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Alcibiades in the Socratic Tradition and in Plato

Examining the presentation of Alcibiades in Plato is particularly fruitful, because of this figure's importance in Socratic writing generally. At least four Socratics wrote dialogues named for him, and evidence from one, that of Aeschines, survives. Even more valuable for comparison is the pseudo-Platonic *Alcibiades I*. Parallel textual evidence of more conventional encounters between Socrates and Alcibiades will help to delineate Plato's relation to the Socratic genre.

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The historical Alcibiades began to be well known very early in life. Apparently praised for his heroism at Potidaia while still almost an ephebe, by his early twenties he had become known for his rhetorical facility and, according to Thucydides, had ambitions a few years later to serve as the *proxenos* of the Spartans. That Alcibiades had some historical connection to Socrates is not unlikely; but Alcibiades' prominent role in Socratic writing has two bases. First, his glamor and wealth contrast piquantly with the famous ugliness and simple habits of Socrates. Second, Alcibiades, with his extreme devotion to the traditional Greek values of competitive display and personal reputation, makes a useful contrast with the untraditional morality (or moralities) presented by Socratic writers..

In the fragments of the *Alcibiades* of Aeschines of Sphettos, as in *Alcibiades I*, Socrates, confronting a youthful and ambitious Alcibiades, proceeds to show the boy that his confidence in approaching a political career is wholly unfounded. Abashed, Alcibiades bursts into tears, lays his head on Socrates' knees, and begs for help and direction. *Alcibiades I* is conducted in a cooler tone; but the attack is equally devastating.

Alcibiades I contrasts in several ways with most Platonic dialogues. Socrates confronts his victim directly, sometimes with a sarcastic tone. When Alcibiades attempts to evade refutation, Socrates accuses him of wanting new proofs like a "spoiled" person who rejects wearing old clothes (113e-114a). This Socrates boldly claims that "I am all-important to you, and no guardian, relative, or other person" except himself can guarantee that Alcibiades will realize his high ambitions. (105e) The underlying assumption that conventional political success can be achieved through Socrates' help is without parallels in the authentic dialogues. The first *Alcibiades* may represent an attempt to supply the Platonic corpus with an element felt to be missing. But the real Alcibiades dialogue of Plato must be *Symposium*. There, we meet an older and more corrupt Alcibiades, who reminisces about their romantic encounters and describes the effect of Socrates' conversation. As in Aeschines, Socrates' words bring tears to his eyes; as in *Alcibiades I*,

he feels himself to be in the condition of a slave. He confesses, as in Aeschines and *Alcibiades I*, that Socrates is the only being before whom he feels shame.

The conventional protreptic Socrates figure, who scolds and rebukes the Athenians for their moral failures, is only indirectly presented in Plato's dialogues, through the confession of Alcibiades and through Socrates' self-description in *Apology* (30a-b). The ironic and tentative tone of Plato's Socrates evidently precludes straightforward Hesiodic moralizing. By letting Alcibiades glorify Socrates and reveal himself, Plato achieves the aims of the Socratic convention, even as he subverts it. My paper will also explore the problematic function of such a narrative in the erotic atmosphere of *Symposium*.