

Socrates the Beautiful: Role Reversal and Midwifery in Plato's *Symposium**

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In a society that valued physical beauty, he was an ugly man. In a culture that idealized youth, he was an old man. Snub-nosed, with protruding eyes, he looked like one of the ridiculous satyrs on the painted vases:

φημί αὐτὸν εἰκέναι αὐτὸν τῷ σατύρῳ τῷ Μαρσύᾳ. ὅτι μὲν οὖν
τό γε εἶδος ὅμοιος εἶ τούτοις, ὥς Σώκρατες, οὐδ' αὐτὸς ἂν που
ἀμφισβητήσας. (215b3–6)

I say that he is like the satyr Marsyas. That you are like them, at least
in form, Socrates, you yourself would not deny.

Thus Alcibiades the beautiful taunts him in the *Symposium* as he begins his speech in praise of Socrates. Yet Alcibiades tells in his speech how he is captivated by this man, an individual like no one else he has ever known or heard of:

τὸ δὲ μηδενὶ ἀνθρώπων ὅμοιον εἶναι, μήτε τῶν παλαιῶν μήτ'
εἰ τῶν νῦν ὄντων, τοῦτο ἄξιον παντὸς θαύματος. (221c4–6)

The wholly amazing thing is that there is nothing like him among
human beings, neither among the ancients nor among those now.

Although the symposiasts laugh at him because he seems still to be in love with Socrates, Alcibiades accuses Socrates of having played an outrageous trick on him, of having pretended to be in love with him, yet of somehow ending up as

*I would like to thank Martha Nussbaum, Nick Smith, Chris Faraone, and the readers of *TAPA* for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. It need scarcely be said that any infelicities of expression or outright errors that remain are wholly the products of my own ignorance, carelessness, or obstinacy.

the pursued and not the pursuer in their relationship. Beware, he warns Agathon, he could do the same to you:

οὐκ ἐμὲ μόνον ταῦτα πεποίηκεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ Χαρμίδην τὸν
Γλαύκωνος καὶ Εὐθύδημον τὸν Διοκλέους καὶ ἄλλους πάνυ
πολλούς, οὓς οὗτος ἐξαπατῶν ὡς ἐραστὴς παιδικὰ μᾶλλον
αὐτὸς καθίσταται ἀντ' ἐραστοῦ. ἃ δὴ καὶ σοὶ λέγω, ὦ
'Αγάθων, μὴ ἐξαπατᾶσθαι ὑπὸ τούτου. (222b1–5)

He has done these things, not only to me, but also to Charmides, son of Glaucon, and to Euthydemus, son of Diokles and to many others, whom he deceived, pretending to be a lover, but instead he became the beloved himself rather than the lover. I am telling you these things, Agathon, lest you too be deceived by this man.¹

Why does Socrates keep pulling this trick and what does it mean in terms of the philosophical education of these young men? In Plato's *Symposium*, there are several pairs whose roles as lover and beloved are reversed or confused: Socrates and Alcibiades, Socrates and Agathon, Socrates and Aristodemus. In each case, confusion arises as to who is the active, educating, dominant lover and who the passive, educated, subordinate beloved. The significance of these reversals for Plato's ideas of philosophic education may be seen if we examine Socrates in the *Symposium* as both lover and beloved in terms of Diotima's erotic theory and its confusing imagery of spiritual pregnancy and midwifery. On the one hand, Plato identifies Socrates with the ἐραστής, the needy, barefooted philosopher who is eternally seeking. He seeks out beautiful youths and engages them in conversation about the good life and virtue (cf. 209b–c). But Socrates is also Socrates the beautiful, the most desirable ἐρώμενος, whose outward ugliness hides supreme beauty, which Alcibiades compares to little golden images of the gods: καὶ μοι ἔδοξεν οὕτω θεῖα καὶ χρυσᾶ εἶναι καὶ πάγκαλα καὶ θαυμαστά, “and they seemed to me so divine and golden and totally beautiful and amazing” (216e7–217a1). This beauty serves as midwife to the thoughts of all the young men with whom Socrates consorts—Charmides, Euthydemus, Agathon, Aristodemus, and Alcibiades—relieving them of the pains of their spiritual pregnancy and helping them actively pursue philosophy. Socrates plays the role of both lover and beloved in these relationships and compels his partners to do the same, breaking down the hierarchical relation and replacing it with a kind of philosophic reciprocity.

¹For Charmides, compare the dialogue with his name, and see further below. On the beauty of Euthydemus, cf. X. *Mem.* 1.2.29, 4.2.1.

Models of Eros

As Alcibiades and the other symposiasts make their speeches in the *Symposium*, they all start from a basic model of an erotic relationship between a lover and a beloved, an ἐραστής and an ἐρώμενος. Halperin describes the paradigms that underlie the roles in erotic relationships in the Athens of Plato:

...sex, as it is represented in classical Athenian documents, is a deeply polarizing experience: constructed according to a model of penetration that interprets “penetration” as an intrinsically unidirectional act, sex divides its participants into asymmetrical and, ultimately, into hierarchical positions, defining one partner as “active” and “dominant,” the other partner as “passive” and “submissive.” Sexual roles, moreover, are isomorphic with status and gender roles; “masculinity” is an aggregate combining the congruent functions of penetration, activity, dominance, and social precedence, whereas “femininity” signifies penetrability, passivity, submission, and social subordination.²

Clearly, this rigid hierarchical dichotomy was not as rigid, hierarchical, or dichotomous in reality as in the ideology.³ Nevertheless, this division of roles formed a set of categories that were “good to think with”, so any tampering with the categories would be certain to provoke a reaction from Plato’s audience. In the ideology of these paradigms, however, the ἐραστής is usually an older male, who actively seeks the favors of his subordinate partner, the ἐρώμενος, who for the speakers at the symposium is usually a younger male. The lover pursues the beloved youth for his beauty, but is not himself pursued in turn. Ideally, the ἐρώμενος is supposed to submit passively to his ἐραστής, never actively initiating contact. In the words of Xenophon,

οὐδὲ γὰρ ὁ παῖς τῷ ἀνδρὶ ὥσπερ γυνὴ κοινωνεῖ τῶν ἐν τοῖς ἀφροδισίοις εὐφροσυνῶν, ἀλλὰ νήφων μεθύοντα ὑπὸ τῆς ἀφροδίτης θεᾶται.

²Halperin 1990: 130.

³Halperin’s formulation of the ideology of eros in classical Athens has been criticized as too schematic by, e.g., Cohen 1991, Hubbard 1998, and Davidson 1997, but his simple schema does lay out the structures around which the complex realities of erotic practice were patterned.

For a boy does not share in the enjoyment of intercourse with the man, as a woman does; cold sober, he looks on the other drunk with sexual desire.⁴

Socrates' trick on Alcibiades, then, disrupts this paradigm of fixed roles within an erotic relationship, confusing the rigid hierarchical division between ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος. While Plato makes use of this kind of disruption in other dialogues, most notably the *Phaedrus*, in the *Symposium* Socrates' role reversals from desiring ἐραστής to beautiful ἐρώμενος are bound up with the image of the midwife, the one who aids in bringing to light the products of philosophical eros.⁵

The Begetter or the Midwife?

The image of the midwife appears in both the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus*, but many scholars have seen a contradiction in the imagery between these two dialogues. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates claims to be a *barren* midwife who merely brings to light the offspring of young men:

οὐ μνημονεύεις, ὦ φίλε, ὅτι ἐγὼ μὲν οὔτ' οἶδα οὔτε ποιοῦμαι
τῶν τοιούτων οὐδὲν ἐμόν, ἀλλ' εἰμὶ αὐτῶν ἄγονος, σὲ δὲ
μαιεύομαι καὶ τούτου ἕνεκα ἐπάδω τε καὶ παρατίθημι
ἐκάστων τῶν σοφῶν ἀπογεύσασθαι, ἕως ἂν εἰς φῶς τὸ σὸν
δόγμα συνεξαγάγω. (157c7–d2)

⁴X. *Smp.* 8.21; cf. Dover (1978: 103): "An honourable eromenos does not seek or expect sensual pleasure from contact with an erastes, begrudges any contact until the erastes has proved himself worthy of concession." As Halperin notes, "For the most part, erotic reciprocity was relegated to the province of women, who were thought capable of both giving and receiving pleasure in the sexual act at the same time and in relation to the same individual" (1990: 133). Nevertheless, while a woman might actively experience *eros*, she was still expected to remain the subordinate in the relationship. A figure like Alcestis (whose story, not coincidentally, Phaedrus mentions), who because of her *eros* outshines her husband, must be carefully handled so as not to upset the hierarchies unduly. As Foley comments on Euripides' treatment of the myth, "At the end of *Alcestis*, the heroine is silenced (on stage if not for life) and passively rescued by and for a man" (1992: 143). It is worth noting that Plato does not have Phaedrus end the story in this way, but rather has the gods send her back as a token of honor. Even if this reward is not as great as that of the male Achilles, it is more than is granted to the effeminate lyre-player Orpheus.

⁵On role reversal and reciprocity in the *Phaedrus*, see Halperin 1986, 1989; Nussbaum 1986: 216–23, 231–33 and 1989.

Do you not remember, my friend, that I neither know nor do anything about such matters? But I am childless in such things, and I am only trying to assist in the birthing, and to that end uttering charms over you and serving up things from each of the wise for you to taste, until I bring out with you into the light your own belief.

In comparing the image of the midwife in the *Theaetetus* to that in the *Symposium*, Dover admits a “superficial” similarity, but “there is a profound difference too; a midwife’s role is not a progenitor’s, and in *Tht.* 150cd Socrates denies his own fertility.”⁶ Most commentators on the *Symposium* have made a similar error, attributing to Socrates the role of active begetter and producer of ideas instead of the role of the midwife. Bury claims, “Agathon is the embodiment of that κάλλος which here stimulates the ἐραστής in his search for truth: it is in Agathon’s soul (ἐν καλῷ) that Socrates deposits the fruits of his pregnant mind.”⁷ Even Burnyeat, in his treatment of the midwife theme, argues, “In the *Symposium* the great lover in the spiritual sense is Socrates himself, ...[it is] he therefore who is most fruitfully pregnant, while it is not Socrates but Beauty, present in the boy, who has the midwife’s office of relieving travail (206d).”⁸ Instead of seeing Socrates as a midwife, all these scholars treat Socrates as the lover who begets his ideas in the fertile minds of beautiful youths like Agathon. The boy is thus seen as a passive instrument, not for the lover’s pleasure, as in the standard Athenian paradigm, but for the active lover’s philosophic ends. This line of argument is developed most forcefully by Neumann:

In Diotima’s account, not a word is said about aiding the beautiful beloved to bring to birth his own fair notions. Instead he is persuaded to assist his educator in bearing and rearing “children” not his own. One can only conclude that this passive role is not natural, if all yearn to engender the beauties of moderation and justice in others. In order to gain undying glory by fathering the moral values of a civilization, Diotima’s educator must do violence to the naturally pregnant, making them forget what she regards as their deepest desire. Her concept of psychical reproduction is little more than indoctrination, however beautiful the rhetoric used to describe it.⁹

⁶Dover 1980: 151, cf. Price 1991: 296.

⁷Bury 1932: xxxviii.

⁸Burnyeat 1977: 8.

⁹Neumann 1965: 40–41.

This argument, however, is based on a misinterpretation of the roles of the lover and beloved in Diotima's speech. As I will show, the lover does not beget his offspring upon the beloved, who then gives birth to them. It is the lover himself, already pregnant by virtue of his stage in life, who gives birth with the assistance of the beloved.¹⁰ In the *Symposium*, Plato depicts his teacher not as the progenitor and begetter of ideas upon beautiful youths but as Socrates the Beautiful, the beloved who assists as a midwife at the labor of the fertile young men, helping them bring their spiritual progeny to light.

Confusion over this point has led to some rather bizarre interpretations. In addition to seeing Plato as an indoctrinating fascist, by confusing the relation between lover and beloved as Neumann does, some scholars confuse the relation of the philosopher to the Forms themselves. For example, Pender sees the climax of the ascent as the philosopher engaging in sex with the Form of Beauty, which then becomes pregnant. "It is the Form of Beauty, rather than the lover of beauty, that is pregnant at 212a, which means that in the course of Diotima's speech the role of 'beauty' changes from that of presiding deity in childbirth to that of sexual partner and mother."¹¹ I argue to the contrary that, if the imagery of Diotima's speech is carefully analyzed, it can be seen that the entire process of procreation takes place within the lover: arousal, begetting, pregnancy, and parturition.

Beauty: The Philosophic Midwife

Diotima describes the lover as a young man who is in search of beauty to relieve his pregnant soul: τις ἐκ νέου ἐγκύμων ἢ τὴν ψυχὴν, ἥθεος ὢν καὶ ἡκούσης τῆς ἡλικίας ("someone who has been pregnant in his soul from youth, being of marriageable age and having come to maturity," 209a8–b2).¹² This lover seeks out a beloved who is possessed of beauty, at least in his soul, ψυχῇ καλῇ καὶ

¹⁰As Guthrie points out, "Pregnancy is not the *result* of love excited by the beautiful, but a universal state which *causes* excitement at an encounter with beauty" (1975: 387).

¹¹Pender 1992: 72. Cf. the confusion of beauty as begetter in Price 1989: 52: "At each stage of the ascent the lover owes to the beauty in which he generates not only release from pregnancy, but the very character of his offspring; beauty has become less midwife than only begetter." See also O'Brien 1984: 190 n. 16: "Among the themes that have taken an unusual form because Diotima rather than Socrates is the imagined speaker is the intellectual relation between ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος. The former is no self-effacing midwife (see *Theaet.* 149a ff.) but the true begetter of their discourse (*Symp.* 210a7–8)."

¹²Dover 1980 argues for Parmentier's emendation of θεῖος to ἥθεος, contra Bury 1932, reading it with the sense of "belonging to the very young adult male age-group," rather than strictly "unmarried." The emphasis on the youth of the pregnant lover should be a clue that not Socrates but Agathon, Alcibiades, etc., should be seen as the lover.

γενναίᾳ καὶ εὐφυεῖ (209b6, and the presence of this beloved allows the lover to bring to birth the spiritual progeny with which he is in travail. Diotima describes the lover's feeling as a desire to relieve birth labor:

ὅταν μὲν καλῷ προσπελάσῃ τὸ κυοῦν, ἰλεῶν τε γίγνεται καὶ εὐφραϊνόμενον διαχεῖται καὶ τίκτει τε καὶ γεννᾷ· ὅταν δὲ αἰσχυρῷ, σκυθρωπὸν τε καὶ λυπούμενον συσπειρᾶται καὶ ἀποτρέπεται καὶ ἀνείλλεται καὶ οὐ γεννᾷ, ἀλλὰ ἴσχον τὸ κύημα χαλεπῶς φέρει. ὅθεν δὴ τῷ κυοῦντί τε καὶ ἤδη σπαργῶντι πολλή ἡ πτοίησις γέγονε περὶ τὸ καλὸν διὰ τὸ μεγάλης ὠδίνος ἀπολύειν τὸν ἔχοντα. (206d3–e1)

Whenever something pregnant draws near to beauty, it becomes glad and, rejoicing, it melts and begets and give birth. But whenever it draws near to the ugly, frowning and distressed, it contracts and turns away and shrinks and does not give birth, but, holding in its progeny, bears it with difficulty. Hence, for the one who is pregnant and already swelling, there is much excitement about the beautiful because of the possibility of relieving the enormous labor pains.

The physical terminology used, as Pender points out, recalls male arousal and ejaculation.¹³ But the mixing of the language of pregnancy with the language of male arousal transfers the imagery from sexual intercourse to parturition.¹⁴ Instead of the lover desiring sexual intercourse (συνουσία) with the beloved as

¹³Pender 1992: 74–75; cf. Dover 1980: 147, who points out that some of the language could be used of the female experience as well. Indeed, the language of eros in Diotima's speech is full of terms evocative and descriptive of physical sexuality. Diotima is not simply using the language of physical sexual appetites as a metaphor for more abstract longings; the theory she provides to explain why lovers have those desires is intended to account for the physical sensations of arousal and longing as well. As Halperin insists, "*Whatever else it may be*, Platonic eros does indeed *also* make sense as an analysis of the intentionality of sexual desire and demands to be taken seriously as such" (1985: 171).

¹⁴Pender draws a contrast between "male pregnancy," which culminates in ejaculation of seed, and the "female pregnancy" that produces a child. She fails to note, however, that the lover himself experiences both male and female forms of pregnancy, claiming instead that the female pregnancy of the beloved is being elided. "In terms of the spiritual procreation metaphor it is the beloved who assumes the female role, and the suppression of his experience suggests that this part of Diotima's speech is addressed to those men who are or have been the older, active partners in homosexual affairs" (1992: 80). The beloved, however, is never described as pregnant; the imagery of pregnancy applies only to the lover. Consequently, the Form of Beauty does not take, as Pender suggests, the role of sexual partner and mother, but remains for the philosophic lover the ultimate midwife: the goddess of childbirth, Eileithyia.

a way of relieving his physical desire, he desires interaction (συνουσία) with the beloved who acts as a midwife to bring forth the progeny the lover has been carrying for so long a term.¹⁵ This συνουσία with the beloved is described as a kind of philosophical activity:

καὶ πρὸς τοῦτον τὸν ἄνθρωπον εὐθύς εὐπορεῖ λόγων περὶ ἀρετῆς καὶ περὶ οἷον χρὴ εἶναι τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἅ ἐπιτηδεύειν. (209b7–c1)

And immediately he has an abundance of conversations with this man, about excellence and how the good man ought to be and what he ought to make his habits.

It is worth noting that the beloved is specifically a person, τοῦτον τὸν ἄνθρωπον, and that, while the lover speaks with the beloved *person*, it is in contact with the *beauty* of that person that he is delivered of his pregnancy:

ἀπτόμενος γὰρ οἶμαι τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ὁμιλῶν αὐτῷ, ἃ πάλα ἐκύει τίκτει καὶ γεννᾷ. (209c2–3)

For I believe that, in contact with the beauty (ἀπτόμενος...τοῦ καλοῦ) and being together with it, he begets and bears the things with which he has long been pregnant.

This distinction explains, why, in the *Mysteries of Eros*, the figure of the beloved person is eclipsed as the lover ascends. The essential part of the συνουσία is the contact with the *beauty* that the lover has found in that person. As the philosopher ascends the Ladder, he is able to appreciate more pure forms of beauty in his συνουσία. This does not mean, however, as some scholars have claimed, that this Socratic eros completely ignores love of an individual beloved, preferring abstract or divine entities.¹⁶ Eros, for Diotima, is the longing

¹⁵The pains of delayed childbirth are explained by reference to the innate desire of all mortal living creatures, from the irrational animals to human beings, to procreate so that they may obtain immortality. ἡ θνητὴ φύσις ζητεῖ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ἀεὶ τε εἶναι καὶ ἀθάνατος. δύναται δὲ ταύτη μόνον, τῇ γενέσει, “mortal nature seeks, as far as possible, to be forever and immortal. But it is possible in this way alone, by procreation” (Pl. *Smp.* 207d1–3).

¹⁶Cf. Vlastos’ critique of Plato: “What needs to be stressed most of all in this area is that Plato’s theory is not, and is not meant to be, about personal love for persons—i.e., about the kind of love we can have only for persons and cannot have for things or abstractions. What it is really about is love for place-holders of the predicates ‘useful’ and ‘beautiful’” (1981: 26). Rosen takes a different perspective: “The unsatisfactory character of the love affair between Socrates and Alcibiades is a necessary consequence

for that beauty that is instantiated in the beloved person; the contact with the beauty is the essence of Diotima's eros, but the beauty is inseparable from the particular beloved who instantiates it, in συνουσία with whom the λόγοι are brought forth.¹⁷

The beloved's role in Diotima's account of eros is less detailed than that of the lover. Indeed, Diotima never speaks directly of any action on the part of the beloved, except that the lover and beloved share in the nurturing of the offspring produced by their relationship:

καὶ τὸ γεννηθὲν συνεκτρέφει κοινῇ μετ' ἐκείνου, ὥστε πολὺ μείζω κοινωνίαν τῆς τῶν παίδων πρὸς ἀλλήλους οἱ τοιοῦτοι ἴσχουσι καὶ φιλίαν βεβαιωτέραν, ἅτε καλλίωνων καὶ ἀθανατωτέρων παίδων κεκοινωνηκότες. (209c4–7)

And he jointly nourishes the offspring together with him, so that such men have much more partnership and stronger love than in the partnership of rearing children, since they have shared in more beautiful and more immortal children.

The repetition in this passage of words for shared and common action has puzzled commentators who see in the Socratic eros a hierarchical relation between the active lover and the passive beloved on the model of the normal paed-erastic relationship. The cooperative work of the beloved makes sense, however, in light of the one particular active role Diotima does describe for the beloved: Μοῖρα οὖν καὶ Εἰλείθυια ἡ Καλλονὴ ἐστὶ τῇ γενέσει ("Beauty is thus the Fate and Goddess of Childbirth at the birth," 206d2–3). The beloved is the instantiation of Beauty, whom the lover approaches for help in delivering. Diotima

of the peculiarity of Socrates' eros, which can only desire divine things or beings" (1968: 279).

¹⁷As Kosman argues, "If I love A because of θ or love the θ in A, I should not be said to love something other than A if θ is what A is. Thus to love A for its beauty is to love A for itself.... Love on this view is recognition" (1976: 64). What the Socratic lover must avoid, on this view, is not the love of an individual, but the mistake of supposing that his desire can be satisfied by the possession of the individual beloved. "One stands in peril of mistaking the particular individual who instantiates beauty for the beauty he instantiates; one risks, in other words, interpreting one's response to incarnate beauty as a longing to possess the beautiful object (i.e. as a sexual impulse) rather than as a longing to (pro)create excellence by means of it (i.e. as an erotic desire)" (Halperin 1985: 184).

makes Kallone (the personification of Beauty) the goddess of childbirth and midwifery, Eileithyia, at the birth of the lover's progeny.¹⁸

The role reversals that Socrates manipulates in his relations with Alcibiades, Agathon, and the rest all have the effect of making him not only the model of Eros the lover, barefoot, scheming, and homeless, but also of the beloved, the beautiful one in contact with whom these young men might bring forth the progeny of their souls. Socrates thus plays both roles in the relations with the young men whom he so confuses by reversing the expected roles of ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος. As Guthrie puts it, "Plato saw both the Eros which is philosophy, and the Beauty which it seeks and which will help it through its pangs, summed up in a person."¹⁹

Midwifery in the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus*

While in the *Symposium* the focus is almost exclusively on the lover and his desire to give birth, in the *Theaetetus* Socrates develops the role of the midwife at greater length. For example, Socrates stresses the notion that the midwife is barren (149bc, 157cd) to reassure Theaetetus that the ideas that they are bringing forth are actually the products of Theaetetus' mind and not just the ideas of Socrates that are being dictated from the older man to the younger. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato also develops the image of the midwife in different ways, particularly in the idea of the midwife as a match-maker (149, 150a) and in the idea that some of the ideas brought to light may be mere wind-eggs, ἀνεμιαῖα (150ac, 151cd, 151e, 157d, 160e–161a, 210b). The *Theaetetus* is more concerned with the analysis of ideas through philosophic dialogue than with their creation, so Plato emphasizes the midwife's skill in judging the nature of the product rather than the repertoire of charms by which the midwife helps bring the birth about.²⁰ In the *Symposium*, on the other hand, the focus is on the impulse toward philosophy and its products, so that the midwife's role is linked with the true beauty that is the inspiration and necessary precondition for philosophizing. Plato, as always, tailors his ideas to match the issues of a

¹⁸As Price notes, "The boy's role is complex: like Socrates (*Theaet.* 150b6–9), he is a midwife to another's labour; he is also a parent, real or adoptive, who *shares* his lover's children" (1989: 28.) Price does not note, however, that Socrates takes this role of midwife in the *Symposium* as well as the *Theaetetus*.

¹⁹Guthrie 1975: 387.

²⁰"And now that it has been born, we must perform the rite of running around the hearth with it, we must make it in good earnest go the round of discussion. For we must take care that we don't overlook some defect in this thing that is entering into life; it may be something not worth bringing up, a wind-egg, a falsehood" (*Tht.* 160e–161a; cf. 151c, 157d).

particular dialogue. Nevertheless, the image of midwifery as a metaphor for the philosophic process remains the same in the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus*, a process in which Socrates draws out of his interlocutors their own thoughts, not impregnating them with his ideas, but assisting them to articulate their own.²¹

By making the youths active participants, Plato breaks down the traditional hierarchy of the ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος relationship, introducing some measure of reciprocity. These youths do not look on cold sober, but actively and passionately pursue even as they are pursued. As Halperin notes, "Plato borrows from conventional Athenian usage the hierarchical terminology employed to differentiate the active and passive roles in a paederastic relationship and converts it to the purpose of articulating the erotic, and aggressive, nature of the philosophic enterprise."²² A reciprocal erotic relationship, in which each partner contributes actively and passionately, serves as the model for Plato's ideal of philosophical learning. This kind of reciprocity, the sharing of the job of bringing forth and nurturing the ideas that arise in philosophic conversation, is the ideal of Socratic dialectic.²³ Plato does not depict Socrates begetting ideas in the fertile young minds of his interlocutors and indoctrinating them with philosophic dogma; on the contrary, Socrates' presence serves as a stimulus for these youths

²¹Burnyeat (1977: 9) describes the contrast between the Socratic method and the teachings of the sophists as Socrates describes them in the *Theaetetus*: "Here, then, are two contrasting notions of education. The sophist treats his pupil as an empty receptacle to be filled from the outside with the teacher's ideas. Socrates respects the pupil's own creativity, holding that, with the right kind of assistance, the young man will produce ideas from his own mind."

²²Halperin 1986: 71. Nussbaum would qualify this attribution of reciprocally active roles. "While Halperin stresses the innovations of the *Phaedrus* with respect to reciprocity, he insists that Plato's solution consists in making both partners mutually and reciprocally *active*; and he strongly suggests that the cultural abhorrence of passivity is left in place. I believe that the evidence I have cited shows that Plato's innovations are more profound than Halperin has suggested, and affect the active/passive polarity as well" (1989: 71 n. 31). Since Socrates plays the role of both lover and beloved and contrives that his interlocutors do so as well, Plato is indeed placing more value on the "passive" role. However, at least in the *Symposium*, he gives the role of the beloved an active nature as well, that of the midwife.

²³"Erotic reciprocity animates what Plato considers the best sort of conversations, those in which each interlocutor is motivated to search within himself and to say what he truly believes in the confidence it will not be misunderstood; mutual desire makes possible the ungrudging exchange of questions and answers which constitutes the soul of philosophical practice. Reciprocity finds its ultimate expression in dialogue" (Halperin 1990: 133).

to bring forth their own ideas, while he uses his philosophic skills to help them with the delivery.

Role Reversals in the *Symposium*

In the *Symposium*, Socrates plays the midwife by reversing the expected roles of ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος. This confusion over the roles of the lover and beloved is a theme that recurs throughout the *Symposium*, and Plato includes a number of hints that this pattern is significant for his ideas of philosophic education. In the first speech, Phaedrus raises the controversy over whether Achilles was the ἐραστής or the ἐρώμενος of Patroclus, pitting the testimony of Homer against that of Aeschylus.²⁴ Having the roles of ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος defined clearly is obviously important to Phaedrus. Diotima too claims that people have mistaken the role of an ἐραστής for that of an ἐρώμενος when she rejects the identification of Eros as the beloved and identifies Eros instead with the lover:

ώθηθης δέ, ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ τεκμαιρομένη ἐξ ὧν σὺ λέγεις, τὸ ἐρώμενον Ἔρωτα εἶναι, οὐ τὸ ἐρῶν· διὰ ταῦτά σοι οἶμαι πάγκαλος ἐφαίνετο ὁ Ἔρως. καὶ γάρ ἔστι τὸ ἐραστὸν τὸ τῷ ὄντι καλὸν καὶ ἀβρόν καὶ τέλειον καὶ μακαριστόν· τὸ δέ γε ἐρῶν ἄλλην ἰδέαν τοιαύτην ἔχον, οἷαν ἐγὼ διῆλθον. (204c1–6)

It seems to me, by the evidence of what you say, that you consider Eros the beloved, not the lover. I think that it is for this reason that Eros seems so beautiful to you. For it is the one who is loved that is in reality the beautiful and tender and perfect and blessed one. But the lover, he has a different form, which I will explain.²⁵

Plato, however, not only raises the confusion as an issue in the dialogue, but, through the interactions of the characters, he shows Socrates reversing the expected roles of ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος in a number of situations.

Alcibiades the Beautiful

The primary example of Socrates' reversal of the roles of ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος is, of course, in the relation between Socrates and Alcibiades.

²⁴“Aeschylus is just babbling,” claims Phaedrus, “when he says that Achilles was the lover of Patroclus. Achilles was not only more beautiful than Patroclus, but more beautiful than all the heroes, and was still beardless because he was much younger, as Homer says” (Αἰσχύλος δὲ φλυαρεῖ φάσκων Ἀχιλλέα Πατρόκλου ἐρᾶν, ὅς ἦν καλλίων οὐ μόνον Πατρόκλου ἀλλ' ἅμα καὶ τῶν ἡρώων ἀπάντων, καὶ ἔτι ἀγένειος, ἔπειτα νεώτερος πολὺ, ὥς φησιν Ὅμηρος, Pl. *Smp.* 180a4–7).

²⁵Note that Diotima uses τὸ ἐρῶν rather than ὁ ἐραστής and τὸ ἐρώμενον or τὸ ἐραστὸν rather than ὁ ἐρώμενος, depersonalizing the lover and beloved.

Previous scholars have noted instances of this role reversal in the *Symposium*, but the reversals have not been linked to Socrates' philosophic midwifery. In his commentary, Bury points out that both Socrates and Alcibiades play the roles of both lover and beloved in Alcibiades' description. "Alcibiades, like Socrates, plays a double part: he is at once the παιδικά of Socrates the ἐραστής, and the ἐραστής of Socrates the ἐρώμενος."²⁶ In his speech, Alcibiades describes his failed erotic relation with Socrates. Alcibiades, the beautiful boy sought by all the older ἐρασταί, decides that he will take Socrates as his ἐραστής but ends up becoming the needy ἐραστής chasing the coy ἐρώμενος, Socrates. Alcibiades describes himself, on the one hand, as the perfect ἐρώμενος, beautiful and submissive. His beauty was always famous, and the praises of his charms as a youth were sounded by one and all, including himself.²⁷ When Alcibiades discovers, however, that Socrates does not seem as impressed with his youthful beauty as he himself is, he begins to change his role from the sought-after ἐρώμενος to that of the seeking ἐραστής.

For not only is Alcibiades the very model of a contemporary Athenian ἐρώμενος, but, in his relation with Socrates, he behaves like a model ἐραστής.²⁸ He offers what might be a textbook lesson in "how to seduce your παιδικά" as he describes the way in which he tried to get Socrates to sleep with him in something more than a literal sense. Nevertheless, Alcibiades fails, both as an ἐραστής and as an ἐρώμενος, because he fails to understand the nature of Socratic eros. To him it appears that Socrates has maliciously deceived him, pretending to be an ἐραστής, while actually being an ἐρώμενος who is tricking him into playing the ἐραστής.²⁹

The role reversal of Socrates is not only explicitly declared by Alcibiades, it is supported by numerous parallels throughout the text between descriptions of Socrates and the descriptions of the ἐραστής and the ἐρώμενος. It has long been noticed, of course, that the description of Eros the ἐραστής in Diotima's speech matches the description of Socrates. Needy and barefoot, he is always

²⁶Bury 1932: lxii.

²⁷ἐφρόνουν γὰρ δὴ ἐπὶ τῇ ὥρᾳ θαυμάσιον ὅσον ("for I considered my bloom of youth something pretty wonderful," 217a5–6).

²⁸Bury 1932: lx–lxiii lays out all the responding passages in parallel, but he does not remark on the significance of the role reversal, nor on the presence of other such reversals throughout the dialogue.

²⁹As he complains, οὗτος ἐξαπατῶν ὡς ἐραστής παιδικὰ μᾶλλον αὐτὸς καθίσταται ἀντ' ἐραστοῦ ("pretending to be a lover, he instead became the beloved himself rather than the lover," 222b3–4).

seeking out beautiful youths.³⁰ Socrates, however, is depicted not just as the needy lover but also as the beautiful beloved. Bury has pointed out that Alcibiades, throughout his speech, describes Socrates in terms that are reminiscent of those used by other speakers to describe Eros as the beloved. Lowenstam goes further, showing that Alcibiades describes Socrates in terms that Socrates himself has used for the Form of Beauty.³¹ Alcibiades' most powerful image, however, is his description of Socrates as a little statue that contains tiny golden images inside:

φημί γὰρ δὴ ὁμοιότατον αὐτὸν εἶναι τοῖς σιληνοῖς τούτοις
τοῖς ἐν τοῖς ἑρμογλυφεῖοις καθημένοις, οὗσιν αἱ ἐργάζονται οἱ
δημιουργοὶ σύριγγας ἢ αὐλοὺς ἔχοντας, οἱ διχάδε διοικθέντες
φαίνονται ἐνδοθεν ἀγάλματα ἔχοντες θεῶν. (215a6–b3)

I'd say that he is most like the *silēnoi* 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.³²

On the outside, Socrates seems just an ugly old man, a typical ἐραστής like the *silēnoi*, but, on the inside, for those who truly see him, he is a most beautiful thing, the ultimate object of eros.

οὐκ οἶδα εἴ τις ἐώρακεν τὰ ἐντὸς ἀγάλματα· ἀλλ' ἐγὼ ἤδη
ποτ' εἶδον, καὶ μοι ἔδοξεν οὕτω θεῖα καὶ χρυσᾶ εἶναι καὶ
πάγκαλα καὶ θαυμαστά, ὥστε ποιητέον εἶναι ἔμβραχυν ὅτι
κελεύει Σωκράτης. (216e6–217a2)

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

³⁰Again, Bury (1932: lx–lxi) has laid out all the responsions in imagery between Eros the erastes and Socrates the erastes. On these responsions, Bury comments: "When one considers the number of these 'responions' and the natural ways in which they are introduced, one is struck at once both with the elaborate technique of Plato and, still more, with the higher art which so skillfully conceals that technique" (1932: lxii).

³¹Like the Form of Beauty, Socrates is absolutely unique (221c4–d6). "Finally, Alcibiades asserts that when he is with Socrates, he realizes that none of the activities which he pursues apart from Socrates are worth living for (*biōton*, 216a1) and that he wishes only to do what Socrates says" (Lowenstam 1985: 99). Cf. Pl. *Smp.* 211d1–2: ἐνταῦθα τοῦ βίου.... εἶπερ που ἄλλοθι, βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπῳ, θεωμένῳ αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν.

³²Such a statue has never, to my knowledge, been found by the archaeologists. Can it be that Plato simply invented the idea? Or have all these statues been smashed long since by those greedy to grab the gold inside?

beautiful and amazing, so that, in a word, whatever Socrates wished must be done.³³

But Alcibiades cannot bring himself truly to do what Socrates wishes; he must run away from him in shame, like a slave. For Alcibiades fails to understand the meaning of the role reversal that he has described to the symposiasts; he cannot accept Socrates as a midwife rather than a lover. Alcibiades argues that Socrates' treatment of him was hubris, and he tells his tale as a mock court indictment of Socrates on that charge.³⁴ For Plato's audience, however, a charge of hubris, especially in the context of an erotic relationship, would have evoked the idea of rape. As Dover notes: "When the subject of the verb *hubrizein* is an adult male and the object a woman or a boy, hubris implies, unless the context gives clear indication to the contrary, that the offence is the commission of sexual or homosexual assault."³⁵ Alcibiades holds back the punch line of his joke until the very end (219c7–d2). Instead of violating him sexually, making him the unwillingly (or even worse, willingly) passive partner in penetrative sex, Socrates responded not at all to his overtures. In Xenophon's words, cold sober, he looked on the other drunk with sexual desire. Alcibiades feels as dishonored, however, as if he had actually been raped. For Socrates' refusal of his beauty showed him finally that he was the one who was actively pursuing, not merely facilitating the chase for his pursuer. By actively seeking the erotic relation with one who was his ἐραστής, Alcibiades had done that which could, in theory, have led to his deprivation of civic status (ἡτιμάσθαι).³⁶ Alcibiades has indeed been dishonored (ἡτιμάσθαι, 219d4).

Of course, his feeling of dishonor, of being made ridiculous, comes only from his confusion. Alcibiades is unable to understand the dynamics of the Socratic eros, in which the beloved is not merely passive object but active midwife. Socrates, by his refusal to act as ἐραστής and have sex with Alcibiades, by his adopting the role of ἐρώμενος, is encouraging Alcibiades to pursue the beauty of philosophy, to engage in dialectic. Alcibiades is a youth pregnant with the potential for great good or evil, and Socrates is putting

³³This picture is not an image of pregnancy, with Socrates giving birth to the little figures within himself, but rather an image of beauty hidden beneath the ugly, ridiculous exterior.

³⁴Cf. 215b7, 217e5, and especially 219c3–6.

³⁵Dover 1978: 36.

³⁶To quote Dover again: "It is not only by assimilating himself to a woman in the sexual act that the submissive male rejects his role as a male citizen, but also by deliberately choosing to be the victim of what would be, if the victim were unwilling, hubris.... To choose to be treated as an object at the disposal of another citizen was to resign one's own standing as a citizen" (1978: 103–4).

Alcibiades in the role of the lover described in Diotima's speech, who approaches the beloved aching with travail. Socrates exhibits his beauties of character to Alcibiades, who is fascinated by them but who cannot dissociate the changing of roles from the shame of the *kinaidos*, the willing passive partner.³⁷

Alcibiades cannot see beyond the contradiction of the paradox of Socratic eros. Lowenstam sums up this paradox: "The essential point, however, is that desire and being desirable are complementary in the philosopher. Neither aspect disappears or changes into the other."³⁸ Socrates is both the lover and the beloved, both the seeker of true philosophic beauty and the embodiment of it. Not only does he seek beauty in Alcibiades, but he possesses the beauty sought by Alcibiades. Alcibiades, however, can only see the relation in the strictly unidirectional and hierarchical terms of the ἐραστής-ἐρώμενος paradigm. The ἐραστής actively seeks gratification from the beauty of the ἐρώμενος, who passively provides it to him. The idea that there could be reciprocity, an equal exchange, between the partners is unnerving to him; he can only see it as an unequal, power-based relation.³⁹ A relation between two autonomous people, ungoverned by the hierarchical rules of the idealized Athenian paederastic relationship, is more than he can comprehend. Trapped within his limited perspective, Alcibiades can only shun Socrates and the kind of eros he offers.⁴⁰

The figure of Alcibiades illuminates the crucial importance of understanding the role reversals. Alcibiades' failure to understand and accept

³⁷On the figure of the *kinaidos*, see Winkler 1990: 176–86.

³⁸Lowenstam 1985: 104 n. 54.

³⁹Nightingale describes the limitations of Alcibiades' perspective: "Alcibiades sees the world in terms of winners and losers, victors and victims. Socrates' refusal to be manipulated is therefore interpreted by Alcibiades as an arrogant attempt to dominate" (1993: 125). Even when Alcibiades is placing himself in the subordinate role, he is trying to gain the upper hand, as Socrates points out when he accuses him of πλεονέξια (218de), trying to get gold in exchange for bronze. Cf. Foucault's analysis of Socrates' shift in the power relations: "Into the lover's game where different dominations confronted one another (that of the lover seeking to get control of the beloved, that of the beloved seeking to escape, and seeking, by means of his resistance, to enslave the lover), Socrates introduces another type of domination: that which is exercised by the master of truth and for which he is qualified by the dominion he exercises over himself" (1985: 242).

⁴⁰Nussbaum suggests a possible reason underlying Alcibiades' failure to comprehend: "There is a strong possibility that Alcibiades *wants* Socrates to be a statue—a thing that can be held, carried, or, when necessary, smashed. There is a possibility that this sort of intense love cannot tolerate, and wishes to end, autonomous movement" (1986: 196). Nussbaum compares the touching of face and genitals in vase paintings to Alcibiades smashing the face and genitals of the herms.

Socrates' switch from ἐραστής to ἐρώμενος underlies his rejection of Socratic philosophy. Although he feels the attraction that Socrates the Beautiful has for a youth of his philosophic potential, he violently rejects what Socrates has to teach him and throws himself into the mad quest for adulation and popular acclaim. He confesses to the symposiasts:

σύνοιδα γὰρ ἑμαυτῷ ἀντιλέγειν μὲν οὐ δυναμένῳ ὥς οὐ δεῖ
ποιεῖν ἃ οὗτος κελεύει, ἐπειδὴν δὲ ἀπέλθω, ἡττημένῳ τῆς
τιμῆς τῆς ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν. (216b3–5)

For I know I am not able to deny that I should do whatever he says,
but whenever I go away from him, I become a slave to adulation from
the masses.

Alcibiades' pursuit of honor from the masses, as Plato's audience knew, led him to his scandalous exploits in the Peloponnesian War, to the squandering of his immense potential with betrayals, exiles, and, finally, assassination. Certainly, Plato would prefer his audience to believe that it was Alcibiades' pursuit of adulation from the masses and not the teachings of Socrates that were responsible for Alcibiades' disastrous career. His depiction of the characters in the dialogue and their relations thus serves not only as philosophical example but also as a kind of defense of Socrates and his school from the charges of corrupting the youth.

Other Role Reversals

The confusion of the roles of lover and beloved is not, however, confined to the relation of Alcibiades and Socrates, nor are all the relations as tragic. Many other pairs of characters in the dialogue have relations in which the orderly division between active lover and passive beloved is confounded. While scholars have noticed some peculiarity about these cases, they have never been classified as part of the same phenomenon, the confusion of the roles of ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος to which Diotima refers in her critique of Socrates (204c1–6).

Aristodemus

The first relationship confused in the dialogue is that between Socrates and Aristodemus. Aristodemus is (presumably) a younger man and a follower of his teacher Socrates, a follower who imitates his master to the extent of adopting his shoelessness (173b2).⁴¹ These two social factors would indicate that Aristodemus is the hierarchically lower partner of the relationship, the younger ἐρώμενος who patterns his behavior on the model of his older ἐραστής.

⁴¹Cf. X. *Mem.* 1.4.2.

Moreover, Aristodemus indicates that he will follow and obey Socrates: οὕτως ὅπως ἂν σὺ κελεύῃς (“I’ll do whatever you command,” 174b2). He also claims he will say he has come to Agathon’s party at the behest of Socrates: ἐγὼ μὲν οὐχ ὁμολογήσω ἄκλητος ἦκειν, ἀλλ’ ὑπὸ σοῦ κεκλημένος (“I won’t say that I have come unbidden, but that I was bidden to come by you,” 174c8–d1). These submissions to Socrates’ authority seem characteristic of a beloved’s response to his lover. Phaedrus says coquettishly that he always obeys Eryximachus in everything: “I, at any rate, am accustomed to obeying you” (ἐγὼ γέ σοι εἴωθα πείθεσθαι, 176d6) and Alcibiades seems to be playing the perfect ἐρώμενος when he says to Socrates: σὺ δὲ αὐτὸς οὕτω βουλεύου ὅτι σοί τε ἄριστον καὶ ἐμοὶ ἡγῆ (“you yourself must decide what you think would be best for you and me,” 219a6–7).

But Aristodemus is explicitly described (173b3) as an ἐραστής of Socrates, a term which is frequently rendered in translations as “admirer” or even “fan,” but whose primary resonance is that of the dominant partner in an erotic relationship.⁴² Scholars have pointed out that Aristodemus, as well as Socrates, is depicted as a philosopher in terms that recall the Eros-ἐραστής of Diotima’s speech.⁴³ Aristodemus’ shoelessness, for example, resembles not only Socrates’ but that of Eros as well. Moreover, although he starts off to Agathon’s by following Socrates, he ends up leading. The confusion over who is leading has caused confusion among scholars as to its meaning. Lowenstam interprets this switch as prefiguring the point when the philosophic lover no longer needs a guide on his ascent, while Osborne construes it as a temporary lapse on Socrates’ part in which his disciple is making better philosophic progress than the master.⁴⁴ In light of the other role reversals that Socrates contrives throughout the dialogue, however, one may suspect that this is part of the Socratic pattern of breaking up the expected hierarchical relations. A sign that

⁴²Halperin (1986: 71 and n. 30) discusses the usage of the term.

⁴³Lowenstam argues: “When Aristodemus goes to the house of Agathon, which in the prologue is symbolical of the Good, his journey corresponds to the philosopher’s route as described in Socrates’ long speech” (1985: 87). That their journey is meant to prefigure the ascent seems to me to be cleverly indicated by, among other things, Agathon’s first words to Aristodemus: εἰς καλὸν ἦκεις (174e5), which has the primary meaning of “You have come at a good time,” but, with the addition of an article, could mean “you have come to the beautiful.”

⁴⁴Lowenstam 1985: 87. See also Osborne (1994: 91): “On this particular occasion Aristodemus is more Socratic than Socrates.... Aristodemus, who on this occasion retains the rugged Socratic mould, temporarily overtakes the uncharacteristically refined Socrates on the road. Socrates is not dressed aright for making good progress on the road to truth.”

Socrates is engaged in some tampering with the hierarchies may be found in his adaptation of a quotation from Homer: ‘σύν τε δύ,’ ἔφη, ‘ἐρχομένω πρὸ ὁδοῦ’ (“‘Two together,’ he said, ‘both going forth on the road’,” 174d2; cf. *Il.* 10.222). The use of the dual is conspicuously different from the “lead on, I follow” statements of Aristodemus, who is attempting to keep himself in the traditional hierarchical relation. Like Alcibiades when he realizes that he has become the ἐραστής, Aristodemus feels ridiculous when he arrives at Agathon’s house before Socrates.⁴⁵

Socrates has also taken steps to put himself in the role, not of the lover, but of the beautiful beloved, so much so that Aristodemus asks him why he has made himself so beautiful.⁴⁶ In preparation for the banquet, Socrates has bathed and donned clean clothes and shoes, a highly unusual act for one who is usually, like Diotima’s Eros, πένης ἀεὶ ἐστὶ, καὶ πολλοῦ δεῖ ἀπαλός τε καὶ καλός, ...σκληρὸς καὶ αὐχμηρὸς καὶ ἀνυπόδητος καὶ ἄοικος (“always poor and, far from being tender and beautiful, ...rough, wrinkled, unshod, and homeless,” 203c6–d1). Gagarin thinks: “There is something boastful and false about Socrates’ beautifying himself” and sees “Socrates’ false pretence to be a lover, his false pretence of ignorance, and his actual (inner) superiority” as characteristic of Socrates’ hubris, his contemptuous rejection of his fellow man. He may pretend to be needy and desirous, but “it seems clear that the beautiful and wise Socrates is no longer a lover/philosopher, but must be a wise man and consequently an object of love.... It seems clear to me that whatever role he may assume, he is in truth an object of love.”⁴⁷ Again, I would argue that Gagarin has missed the paradox of Socratic eros. Socrates is *both* the lover of wisdom, the needy seeker after beauty, *and* the much sought-after beloved, who draws Aristodemus to him by the beauty of his wisdom. By reversing the expected roles, Socrates forces Aristodemus to become the active seeker of wisdom, the philosopher. Socrates the Beautiful attracts Aristodemus to philosophic pursuits, and his peculiar inner beauty serves as midwife to this young man, helping bring forth the fruits of his philosophic life.

⁴⁵καὶ τι ἔφη αὐτόθι γελοῖον παθεῖν (174e1–2, cf. 222c1). Being ridiculous throughout the dialogue is linked with shame and being out of place.

⁴⁶Ἐφη γάρ οἱ Σωκράτη ἐντυχεῖν λελουμένον τε καὶ τὰς βλαύτας ὑποδεδεμένον, ἃ ἐκεῖνος ὀλιγάκις ἐποίει καὶ ἐρέσθαι αὐτὸν ὅποι ἴοι οὕτω καλὸς γεγεννημένος (“For he said that he came upon Socrates, who had bathed and was wearing shoes, things that he did seldom, and that he asked Socrates where he was going, having become so beautiful,” 174a3–5).

⁴⁷Gagarin 1997: 23 n. 7; 33; 27.

Agathon

There is still one more person on whom Socrates reverses the expected roles of ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος, the host of the symposium himself, the beautiful Agathon. Agathon and Socrates exchange a number of sexual innuendoes throughout the dialogue, and the erotic tension is heightened with the entrance of Alcibiades. Agathon, as his portrait in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* suggests, was regarded as effeminate, and he is clearly the ἐρώμενος in his relationship with Pausanias.⁴⁸ He is regarded as a beautiful object by a number of people in the dialogue, not only by his ἐραστής, Pausanias. Near the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates refers to Agathon's beauty, saying that he has made himself beautiful to visit the beautiful, ταῦτα δὴ ἐκαλλωπισάμεν, ἵνα καλὸς παρὰ καλὸν ἴω (174a8–9). Phaedrus forestalls Socrates' first attempt at dialectic with Agathon, claiming that Socrates will ignore the rest of the party if he can get the attentions of someone as beautiful as Agathon:

οὐδὲν ἔτι διοίσει αὐτῷ ὁπποῦν τῶν ἐνθάδε ὅτιοῦν γίγνεσθαι,
ἐὰν μόνον ἔχη ὅτῳ διαλέγεται, ἄλλως τε καὶ καλῷ. (194d2–4)

It will make no difference to him whether any of these matters here are resolved in any way, if only he has someone to converse with, especially someone beautiful.

When Alcibiades enters, he complains that Socrates, who is lying next to Agathon, always contrives “to recline near the most beautiful of all the people in the house,” διεμχανήσω ὅπως παρὰ τῷ καλλίστῳ τῶν ἐνδον κατακείσῃ (213c4–5). After Alcibiades' speech, Socrates and Alcibiades contend over who gets to recline next to Agathon, squabbling like a couple of ἐρασταί over a beautiful boy (222d–223a).

Actually, the fact that Agathon and Socrates were on the same couch was Agathon's contriving, rather than Socrates'. Agathon invites Socrates to sit next to him so that he may gain wisdom from him through their contact: παρ' ἐμέ κατάκεισο, ἵνα καὶ τοῦ σοφοῦ ἀπτόμενός σου ἀπολαύσω (“come, recline by me, so that by touching you (ἀπτόμενός) I may have the benefits of your wisdom,” 175c8–d1). Ἀπτόμενός is, of course, full of sexual overtones, but

⁴⁸Their relationship is noteworthy for its duration. Plato has Socrates refer to it in the *Protagoras* (315d), set many years before the *Symposium*, and it apparently lasted through Agathon's final trip to Macedonia. Despite Agathon's many accomplishments (the *Symposium* is after all the occasion of his first tragic victory), that he was regarded as the subordinate partner in the relationship is suggested by Aristophanes' insinuations of his willingness to be a passive partner (cf. *Th.* 130ff.; 191ff.).

Plato also uses it in connection with apprehension of the forms in the *Phaedo* (79d4–6), the *Timaeus* (90b6–d7), and perhaps also in the *Republic* (490a8–b7). The idea that the lover educates the beloved, passing wisdom along to him, is a standard part of the ideal erotic relation.⁴⁹ Socrates, however, reverses the relation by claiming that, if wisdom could be passed through contact, he would be the one to profit from his contact with Agathon. Agathon responds to this reversal, just as Alcibiades does later, by accusing Socrates of hubris: Ὑβριστῆς εἶ... (175e7). Even in their playful banter, Agathon senses that Socrates is somehow not playing by the rules of the game. Alcibiades himself concludes his speech by warning Agathon to beware lest Socrates transform him from an ἐρώμενος into an ἐραστής, as he has done with so many others.⁵⁰ Alcibiades, as he competes for the attentions of Agathon, recognizes the effects of Socrates' fascination upon Agathon.

Throughout the dialogue, then, Plato depicts Socrates reversing the roles in his relations with Agathon and Aristodemus, while Alcibiades tells the complete story of how Socrates switched the roles around on him. In none of these relations, however, does the reversed set of roles entirely replace the original set. Rather, by confusing the hierarchical roles, Socrates breaks down the strict active-passive, dominant-submissive, dichotomies. The result of this is that the ἐρώμενος, be it Aristodemus, Agathon, or Alcibiades, finds himself taking an active role in the relationship.

Role Reversal in Other Dialogues

The same pattern appears in other Platonic dialogues, even though the image of the midwife is not present. Socrates frequently portrays himself as a lover of youthful beauty, an ἐραστής who is always scoping out the potential ἐρώμενοι. Socrates jokes with Meno about his susceptibility to a pretty face, and in the *Charmides* the first thing Socrates does, as soon as he has given his news from the war, is ask his friends whether there are any remarkable boys

⁴⁹“This is a dramatic anticipation of the theme of the first five speeches that in the sexual relation of lover and beloved lies one of the chief means to wisdom and virtue” (Bacon 1959: 423).

⁵⁰οὐκ ἐμὲ μόνον ταῦτα πεποίηκεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ Χαρμίδην τὸν Γλαύκωνος καὶ Εὐθύδημον τὸν Διοκλέους καὶ ἄλλους πάνυ πολλούς, οὓς οὗτος ἐξαπατῶν ὡς ἐραστής παιδικὰ μᾶλλον αὐτὸς καθίσταται ἀντ' ἐραστοῦ. ἃ δὲ καὶ σοὶ λέγω, ὦ Ἀγάθων, μὴ ἐξαπατᾶσθαι ὑπὸ τούτου (“He has done these things, not only to me, but also to Charmides, son of Glaucon, and to Euthydemus, son of Diokles and to many others, whom he deceived, pretending to be a lover, but instead he became the beloved himself rather than the lover. I am telling you these things, Agathon, lest you too be deceived by this man,” 222b1–5).

around.⁵¹ In the *Protagoras*, his pursuit of Alcibiades is well known (309a), while in the *Gorgias* he claims to be the ἐραστής of Alcibiades and of philosophy (481d). In the *Symposium*, however, Alcibiades warns the symposiasts that Socrates may *seem* to be crazed for the beauty of youths, but that is not really what he cares about:

ὁρᾶτε γὰρ ὅτι Σωκράτης ἐρωτικῶς διάκειται τῶν καλῶν καὶ
ἀεὶ περὶ τούτους ἐστὶ καὶ ἐκπέπληκται, ...ἴστε ὅτι οὔτε εἴ τις
καλὸς ἐστὶ μέλει αὐτῷ οὐδέν. (216d2–3, 7–8)

For you see that Socrates is erotically inclined toward beautiful people and that he is always around them and struck out of his wits with them...but you should know that it matters not at all to him whether someone is beautiful.

In other dialogues, just as in the *Symposium*, Socrates appears at first to play the role of the ἐραστής courting the pretty ἐρώμενος, but he soon turns the tables and has the youths pursuing him. The *Charmides* ends with Charmides vowing to be with Socrates every day and even threatening in jest to use violence if Socrates resists his attentions.⁵² The author of the *Alcibiades Major* has followed the same pattern when he has Alcibiades conclude the dialogue by claiming that they will exchange roles and that he will play the part of Socrates' pedagogue, leading him about like a boy.

ὅτι κινδυνεύσομεν μεταβαλεῖν τὸ σχῆμα, ὦ Σώκρατες, τὸ μὲν
σὸν ἐγώ, σὺ δὲ τοῦμόν· οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ὅπως οὐ παιδαγωγήσω
σε ἀπὸ τῆσδε τῆς ἡμέρας, σὺ δ' ὑπ' ἐμοῦ παιδαγωγήσῃ. (*Alc.*
I.135d7–10)

⁵¹*Men.* 76c1–2: καὶ ἅμα ἐμοῦ ἴσως κατέγνωκας ὅτι εἰμὶ ἥττων τῶν καλῶν (“perhaps you knew that I become enthralled with beautiful people”). Cf. *Chrm.* 153d2–5: αὐθις ἐγὼ αὐτοὺς ἀνθρώπων τὰ τῆδε, περὶ φιλοσοφίας ὅπως ἔχοι τὰ νῦν, περὶ τε τῶν νέων, εἴ τινες ἐν αὐτοῖς διαφέροντες ἢ σοφία ἢ κάλλει ἢ ἀμφοτέροις ἐγγεγονότες εἶεν (“Straight away, I asked them about things here, how things stood with regard to philosophy now, and, with regard to the young men, I asked whether any of them were remarkable for wisdom or beauty, or both”). Later, he reports that he is so enflamed by a glance inside Charmides' garments that he nearly faints: εἰδὼν τε τὰ ἐντὸς τοῦ ἱματίου καὶ ἐφλεγόμενην (*Chrm.* 155d3–4).

⁵²σοὶ γὰρ ἐπιχειροῦντι πράττειν ὅτιοι καὶ βιαζομένῳ οὐδεὶς οἶός τ' ἔσται ἐναντιοῦσθαι ἀνθρώπων. μὴ τοίνυν, ἦ δ' ὅς, μὴδὲ σὺ ἐναντιοῦ. οὐ τοίνυν, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ἐναντιώσομαι (“For when you undertake to do something and are becoming violent, no man can resist you. Then, he said, you should not resist me. No indeed, said I, I will not resist you,” *Chrm.* 176d1–5).

We run the risk of exchanging our roles, Socrates, so that I shall have yours and you mine. For from this day forward, there will never be a time when I am not your caretaker, and you will be taken care of by me.

Alcibiades will take the active and dominant role, treating Socrates as if he were a young ἐρώμενος.

Midwifery in the Philosophic Life

In the *Symposium*, Plato uses the theme of the confusion of the roles of ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος to illustrate the dynamics of Socratic erotics. By taking on the role of the beautiful beloved, Socrates becomes the midwife, assisting the youths pregnant in their souls to bring forth their spiritual progeny. But just as Eros in Diotima's myth fluctuates between mortal and immortal, living and dead, empty and full, needy and satisfied (or is paradoxically both at once), so the philosophic lovers must be both ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος, lover and beloved.⁵³ Such a reciprocating relation, so different from the accepted hierarchical model, provides the model for Plato's conception of the process of philosophy. As the lovers nurture together the ideas they have brought forth, they both progress along the path of philosophy. In the Platonic *Seventh Letter*, such a relationship is essential to philosophical understanding:

ρήτὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἐστὶν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα, ἀλλ' ἐκ πολλῆς συνουσίας γιγνομένης περὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτὸ καὶ τοῦ συζῆν ἐξαίφνης, οἷον ἀπὸ πυρὸς πηδῆσαντος ἐξαφθὲν φῶς, ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ γενόμενον αὐτὸ ἑαυτὸ ἤδη τρέφει. (341c5–d2)

For it cannot be expressed in words, like other knowledge, but, from much converse together about the matter and from a life lived together, suddenly, like a light kindled by a leaping flame, it is born within the soul and nourishes itself.

⁵³For explorations of the paradox of eros in the images of emptiness and fullness, see Lowenstam 1985.

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