socrates than its creator.

1 See further, Belfiore 1984.
3 Clay 2000, 143 (cf. 93-95) notes that Socrates was characterized as dimorphos (two-formed) by an anonymous comic writer (SSR I.A.17, vol. 1, p. 17).
Alcibiades’ portrait of Socrates can be better understood in light of the philosopher’s complementary, but less studied, interactions with Agathon. Like Alcibiades, Agathon attributes to Socrates a superior wisdom that he seeks to acquire by touch (175c7-d2; cf. 218c7-d5), and, like Alcibiades, Agathon accuses Socrates of hybris after failing in this attempt (175e7). There are indications, however, that Agathon is better able to benefit from his association with Socrates than is Alcibiades. After a brief discussion of the Greek concepts of hybris and disdain (section 2), this paper focuses on Socrates’ interactions with these two men. I argue that Socrates is portrayed by the multiple narrators of the Symposium as both a comic, hubristic and satyr-like figure (section 3), and as a man of extraordinary virtue (section 4). Although Alcibiades, who missed the speech Socrates attributes to Diotima, grasps only part of the truth, his image of the silenus-statue can help us to understand the relationship between these two apparently inconsistent sets of characteristics (section 5). The outer satyr-like figure is not merely a deceptive appearance, as Alcibiades believes, nor do the inner divinities and images of virtue represent the whole truth about Socrates. Alcibiades identifies the satyr with Marsyas, and there is good reason to suppose that one of the inner divinities of his image is Eros. The reader, then, is in a position to recognize that the satyr Marsyas, and the daimon Eros of Diotima’s speech are not essentially different. Both are images of one and the same figure: the erotic philosopher.

2. Hybris and Disdain

A brief survey of the Greek concepts of hybris and disdain will give us a better understanding about how Socrates’ behavior would have appeared to a Greek audience. Rhetoric 2.2, Aristotle defines anger as “desire, accompanied by pain, for retaliation, because of what appears to be slighting [ὀλιγωρίαν]” (1378a30-31), and he defines “slighting” as “the actualization of opinion concerning that which appears to be worth nothing” (1378b11). Disdain is one kind of slighting: “The person who disdains slights. For people disdain things they think are worth nothing, and they slight things that are worth nothing” (1378b15-17). Another kind of slighting is hybris:

The man committing hybris also slights: for hybris is doing and saying things at which the victim incurs shame, not in order that one may achieve anything other than what is done but simply to get pleasure from it. For those who act in return for something do not commit hybris, they avenge themselves. The cause of the pleasure for those committing hybris is that by harming people they think themselves to be superior (that is why the young and the rich are hybristai; they think they are superior when committing hybris). Dishonour is characteristic of hybris, and he who dishonours someone slights him, since what has no worth has no honour, either for good or for bad. That is why Achilles says when angry: “He dishonoured me; for he has himself taken my prize, and keeps it” (Iliad 1.356) and “He treated me as if I were a wanderer without honour” (Iliad 9.648=17.59), since he is angry for those reasons.4

4 Rhet. 1378b23-35. Translation Fisher 1992, 8, with his parenthetical references.
Aristotle goes on to explain that slighting causes anger when people think they ought to be highly esteemed by those who are inferior in whatever respect they themselves are far superior, for example, in birth, power, virtue, wealth, ability to speak well or to rule. They are also angry at slights from those by whom they think they have a right to be treated well, for example, those whom they have benefited or desire to benefit (1378b35-1379a9). Aristotle also says that people are angry at those who laugh at, mock, or make fun of them, for these people are committing **hybris** (1379a30-32).

Aristotle’s passage supports the view of N. R. E. Fisher and Douglas Cairns that there is a close connection in Greek thought between **hybris** and dishonor. According to Fisher, “**hybris** is essentially the serious assault on the honour of another, which is likely to cause shame, and lead to anger and attempts at revenge,” and it involves committing “acts of intentional insult . . . which deliberately inflict shame and dishonour on others.”⁵ Cairns also stresses the association of **hybris** with honor, arguing that “the most fundamental of all significances of **hybris**” is “the idea that **hybris** involves a disposition in the agent which overvalues self and undervalues others.”⁶

Socrates’ behavior in the Symphony meets Aristotle’s criteria for slighting (**Rhet.** 1378b15-17, quoted above) in that he is represented as showing disdain (**καταφρόνησις**) for things he thinks are worth nothing. According to Alcibiades, Socrates disdains Alcibiades’ beauty and other external advantages (216d7-e2, 219c4), and he offends common soldiers, who think he is showing disdain for them when he walks unshod on ice (220b7-c1). In being disdainful, Socrates might appear to be following the advice of his teacher, Diotima, who says that the lover must learn to loosen his regard for one body, “disdaining it and thinking it to be a small thing” (210b5-6).

The question of Socrates’ **hybris** is more complicated. According to some scholars, the accusations of **hybris** are “humourously exaggerated,” but others take them seriously.⁷ A good case can be made for interpreting Socrates’ behavior toward Agathon and Alcibiades as meeting Fisher’s definition of **hybris** as a “serious assault on the honour of another, which is likely to cause shame, and lead to anger and attempts at revenge.”⁸ Because Socrates openly slights those things of which Agathon and Alcibiades are most proud—respectively, the ability to speak well before a crowd and physical beauty,—he can be seen as dishonoring the two men. That Socrates does and says things “at which the victim incurs shame” (**Rhet. 1378b24**) is clear from Alcibiades’ admission that Socrates makes him ashamed of himself (216b2). Moreover, both Agathon and Alcibiades express anger and threaten revenge when they speak of bringing Socrates to trial (175c7-10, 219c5-6). On the other hand, Socrates does not meet Aristotle’s criteria for **hybris** in that he is not represented by the narrators as slighting in order to get pleasure from harming people and demonstrating his own superiority (**Rhet. 1378b23-29**).

Another aspect of Socrates’ behavior is relevant to an understanding of the charges of **hybris**. Alcibiades links Socrates’ **hybris** to that of satyrs: “And I say that he is

---

⁵ Fisher, 1992, 1 and 148.
like the satyr Marsyas. That you are like him in appearance, Socrates, not even you would contest. Next, listen to how you resemble him in other respects also. You are hubristic, aren’t you? If you don’t agree, I’ll furnish witnesses” (215b3-7). In myth, the satyr Marsyas was hubristic in challenging Apollo at the aulos, a crime for which he was flayed. However, this aspect of the myth is never explicitly mentioned, and another reference to satyrs in Alcibiades’ speech make it clear that what he calls Socrates’ hybris is satyr-like in a more general way. Socrates’ words, says Alcibiades, resemble “the skin of some hubristic satyr” (221e2-4).

Satyrs are typically represented as violating and inverting social norms. The very appearance of these half-human, half-bestial creatures is transgressive. Satyrs are often represented as drinking excessively and in other ways violating sympotic norms. Their sexual behavior is also excessive and transgressive. Far from observing the norms for the behavior of erastai that were intended to avoid dishonoring the eromenoi, satyrs frequently commit such sexual offenses as attempted rape, a particularly salient example of hybris that dishonors another. In transgressing social norms in this and other respects, satyrs are hubristic because they put gratification of their own desires ahead of the honor of others. Satyrs also arouse laughter, a characteristic notably exploited in the satyr play. Satyrs are themselves objects of laughter, but they may also hubristically direct laughter at others. Indeed, mockery is a form of hybris, in Greek culture, and to make someone an object of laughter is to shame and dishonor him or her. Conversely, to dishonor someone is to make him or her an object of laughter. For example, after Odysseus gives Thersites “dishonoring blows” (Il. 2.264), all the other men laugh at Thersites (270). Someone who commits hybris often does things that appear ridiculous, as Conon does when he crows like a cock over his victim (Demosthenes 54. 9), but it is the victim who is the real object of laughter. Similarly, in behaving transgressively and violating the honor of others, satyrs make their victims the objects of laughter.

Alcibiades’ Socrates is satyr-like because he transgresses social norms in ways that satyrs do. He violates convention in physical appearance (215b4-6, 216d4) and behavior, as will be shown in more detail below, section 3. Socrates is silenus-like in having an erotic nature (216d2-4), in large part because he violates convention by playing the role of both erastes and eromenos (222b3-4). Socrates also resembles a hubristic satyr in arousing laughter. He does this in two ways, according to Alcibiades. First, Socrates is himself the object of laughter. An inexperienced and foolish person would laugh at Socrates’ words, that at first appear ridiculous, like the skin of a hubristic satyr, being concerned with such subjects as pack-asses and tanners (221e1-222a1). Alcibiades indicates that Socrates himself is laughable when he suggests that the philosopher would most appropriately sit beside “Aristophanes or someone who is ridiculous and wants to be so” (213c2-5). Alcibiades’ speech also makes Socrates the object of laughter. Socrates asks if Alcibiades is going to praise him by making people laugh (214e4-5), and the young man’s speech does indeed have this effect (222c1). Partly for this reason, it is a “satyric and silenic drama” (222d3-4). However, Socrates, is also represented as

---

resembling a satyr in hubristically make others the objects of laughter. According to Alcibiades, he laughed at the young man’s beauty, thereby committing hybris (219c4-5).

The comic image of the satyr, then, has a serious philosophical purpose in Alcibiades’ speech, serving to characterize Socrates as hubristic in specific respects. Section 3 examines in detail the evidence for this aspect of the philosopher’s behavior.

3. The Skin of a Hubristic Satyr

The occasion at which the events are represented as taking place is significant for an understanding of Socrates’ behavior. Agathon, who has just won first prize in a tragic competition, has invited a few friends to a celebratory dinner and symposium. The poet has every reason to think he is superior in his ability to speak well, and every reason to expect praise and good will from his friends, especially on the present occasion, when he is benefiting them by inviting them to dinner. Agathon would, then, according to Aristotle’s account (Rhet. 1378b35-1379a9), be ready to see as a slight by his friends and guests any rudeness or any suggestion that he lacks the ability to speak well.

Socrates’ treatment of Agathon meets Aristotle’s criteria for disdain. In the first place, the philosopher is a very rude guest to Agathon. Contrary to his usual custom, Socrates has bathed and put on shoes in honor of the occasion (174a3-4). Yet, he brings along an uninvited guest, Aristodemus, who is “always unshod” (173b2). Socrates then allows this uninvited and inappropriately dressed follower to arrive alone, while he himself stops along the way to think about something (174d4-7). Worse, he ignores his host’s request to arrive in time for dinner. After asking Aristodemus where Socrates is, Agathon sends a slave to bring him to his house. When the slave reports that Socrates is standing in a neighbor’s porch and refuses to leave, Agathon calls this behavior “strange” (ἄτοπον), and tells the slave to return to Socrates and take no refusal. However, the uninvited guest, Aristodemus, countermands his host’s order, telling the slave to leave Socrates alone (174e12-175b3). Repeatedly, Agathon attempts to send his slave to fetch Socrates and is prevented from doing so by the uninvited follower of Socrates (175c2-4). Not until the middle of dinner does the philosopher finally arrive (175c5-6). Socrates’ behavior is not only rude to Agathon, it also puts Aristodemus in the embarrassing and ridiculous (174e2) position of arriving at the party uninvited by his host, and without the guest who invited him. In going uninvited (ἄκλητος: 174b1, c7, c8) to the symposium, and experiencing something “ridiculous” (174e2) on his arrival, Aristodemus resembles the akletoi, the uninvited hangers-on of inferior social, physical and moral status, who earned a dinner by providing comic entertainment for the invited guests.

Socrates’ rude behavior as guest is highlighted by Agathon’s contrasting behavior as the model host. Agathon tells Aristodemus that he had intended to invite him (174e5-8), and he asks Socrates to sit beside him when the philosopher finally arrives: “Come here . . . and recline beside me, Socrates, so that I can also benefit, by touching you, from the piece of wisdom that came to you in the porch. You’ve clearly found it and have it. Otherwise you wouldn’t have gone away” (175c7-d2). Socrates, instead of apologizing for being late and responding to his host’s request, replies:

It would be a good thing, Agathon, if wisdom were the kind of thing that flowed from what is fuller into what is emptier in our case, if only we touch each other, like the water in cups which flows from the fuller into the emptier through the thread of wool. If wisdom too is like that, then I put a
high value on reclining beside you, because then I think it’s I who’ll be filled from your side with quantities of beautiful wisdom. Mine, I guess, will be an inferior sort of wisdom, or even a debatable one, existing as if in a dream; whereas yours is brilliant and promises much for the future, to judge from the brightness with which it shone out from you—and you still a young man—the other day, when it was displayed in full view with more than thirty thousand Greeks as witnesses (175d3-e6: translation Rowe 1998.)

These actions and words are disdainful, according to Aristotle’s criteria, for they show that Socrates thinks nothing of his host’s wisdom. Socrates makes a joke of Agathon’s idea that wisdom can be transmitted by touch, and he ironically suggests that the young poet has greater wisdom than his own, because it shone brightly before a crowd of thirty thousand people. Coming from Socrates, who told Aristodemus that he stayed away from Agathon’s victory party on the day before because he feared the crowd (174a6-7), this is not praise, but disdain. Socrates’ mention of Agathon’s youth (175e5) is also a slighting allusion to his lack of mental insight, that, as Socrates tells Alcibiades, comes with age (219a2-4). In behaving in this way toward Agathon, Socrates could be interpreted as acting hubristically in that he commits a “serious assault on the honour of another, which is likely to cause shame, and lead to anger and attempts at revenge” (Fisher 1992, 1). Agathon’s reply is an expression of the anger and desire for revenge he would be justified in feeling in response to this kind of slighting: “You are hubristic ὑβριστής εἶ, Socrates . . . . As for that, a little later you and I will go on trial concerning wisdom, with Dionysos as judge” (175e7-9).

Socrates continues to slight Agathon in their encounters before and after the poet’s speech (194a1-e3, 198a1-201c9). Before Agathon delivers his encomium of Eros, Socrates says that he fears he will be at a disadvantage after this speech. Agathon responds that Socrates is trying to bewitch and disturb him before he speaks (194a1-7). Socrates then expresses surprise that Agathon could be disturbed at the thought of speaking before a few people when he was not at all frightened before the crowd in the theater (194a8-b5). Agathon replies that it is more terrifying to speak before a few who have sense than before a crowd of the foolish (194b6-8). Socrates then says: “I know well that if you should meet any people you thought wise, you’d think more of them than of the many. But I suspect that we are not those wise people—for we were present there [at the theater] and were among the many” (194c2-5). In making this statement, Socrates slights Agathon by implicitly accepting the latter’s statement that the audience applauding Agathon at the theater was made up of fools. By including the symposiasts among this crowd of fools, he slights them also.

The conversation is interrupted at an interesting point. Questioned by Socrates, Agathon asserts that he would be ashamed before wise people if he thought he were doing something shameful (194c5-8). Socrates then asks him if he would not be ashamed before the many if he thought he were doing something shameful (194c9-10). At this point, Phaedrus tells Agathon to give his encomium of Eros before talking with Socrates, and Agathon complies (194d1-e3), thereby accepting the invitation of his audience to speak beautifully in performance instead of examining his behavior and seeking the truth by conversing with Socrates. The cross-examination, however, is merely postponed until
after Agathon’s speech. The text suggests that Socrates could have pressed Agathon to make even more humiliating confessions than he in fact does. In the reconstructed dialogue below, what Socrates and Agathon could have said is given in italics.

Socrates: You wouldn’t be ashamed before the many if you thought you were doing something shameful? (194c9-10)
Agathon: Certainly I would, Socrates.
Soc.: Do you consider it shameful to claim to know things that you don’t know?
Ag.: Yes, I do.
Soc. Then you would be ashamed to speak before the many and the few, claiming that you know about things you in fact know nothing about?
Ag. Yes, I would.
Soc. Well, Agathon, do you know something about Eros?
Ag. Certainly I do.
Soc. And do you speak about this topic before the many?
Ag. Yes, I do, Socrates, when my plays are performed. My poetry is full of this subject.
Soc. Come, then, Agathon. Tell me what Eros is like.
Ag: Well, that’s just what I’m going to do. Here’s my encomium.
[Agathon makes his speech (194e4-197e8), and after an interlude (198a1-199c2) Socrates resumes questioning.]
Soc.: Come, then, tell me this about Eros . . . (199c6-d1).
[The elenchos continues (199d1-201b8).]
Soc. Do you still agree that Eros is beautiful, if these things are so (201b9-10)?
Ag.: It seems likely, Socrates, that I didn’t know anything I was talking about then (201b11-12).
Soc. Yet, when you presented your plays you spoke about this topic before the many, thereby claiming to know something about it. Not only that, but just now you made a speech about Eros to us few, claiming knowledge before us also.
Ag. Yes, you’re right, Socrates.
Soc. But didn’t you just now agree that you would be ashamed to speak before the many and the few, claiming that you knew things you in fact knew nothing about?
Ag. I did.
Soc. Then it follows that you should be ashamed of your poetry about Eros and of the encomium you gave just now.

In this reconstructed elenchos, Socrates convicts Agathon of doing something Agathon himself considers shameful, and thus demonstrates that the young man ought to be ashamed of himself. He thereby slights Agathon, showing that the achievement of which he is most proud—his ability to make beautiful speeches—is actually something shameful. When he leads Agathon to admit his ignorance (201b11-12) and his inability to

refute Socrates (201c6-7), Socrates is victorious in the trial for wisdom predicted by Agathon (175c7-9). In refuting Agathon publicly, Socrates not only shows disdain for the young man’s ability to speak well, he also shames the poet and demonstrates his own superiority in argument.

Socrates’ behavior immediately after Agathon’s speech (198a1-199b5) has still other disdainful aspects. His very applause can be interpreted as mockery, and his use of extravagant praise, for example, when he remarks on the marvelous beauty of the last part of the speech (198b3-5), might be perceived as a form of insult. After joining all the other symposiasts (198a1) in applauding Agathon’s speech, Socrates attacks this very speech, thereby implying that the audience of symposiasts was, like the theater crowd, foolish to applaud an ignorant speaker. Socrates parodies Agathon’s style, employing mock-solemminity in addressing Eryximachus as “child of Akoumenos” (198a5), and asking the doctor if he, Socrates, “feared a fearless fear” when he was afraid to speak after Agathon (ἀδεὲς . . . δεός δεδιέναι: 198a5). The phrase “Gorgias’ head” (Γοργίου κεφαλήν 198c3), punning on “Gorgon’s head,” parodies Agathon’s Gorgianic style, as do the words “to speak in the speech” (λέγειν ἐν τῷ λόγῳ:198c4). Socrates’ statement that Agathon’s speech was “beautiful and variegated” (καλὸν . . . καὶ παντοδαπὸν 198b3) can also be viewed as an attack. Moreover, in quoting Euripides’ well-known line--“my tongue swore but not my heart” (199a5-6, Hippolytus 612)--Socrates casts doubt on Agathon’s description of Eros by alluding to infamous counter-examples to the gentleness Agathon attributed to Eros in his speech: Phaedra’s disastrous passion for her stepson and the deceptive nature of promises in erotic contexts. Socrates also accuses Agathon of lying when he states that apparently it makes no difference whether an encomium is true or false (198e1-2).

Socrates not only slights Agathon’s ability to speak well, he also implies that he himself is superior in this regard. He asks: “Who would not have been stunned (ἐξεπλάγη)?” hearing Agathon’s beautiful words (198b5). The answer, of course, is “Socrates.” Socrates says that he thought that he would be unable to make an equally beautiful speech, and that as a result, “I almost ran away from shame” (198b6-c1). He feared that the ‘Gorgias’ head’ of fine words would turn him into a speechless stone, and that he would be an object of laughter (198c1-6). One small word, however, saves him from this fate: Agathon’s speech almost (ὁλίγου 198b7) produced in Socrates the very same effects that Socrates’ words actually produce in Alcibiades, who feels shame and runs away when Socrates forces him to admit his deficiencies (216a4-b6). Socrates goes on to demonstrate his ability to resist Agathon’s power to stun, cause shame and render speechless by proceeding to speak at far greater length than any of the previous speakers.

Socrates also shows disdain in his interactions with Alcibiades. The young man’s speech recounts an exchange with Socrates that is very similar to the philosopher’s first encounter with Agathon. Like Agathon, Alcibiades wants to use physical proximity in order to get a share of Socrates’ wisdom. When Alcibiades offers his own physical beauty, of which he is marvelously proud (217a5-6), in exchange for being made better by Socrates (218c7-d5), the latter replies, “very ironically, and very much in his accustomed manner” (218d6-7):

14 These examples are given by Bury, 1932, on 198a-c.
My dear Alcibiades, you must really be a person of no mean quality, if indeed what you say about me is actually true, and there is in me some power which could make you a better man; it’d be an irresistible beauty that you were observing in me, and one altogether superior to your own fine looks. If then because you see it you’re trying to enter into partnership with me and exchange beauty for beauty, you’re meaning to get the better of me in no small way; you’re trying to get hold of truly beautiful things in return for only apparently beautiful ones, and you have in mind a true exchange of “gold for bronze.” But you need to take a better look, my fine friend, in case you’re mistaken about me, and I’m really nothing. The sight of the mind, I assure you, first sees sharply when the sight of the eyes starts to fade from its prime; and you are still far away from that (218d7-219a4. Translation: Rowe 1998).

Just as Socrates slighted Agathon’s ability to speak beautifully, so he slights that of which Alcibiades is most proud: his physical beauty. Socrates again rejects the idea that physical proximity can convey wisdom. He belittles Alcibiades’ physical beauty, and he insults the young man by suggesting that Alcibiades is trying to cheat him and that he is so lacking in mental insight that he is not capable of seeing whether or not Socrates has great beauty of mind. Even while he suggests that Alcibiades lacks beauty of mind, Socrates implicitly claims a kind of mental superiority: as an older man, he has the mental acuity (“sight of the mind”) that Alcibiades lacks. Socrates’ behavior leads Alcibiades, like Agathon, to accuse Socrates of hybris (ὑβριστής εἶ: 215b7) and to bring him to trial before a jury of the symposiasts (219c3-6).

Alcibiades accuses Socrates of hybris in large part because of the sexual humiliation the philosopher inflicts. The young man behaves like both lover and beloved in his attempted seduction of Socrates, and is frustrated in both roles. He challenges (217c1), attacks (217c5) and plots against Socrates “just as a lover plots against a boy” (217c7-8; cf. 217d3). Alcibiades acts like the beloved, however, in attempting to “wound” Socrates as if with weapons when he offers his sexual favors (219b3-4), and in thinking that Socrates cares about his beauty and will, in exchange for sex, teach him all that he knows (217a2-5). Moreover, he refers to Socrates as his erastes, who can help him to become as good as possible, and he tells Socrates that he is ready to gratify him sexually (218c7-d3). Socrates, however, does not respond to the young man’s advances in the conventional way, but, in refusing the role of erastes, reduces him to a state of slavery (219e3-4) and perplexity (219d8-e1, 219e3), in which he can neither be angry with Socrates nor win him over (219d7-e5). Humiliated by the philosopher’s resistance, Alcibiades concludes that although Socrates appears to have eros for the beautiful and to be stunned by them (216d2-3), he really disdains (καταφρονεῖ: 216d8) their beauty. Indeed, Socrates has disdain not only for physical beauty but also for wealth and honor, and “he thinks that all such possessions are worth nothing and that we are nothing” (216d7-e4). The young man thought that Socrates was serious about his beauty (217a2-3), but it turned out that the philosopher instead disdained it (219c4-5). In response to these slights, Alcibiades accuses Socrates of dishonoring him (219d4), and of hybris and arrogance in laughing at his beauty (219c4-6). Many other close associates of Socrates, according to Alcibiades, have experienced a similar kind of hybris from him (222a7-b4).
Socrates can also be perceived as acting slightingly and hubristically in compelling Alcibiades to agree that, although he is very deficient, he neglects himself and instead takes care of the affairs of the Athenians (216a4-6). The philosopher, moreover, produces in Alcibiades something of which no one would have thought him capable: shame (216a8-b2). As a result, Alcibiades flees from Socrates like a runaway slave (δραπετεύω), overcome by desire for honor from the many, but again feels shame when he meets the philosopher (216b3-6). Alcibiades feels anger as a result, for he sometimes wishes Socrates were dead. He realizes, however, that this would cause him even more pain, and concludes: “I don’t know what to do with this man” (216c1-3).

Socrates also shows disdain in his other interactions with both Agathon and Alcibiades. At the end of Socrates’ speech, Alcibiades arrives, drunk and late, and crowns the young poet with a wreath of ribbons, calling him “wisest and most beautiful” (212e6-8). Alcibiades then notices Socrates and takes some of the ribbons from Agathon’s head to crown the philosopher:

“Now, Agathon,” he said, “give me back some of the ribbons, so that I may also crown the most marvelous head of this man, and he won’t blame me for crowning you and not him, when he wins the victory in words over all people, not just the day before yesterday, as you did, but always.”

While he spoke, he took some of the ribbons, crowned Socrates, and reclined. (213d8-e6)

This scene has comic overtones, for after the drunken Alcibiades almost sits on Socrates, whom he accuses of ambushing him, Socrates asks Agathon to defend him against Alcibiades if he becomes violent (213a3-d6). However, the comedy can be perceived as having hubristic overtones, suggesting an assault on Agathon’s honor. Alcibiades not only proclaims Socrates winner of the first prize in words, thereby demoting Agathon to second place, he also does this at a symposium given by Agathon to celebrate the poet’s first victory at a tragic competition (173a5-6). Although Socrates himself does not take away the wreath, in keeping it he might be seen as offending against Agathon’s honor. Agathon is his host, and, as Homer’s Odysseus says, one should not compete with one’s host (Od. 8.204-211). Moreover, in keeping another’s prize, Socrates dishonors Agathon in the way Agamemnon dishonors Achilles, who says: “He dishonored me; for he has himself taken my prize and keeps it” (Il. 1.356), lines quoted by Aristotle in his discussion of hybris (Rhet. 1378b32, quoted above). In the Symposium, in which Achilles is repeatedly mentioned (179e1, 180a4, b4, 208d3, 221c6), the crowning of Socrates might well recall the Iliadic precedent.

At the end of the dialogue, Socrates states that Alcibiades’ real purpose in telling his story was to make trouble between Agathon and Socrates by means of the warning against Socrates with which the speech concluded. What Alcibiades wants, says Socrates, is for Socrates to love Alcibiades alone, and for Agathon to be loved by Alcibiades alone (222c4-d3). Socrates calls on Agathon to see to it that Alcibiades does not succeed in setting Socrates and Agathon at variance (222d1, 222d6). At this point, the three men dispute about the seating arrangement. Agathon, Alcibiades, and Socrates have been reclining on the same couch, in that order, but Agathon now offers to sit beside Socrates, who invites him to do so (222e3-5). In this new arrangement, the order would be: Alcibiades, Socrates, Agathon. When Alcibiades suggests that Agathon instead sit
between them, Socrates objects on the grounds that he needs to sit to the right of Agathon in order to praise him. Agathon is delighted at the prospect of being praised by Socrates, and gets up to sit beside him. Alcibiades now admits defeat in the contest over Agathon, saying that no one can get a share of the beautiful people when Socrates is present, for the philosopher is resourceful in inventing persuasive words (222e6-223b2).

This scene represents Socrates as a comic figure, participating in a game of musical chairs and competing for Agathon’s favors. It also portrays him as acting in ways that could be construed as hubristic. Alcibiades has just described Socrates as an eromenos (222b3-4), and the narrators of the dialogue corroborate this by saying that Alcibiades still seems to be in love with Socrates (222c2-3). Instead of acting as Alcibiades’ eromenos, however, the philosopher casts himself in the role of erastes (222d1). He thus once again acts in a way that Alcibiades calls hubristic, in leading people to think he is an erastes while actually being the eromenos (222a7-b4). Socrates also casts Alcibiades in the role of erastes of Agathon (222d2), and humiliates him in this role as well, by himself playing the role of successful erastes in relation to Agathon. When he persuades the beautiful Agathon to sit next to himself instead of beside Alcibiades, Socrates demonstrates his superiority in the erotic competition.

Just as Socrates’ cross-examination of Agathon was interrupted by Phaedrus, so the philosopher is prevented from praising Agathon by the arrival of a crowd of revelers, who compel the symposiasts to drink much wine (223b2-6). In this scene, Socrates is once again judged by Dionysos to be victorious in the trial for wisdom alluded to by Agathon at 175e7-9. Socrates shows his superiority in three Dionysian activities: drinking, drama and love. After monopolizing Agathon, the most beautiful man present, he drinks all the rest of the symposiasts under the table, demonstrating the truth of Alcibiades’ statement that the present occasion would be a test of his ability to withstand the effects of wine (220a4-6). He proves his superiority in drama by compelling Agathon and Aristophanes to agree that the man who has the skill to compose tragedies is also able to write comedies (223d2-6). He thus shows that he knows more about drama than they do, and also demonstrates that they, who compose in only one dramatic genre, do not do so by means of expert knowledge.15 The end of the dialogue, then, could be taken to imply that Socrates once again slights Agathon’s ability to speak well, and at the same time hubristically demonstrates his own superiority.

In sum, throughout the dialogue, Socrates acts contrary to sympotic conventions. He says things that lead Agathon to charge him with hybris; he ridicules his host; he creates strife between Agathon and Alcibiades, and he is excessively sober. An orderly symposium, from which hybris is excluded, produces friendship and peace. Socrates, in contrast, might appear to introduce strife and jealousy, hybris and disdain.

4. Divine Images of Virtue

Socrates’ comic and satyr-like traits are only one aspect of his persona. Alcibiades’ speech portrays Socrates not only as hubristic, but also as exhibiting the virtues (219d4-7), and as using his virtues to benefit the young man. Socrates also benefits Agathon, who, in contrast to Alcibiades, appears to be a model interlocutor, who learns from Socrates’ disdainful treatment.

15 Noted by Rowe 1998, on 223d2-5.
According to Alcibiades, Socrates’ courage is shown by his actions in war (220d5-221c1), and his endurance is attested by his extraordinary resistance to pleasure and pain. Socrates resists the effects of wine (220a4-6; cf. 176c3-5), the need for sleep (220c3-d5; cf. 223d6-12), the temptations of money (219e1-2), and the effects of hunger and cold (219e7-220a1, 220a6-c1). His sophrosyne is evidenced by his remarkable ability to spend the night in Alcibiades’ arms without having sexual relations with the beautiful youth (219b3-d2). Above all, Alcibiades attributes to Socrates exceptional understanding (φρόνησις: 219d6), and it is this virtue that he himself wants to acquire (217a2-6, 218d1-3). Alcibiades also acknowledges Socrates’ superior understanding when he says that he cannot contradict Socrates. He knows that he should do what the philosopher bids, but fails to act on this belief because he is overcome by desire for honor from the many (216b3-5).

In Alcibiades’ story, Socrates uses his courage for Alcibiades’ benefit, saving the life of the young man, along with his weapons, and giving up to Alcibiades the prize for valor that he, Socrates, deserves (220d6-e4). The philosopher does not share his understanding with Alcibiades in the way a lover is traditionally thought to impart wisdom to a beloved, but he does use it to care for the young man’s soul. Socrates compels Alcibiades to agree that he is neglecting his own soul to engage in political affairs (216a4-6). He talks to Alcibiades and spends the day with him (217b6-7), discourses with him far into the night (217d4), and offers to consider with him the best course of action (219a8-b2). Socrates also shares meals with Alcibiades during the war at Potideia (219e7), during which more philosophical discourses undoubtedly take place. The shame that Alcibiades feels as a result of his conversations with Socrates leads him, at least temporarily, to recognize his faults and to want to change his way of life (216a8-b6). That Socrates’ sophrosyne benefits Alcibiades is implied by the latter’s statement that Socrates’ relations with him are like those of a father or older brother (219c7-d2). In the Apology, the reader will recall, Socrates neglects his own affairs, going around to each man in private like a father or an older brother, persuading the Athenians to take care of virtue (31b3-5). Alcibiades acknowledges Socrates’ superior virtue, saying that the failed seduction made him admire the philosopher’s courage, sophrosyne, understanding and endurance, but he characterizes this virtuous behavior as, paradoxically, a form of hybris (219c5).

Agathon’s interactions with Socrates indicate that the poet, like Alcibiades, thinks that Socrates has superior understanding, which Agathon does not hesitate to call wisdom (tou sophou: 175c8; cf. 175e2). Although Socrates slights Agathon, his interactions with the poet can also be interpreted as providing evidence that he cares deeply about seeking wisdom and about leading others to do so also.

Socrates is a rude guest, who acts in a strange, unconventional, way (ἄτοπον: 175a10). However, he does so not because he enjoys insulting his host and putting Aristodemus in an embarrassing situation, but because he is engaged in philosophical thought (174d4-5), which he values more highly than obeying social conventions. When Agathon asks to share Socrates’ wisdom by touching him, Socrates’ reply slights Agathon’s achievements, but it also attempts to correct the young man’s false ideas. True wisdom, Socrates says, is not conveyed by touch, and it does not consist in the ability to win the praises of crowds, but in the recognition that all human beings, including Socrates, have “an inferior sort of wisdom, or even a debatable one, existing as if in a
dream” (175e2-4). Agathon accuses Socrates of hybris, but he also shows his willingness to learn when he says that Dionysos will be the judge concerning wisdom.

Socrates’ interactions with Agathon before the poet gives his encomium (194a-e) also show that he wants to benefit Agathon by correcting false beliefs. When Agathon says that it is more terrifying to speak before a few who have sense than before a crowd of the foolish (194b6-8), Socrates’ reply, “I certainly wouldn’t be acting nobly, Agathon, if I thought you were at all boorish” (194c1-2), indicates genuine respect for the young poet. After Agathon makes his speech, Socrates, like a good teacher, prefaces his critical questioning with praise: “Indeed, dear Agathon, it seemed to me that you began your speech well, saying that it was first necessary to demonstrate what characteristics Eros has, and after that to discuss his works. I very much admire this beginning. Come then, since you recounted beautifully and magnificently what he is like in other respects, tell me this also about Eros. . . “ (199c3-d1). Moreover, Socrates’ parody of Agathon’s style, his criticism of the contents of the speech, and his cross-examination can all be seen as part of an attempt to produce a beneficial humility and self-awareness that is the beginning of wisdom. Socrates treats Agathon just as he does Lysis (Lysis 210d4-e5), and Alcibiades (Alcibiades 1, Symposium 216a4-b6), inducing shame in order to cast out false opinion. In Agathon’s case, this is the false opinion that fine rhetoric is more important than truth. In showing Agathon that he does not know what he thinks he knows, Socrates applies the lesson he will later say he learned from his teacher (204a4-7). Lack of learning (ἀμαθία), according to Diotima, is harmful because it leads one to think that one is beautiful, good and sensible (phronimon) without being so. People desire what they lack only if they know that they are deficient. Just as Socrates leads Alcibiades to admit that he is deficient (216a5), so he shows Agathon that he lacks the true beauty of speech he thought he had, and thus leads him to desire to become able to speak truthfully.

The interaction between Socrates and Agathon after the elenchos provides persuasive evidence that Socrates benefits Agathon, and that Agathon realizes this:

And Agathon said, “It seems likely, Socrates, that I didn’t know anything I was talking about then.”

“But indeed you spoke beautifully, Agathon,” he said. “But tell me one little thing more. Don’t good things [ταγαθά] seem to you to be beautiful also?”

“They do.”

“If, then, Eros is deficient in beautiful things, and good things [τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἐνδεής εἴη].”

“I wouldn’t be able to contradict you, Socrates,” he said, “but let it be just as you say.”

“You aren’t able to contradict the truth, beloved16 Agathon,” he said, “but it’s not difficult to contradict Socrates.” (201b11-c9)

This exchange ends in a remarkably friendly way. Agathon does not react to the elenchos as so many of Socrates’ interlocutors do, by becoming angry with Socrates, nor does he repeat his earlier charge of hybris. Instead, he readily acknowledges his own

16 Reading φιλούμενε, defended by Dover 1980, on 201c9, and (with caution) Rowe 1998, on 201c8-9.
ignorance and agrees with Socrates’ conclusion. Agathon admits that he cannot contradict Socrates (201c6), just as Alcibiades does (216b3), but unlike Alcibiades (216b4-6), Agathon does not go on to say that other forces deter him from acting in accord with his admission. Socrates continues to show consideration for Agathon when he addresses him as “beloved” and goes on to recount his own interactions with Diotima, in which he himself was refuted after saying things about Eros similar to those Agathon has just asserted (201c3-7). In the passage quoted above, Socrates concludes his exchange with a punning compliment to Agathon. The young poet had portrayed Eros in his own image, as most beautiful (195a7), most tender (195e8, 196a1, cf. 195d1), living among the softest things (195e8, cf. 195d7, e3, e7), and producing kinship, gentleness, and good will among people (197d1-5). In punning references to his own name, Agathon said that Eros is “good” (agathos: 197d5), a “good poet” (poietês . . . agathos : 196e4), and a god who takes care of the good (epimelēs agathôn: 197d7-8).17 The same pun was introduced at the beginning of the dialogue, when Socrates, on his way to Agathon’s house, quoted the proverb: “The good [agathoi] go of their own accord to the feasts of the good [agathôn]” (ἄγαθον ἔτι δία τας ἰαυτές ἀγαθοί: 174b4-5).18 In the context of these precedents, when Socrates says that Eros is deficient in (or needs) good things (Ἔρως . . . τῶν ἄγαθων ἐνδεής εἰ: 201c5), he is simultaneously refuting Agathon and paying him a compliment by stating that Eros is in need of Agathon. This pun also helps to explain why Socrates addresses Agathon as “beloved.” In identifying him with the things Eros needs, Socrates casts Agathon in the role of beloved, a role that Agathon’s speech already gave to his soft and tender Eros (see 204c1-5). Agathon’s response, “I wouldn’t be able to contradict you, Socrates...but let it be just as you say” (201c6-7), shows that he accepts the compliment as gracefully as the defeat. In addition to being a good host and poet Agathon is a good interlocutor, in that he learns from his defeat.

That Agathon has learned from his interactions with Socrates is also apparent from their interactions at the end of the dialogue. In being persuaded to sit next to Socrates by the philosopher’s offer of praise, Agathon reenacts the situation at the beginning of the dialogue. In their first encounter, Agathon called Socrates hubristic after the philosopher denied that wisdom can be imparted by means of physical proximity and mockingly praised Agathon’s ability to speak well at the theater (175d3-e7). Now, however, Agathon changes his seat in order to sit next to Socrates and be praised by him, thus reproducing the situation at the beginning of the dialogue. In being eager for Socrates’ praise, even though he has learned that this praise is mixed with criticism, Agathon, shows that he accepts the judgment of Dionysos concerning wisdom (175e7-10).

5. Marsyas and Eros

Alcibiades, whose encomium of Socrates mixes praise with blame for hybris (222a7-8), is perplexed by Socrates (οὔτε . . . ηὐπόρουν: 219d8-e1, ἢπόρουν: 219e3 ), and says that he “does not know what to do with the man” (216c3). The dialogue raises a similar problem for the reader who attempts to understand the combination of

---

17The last pun is noted by Rowe, 1998, on 197d8.
18 Discussed by Bury 1932, 8-9; Hug 1876, 12-13; Lowanstam 1985, 86-87; Rowe 1998, on 174b3-c5. Cf. Aristophanes’ Frogs 84.
extraordinary virtue with disdainful and hubristic behavior that characterizes the Socrates portrayed by the multiple narrators of the Symposium. Modern readers must begin by realizing that Socrates’ disdain, and perhaps even his apparently hubristic behavior, would have seemed less problematic to Plato’s contemporaries than it does to us. Within the context of ancient Greek ethical values, disdain is not only perfectly compatible with, but is actually essential to extraordinary virtue. Disdain for inferior objects is sometimes presented in Plato’s dialogues as an essential concomitant of virtue: Achilles disdains death (κατεφρόνησεν: Ap. 28c3), and philosophers think little (ὁλιγωροῦσιν) of the body (Phdo. 68c11-12). Aristotle’s account of magnanimity (μεγαλοψυχία) in NE 4.3 and EE 3.5 also provides important information about fourth-century views on disdain as a characteristic of the virtuous person.

According to Aristotle, to disdain something (καταφρονεῖν) is to think slightingly of it, to give it little value in comparison with other things (Rhet. 1378b15-17). Disdain can be a sign of arrogance, but it can also be a virtuous attitude if it involves giving an accurate valuation to objects that are in fact inferior. The magnanimous man’s disdain is virtuous because he combines extraordinary virtue with an accurate assessment of his own merits (NE 1123b2). According to Aristotle, disdain is not only compatible with virtue, but is a direct consequence of it. Every virtue makes people disdainful of things that appear important contrary to reason: the courageous person is disdainful of dangers, the moderate person of great pleasures. Because he has extraordinary virtue, and places a high value on great things, disdain of lesser things is characteristic of the magnanimous man (EE 1232a38-b10). The magnanimous man may even show his disdain by speaking hubristically (NE 1125a8-9). Although some scholars have argued that Aristotle’s magnanimous man is based, at least in part, on the historical Socrates, there is no firm evidence to support this view. Nevertheless, the undeniable similarities between Aristotle’s magnanimous man and Socrates in the Symposium can help modern readers to understand that Socrates’ disdain for the things others honor (216d7-e4, 219c3-5) and perhaps even his apparently hubristic behavior might be explained as justified by and essential to his extraordinary virtue.

Before we identify Socrates with the magnanimous man, however, we would do well to heed Alcibiades’ warning against attempting to stereotype Socrates. The philosopher is so unique and strange (ἀτοπίαν: 215a2, 221d2) as to be unlike any other model, ancient or modern (221c4-d6). Socrates cannot be compared to Achilles, Nestor or Antenor (221c6-8); he is “much more marvelous” than Marsyas (215b8) and much more invulnerable than Ajax (219e1-2). In describing Socrates’ behavior, Alcibiades quotes Aristophanes (221b3 adapts Clouds 362). The fact that this verse is a description of Socrates himself indicates that the philosopher, like Achilles and Ajax, has been immortalized in poetry. Socrates sets his own standards and makes his own traditions.

If Alcibiades’ Socrates resembles Aristotle’s magnanimous man in having extraordinary virtue and in being disdainful, the dialogue also provides evidence to support Alcibiades’ and Agathon’s accusations of hybris, for the philosopher can be seen as dishonoring and shaming others. Nevertheless, the text gives many indications that this

19 I owe these references to Pakaluk 2003.
20 The view of Deman (1942, 54-57), followed by Gauthier (1951, 116-17) that Aristotle’s magnanimous man is modeled on the historical Socrates is opposed by Dirlmeier (1991, 370-371).
strange man is also unlike both the magnanimous man and the hubristic man of Aristotle’s definition (Rhetoric 1378b23-35, quoted above, section 2). The magnanimous man “thinks himself worthy of great things” (NE 1123b2), especially honor (1123b15-24), and the hubristic man of Aristotle’s definition dishonors others in order to get pleasure by proving his own superiority. Socrates, however, disclaims superior virtue and wisdom, does not think that he deserves to be honored, slights himself as well as others, and gives no sign that he enjoys humiliating others. The philosopher claims to be ignorant of everything, and to know nothing (216d3-4), and he recounts Diotima’s belittling remarks about his intellectual abilities (204b1, 207c2-4, 209e5-210a4). He refers mockingly to Agathon’s wisdom before the crowd at the theater, but he also calls his own wisdom inferior or doubtful (175d3-e6). When Socrates denies that Agathon’s audience was made up of wise people, he includes himself in the number of fools (194c1-5). The superior insight of maturity to which he alludes in his conversation with Alcibiades is that of knowing one’s own worthlessness (219a1-4). In rejecting the prize for valor (220e2-7), Socrates might be thought to disclaim courage; he certainly shows that he himself does not desire honor. In this case, far from hubristically dishonoring Alcibiades to prove his own superiority, Socrates enhances the young man’s reputation at the expense of his own. Socrates’ suggestion that Alcibiades may be trying to exchange bronze for gold (218e5-219a1) might be taken as a disclaimer of sophrosyne: if Alcibiades’ beauty is mere bronze, there is little virtue in resisting it. Alcibiades accuses Socrates of laughing at him (219c4), but the philosopher’s slighting references to his own virtues are inconsistent with the hubristic laughter that comes from enjoyment of his own superiority.

How, then, are we to understand this strange and unique persona, who is neither a magnanimous nor a hubristic man, but who appears to share certain traits with both? According to Alcibiades, the strangeness of Socrates and his words can only be captured in the images of the sileni and satyrs (221d1-6) that represent the philosopher as having a deceptive (222b3) outer, hubristic, satyr-like aspect, and an inner, divinely virtuous aspect. Alcibiades’ interpretation of the persona of Socrates, cannot, however be taken at face value, for the dialogue gives the reader good reasons for questioning Alcibiades. Soon after awarding Socrates the victory in speech, he accuses him of lying: “Did Socrates persuade you of anything he said just now? Don’t you know that it’s just the opposite of what he said?” (214c8-d2). Alcibiades’ veracity is also open to doubt. He swears to be telling the truth, attributing this fact to his drunken state (217e3-4; cf. 212e9-213a1), and he frequently challenges Socrates to deny that he speaks the truth (214e10, 217b2-3, 219c2, 220e4). Socrates does not contest anything in Alcibiades’ story except his claim to be drunk, saying, immediately after Alcibiades’ story: “You seem to me to be sober, Alcibiades” (222c3-4). If, as Alcibiades claims, there is truth in wine, a sober Alcibiades may be lying. Furthermore, Alcibiades admits that he is in a state of aporia about Socrates (219d7-e5). Just as the perplexity of Socrates’ interlocutors in other dialogues is the result of an inability to reconcile apparent inconsistencies, so Alcibiades’ aporia results from the failure to understand the combination of hybris and virtue that he claims Socrates exhibits. In comparing Socrates to a silenus statue that opens up to reveal divine images, Alcibiades grasps part of the truth. His audience within

21 On aporia and atopia see Blondell 2002, 73 and n.102.
the dialogue, however, and Plato’s readers, who, unlike Alcibiades, have heard Socrates’ speech about Eros, are in a better position than is Alcibiades himself to understand the way in which the image, with its unique combination of virtue with hybris, represents the truth about Socrates.

Alcibiades does not identify the gods within the silenus, but two candidates are prominent in the dialogue. As the god of the symposium and of the theater, Dionysos presides over the symposium in honor of Agathon’s theatrical victory. The god is invoked as judge by Agathon (175e9), and is said to be one of Aristophanes’ main concerns (177e1-2). Moreover, the followers of this god are satyrs. Another divinity, however, is much more important in the Symposium: Eros, the subject of the first six speeches in the dialogue. Eros is also appropriate in this context because Socrates replaces Eros as the subject of Alcibiades’ encomium (214b9-d8), within which the philosopher is characterized in erotic terms. It is a plausible inference, then, that Alcibiades intends his audience to identify one of the gods within the statue as Eros.

The symposiasts, who, unlike Alcibiades, have heard Socrates’ speech, have still other reasons for identifying the god within the silenus with an Eros whom Socrates resembles. As has often been noted, the Socrates portrayed by Alcibiades and others in the Symposium has much in common with Eros in the speech attributed to Diotima. Both are daimonion (Eros: 202d13; Socrates: 219c1), lack beauty (Eros: 203c6-7; Socrates: 215b4-6, 216d4), are unshod (Eros: 203d1; Socrates: 174a4, 220b6), live outside and in doorways (Eros: 203d1-3; Socrates: 220c3-d4, 175a8). Socrates and Eros both contrive plots so as to associate with the beautiful (Eros: 203d6, Socrates: 213c4: 223a6-9). Both are courageous (Eros: 203d5, 212b8; Socrates: 219d5, 220d5-221c1) and resourceful (Eros: 203d7, Socrates: 223a7), and both are characterized as magicians and spellbinders. Both are erotic with respect to beauty (Eros: 204b3; Socrates: 216d2-3), and both Socrates and the erastes have disdain for lesser objects (erastes: 210b5-6, c5-6; Socrates: 219c4-5). Just as Eros desires what he lacks (200a9-b1), and eros causes people to desire what they lack (205a5-7), so Socrates causes Alcibiades to desire to remedy his deficiencies (215e7-216a6).

Alcibiades’ audience would also have recognized an important difference, of which Alcibiades himself cannot be aware, between Alcibiades’ Socrates and Diotima’s Eros. According to Socrates’ speech, Eros is not the eromenos but the lover (204c1-6), and therefore lacks beauty, goodness, understanding (204a5), and the other virtues. That Diotima’s Eros lacks virtue is shown, above all, by his characterization as a philosopher, someone who is between wisdom and lack of learning (ἀμαθής), and who recognizes his own deficiencies (203d7-204b5). In contrast, Alcibiades’ Socrates is the eromenos (222b3-4, 222c2-3), who contains very beautiful (217a1) images of virtue (222a4), having extraordinary courage (219d5, 220d6-221c1), endurance (219d7, 220a1), understanding (219d6), and sophrosyne (219d5).

When he characterizes the “inner” Socrates as beautiful and virtuous, Alcibiades, who was not present when Socrates characterized Eros as the lover instead of the beloved, shows that he misunderstands Socrates. Socrates in the Symposium, like Diotima’s Eros, is not virtuous or wise, nor does he have the “immense beauty” (218e2)

22 Eisner 1982, 114 argues that Dionysos is a god within the statue.
23 Eros: 203d8; Socrates: 194a5, 215c1, 215d5-6.
of the eromenos; he is instead between virtue and vice, knowledge and lack of learning. Socrates knows nothing except erotics (177d7-8), that is, like Eros, he knows that he is deficient (175e2-4, 219a2).²⁴ Socrates, like Eros, is a philosopher (218a4-5, 218b3), who desires wisdom because he recognizes that he lacks it. Socrates’ ignorance (ἀγνῶσις), then, is not merely a schema (216d4), a deceptive outer covering, but part of his true erotic nature. Although Alcibiades mistakenly attributes virtue to Socrates, he does grasp an important part of the truth about Socrates. Just as Socrates has an inferior and doubtful kind of wisdom (175e2-4), so he possesses an inferior kind of virtue. Socrates has the kind of courage Eros has, in that he desires beauty and pursues it; he has endurance in that his disdain for inferior objects leads him to resist the pleasures and pains associated with them, and he has understanding in that he knows his own ignorance. He also has sophrosyne in that he has little regard for physical beauty compared to wisdom and beauty of soul. The “images” Alcibiades sees within the silenus are not virtue, but objects between virtue and vice, statues (ἀγάλματα) of the god Eros.²⁵

Alcibiades’ mistake about Socrates is apparent in his narration of the attempted seduction. When the young man asks Socrates to be a helper in making him as good as possible (218d1-3), the philosopher replies that Alcibiades may be mistaken if he thinks that Socrates has within him an “immense beauty” (218e2). Socrates goes on to tell Alcibiades: “In the future, considering things, we will do whatever appears best to us, about these and other matters” (219a8-b2). Because he mistakes the erastes of wisdom and beauty for the virtuous and beautiful eromenos, Alcibiades fails to recognize that this “shared search” for wisdom is the very help he asks for.²⁶ Indeed, in the exhortation Alcibiades did not hear, Socrates explained that Eros is a helper (212b3) of humans in their search for the object of their desires:

I am persuaded, and I try to persuade others also that one could not easily acquire a better co-worker . . . than Eros. For this reason, I say that every man must honor Eros and I myself honor and especially cultivate erotic matters and exhort others to do so also. Both now and always I praise the power and courage of Eros as much as I am able (212b2-8).

Although Alcibiades merely leaves his audience to infer who the gods within the statue are, he explicitly identifies the “outer” Socrates with a satyr or silenus, and, in particular, with the satyr Marsyas. Socrates, he says, resembles a satyr, or Marsyas (215b3-6), in being hubristic (215b6-7; cf. 221e3-4), and in being an aulos-player who enchants people and invents tunes (215b8-d1). Alcibiades also connects Socrates’ satyr-like characteristics with his erotic nature and his ignorance: “You see that Socrates is erotically disposed toward the beautiful and that he is always around them and that he is stunned by them, and again that he is ignorant of everything and knows nothing, as far as his appearance goes. Isn’t this silenus-like?”²⁷ Alcibiades is making a statement about

---

²⁵ The ἀγάλματα are not “mere images” (Reeve 1992, 112-13) but statues honoring a god (Blundell 1992, 120-21).
²⁶ Shared search: Gill 2002, 150 and 165 n16.
Socrates’ satyr-like physical appearance (σχῆμα), which, according to Greek theories of physiognomy, is an indication of ignorance, stupidity, and lechery.28

In characterizing Socrates as satyr-like in outward appearance, Alcibiades once again grasps only part of the truth. The young man, who missed Socrates’ speech, cannot recognize that the same satyr-like traits he attributes to Socrates also characterize Diotima’s Eros. Socrates’ satyr-like appearance marks him as erotic and ignorant (216d2-4), and Eros is ignorant, in a state between lack of learning and wisdom (203e5). Eros lacks beauty (203c6-7), and so do the satyrs that Socrates resembles. Socrates’ words appear laughable, like a satyr’s skin (221e2-222a1), and Diotima’s Eros, with his absurd birth story, is a comic figure (203b2-d8). According to Alcibiades, Socrates is satyr-like in being hubristic (215b6-7), and his ὑbris consists in laughing at and disdaining the young man’s beauty (219c3-5). Ὕbris is not explicitly associated with Diotima’s Eros. However, because the daimon is identified with the lover (τὸ ἐρῶν: 204c1-6), it is a reasonable inference that he, like the human erastes, has the disdain for a beautiful body (210b5-6) that Alcibiades calls ὑbris when Socrates exhibits it. Eros is a resourceful contriver (203d6-7), and Socrates resembles the satyr Marsyas in being a resourceful inventor of tunes (215c2-3; cf. 223a8: εὐπόρως). Eros is shoeless, homeless and sleeps out of doors (203d1-3), and Alcibiades’ Socrates is shoeless and spends time out of doors (220b6, c3-d4). Although satyrs are not explicitly said to share these characteristics in the Symposium, they are essential traits of these half-bestial creatures, who have hooves instead of feet and who live in the wild. Eros is bold, impetuous and a hunter (203d5), and satyrs are commonly represented in the visual arts as bold pursuers of sexual objects. Socrates, according to Alcibiades, is also a pursuer of the beautiful (213c4-5, 216d2-3, 223a6-9). Finally, like Eros (202d13) and Socrates (219c1), a satyr is commonly represented as a daimon.29

Alcibiades’ audience, and Plato’s readers, then, are able to recognize what Alcibiades cannot, that the outer satyr in many ways resembles the inner god (or rather, daimon), and that Socrates resembles both. Diotima’s Eros and Alcibiades’ Marsyas, daimon and satyr, both exemplify the same characteristics of the erotic philosopher: someone whose ἔρως for true beauty leads him to be resourceful and energetic in pursuing it, without regard for convention, and to disdain such inferior objects as Alcibiades’ physical beauty, the rhetorical beauty of Agathon’s speech, and Socrates’ own inferior and doubtful kind of wisdom and virtue.

One particularly significant way in which Socrates resembles both Eros and Marsyas is in being a magician.30 The philosopher uses binding spells (κατεχόμεθα: 215d6, cf. 218a6-7) to enslave (215e6-7, 219e3-4), give pain (218a2-5), and produce shame (216b2). More specifically, Socrates’ words are a kind of love magic, that seek to create, in a young man’s soul that is not without natural ability (νέου ψυχῆς μὴ ἄφροδίς: 218a6) ἔρως not for a person but for the virtues that Socrates himself does not possess.31 As Socrates says, “I honor and especially cultivate Eros, and I exhort others to do so

30 Eros 203d8; Marsyas and Socrates: 215c1-d1. See further, Belfiore 1980.
31 Socrates and love magic Faraone 1999.
also” (212b6-7). When Alcibiades listens to Socrates he falls under the philosopher’s spell and thinks that his present life is not worth living (215e7-216a2). In thus recognizing his own deficiencies (πολλοῦ ἐνδεής ὢν: 216a5), a lesson reinforced by what Alcibiades later calls Socrates’ hybris, Alcibiades comes to resemble, for a time, the philosopher Eros, who thinks that he is deficient (ἐνδεής εἶναι: 204a6) and therefore desires to become wise. Socrates’ love magic, however, can also produce an unintended result in those who fail to understand him: eros for Socrates. The philosopher has many lovers in the Symposium. Alcibiades seems to be still in love with Socrates (222c2-3); Aristodemus is “very much a lover” (ἐραστῆς) of Socrates (173b3-4), and, according to Alcibiades, Charmides, Glaucus, Euthydemos, Diocles, and “very many others” have been deceived into thinking that Socrates is a lover, while he is really a beloved (222b1-4).

Alcibiades warns Agathon not to be deceived by Socrates: “So I tell you also, Agathon, not to be deceived by this man, but to watch out, learning from my experiences. Don’t, as the proverb says, learn like a fool by suffering” (222b5-7). It is Alcibiades’ own story, however, that contains the deceptive image of Socrates as wise and virtuous eromenos, and the dialogue contains suggestions that Agathon has acquired a better understanding of Socrates than Alcibiades. As I have argued, Agathon appears to learn from his interactions with Socrates, acknowledging his own ignorance, and being eager to receive more of Socrates’ critical praise without repeating his accusation of hybris a second time. Agathon, moreover, is the only one of the symposiasts with whom Socrates engages, however briefly, in dialectic, and the only one whom Socrates addresses as “beloved.” At the end of the dialogue, there is still another hint of Agathon’s superiority as interlocutor. After many of the others have left (223b6-8), and first Aristodemus (223b8-c1), and then Aristophanes (223d7-8) have fallen asleep, it is Agathon who remains conversing with Socrates until dawn (223d7-8). Socrates is interrupted before he can praise Agathon (223a3-b6), but Plato pays the good poet a compliment in representing him as the last to fall asleep. The soft and effeminate Agathon, the dialogue thus suggests, has a better understanding of Socrates than either Alcibiades or Aristophanes. He deserves from us the close attention he himself gives Socrates.  

Works Cited

32 I am indebted to Sandra Peterson, Christopher Rowe, and Marilyn Skinner for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.