SOCRATES’ DAIMONIC ART

Despite increasing interest in the figure of Socrates and in love in ancient Greece, no recent monograph studies these topics in all four of Plato’s dialogues on love and friendship. This book provides important new insights into these subjects by examining Plato’s characterization of Socrates in the Symposium, Phaedrus, Lysis and the often neglected Alcibiades I. It focuses on the specific ways in which the philosopher searches for wisdom together with his young interlocutors, using an art that is “erotic,” not in a narrowly sexual sense, but because it shares characteristics attributed to the daimon Eros in the Symposium. In all four dialogues, Socrates’ art enables him, like Eros, to search for the beauty and wisdom he recognizes that he lacks and to help others seek these same objects of erōs. Professor Belfiore examines the dialogues as both philosophical and dramatic works, and considers many connections with Greek culture, including poetry and theater.

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SOCRATES’ DAIMONIC ART

Love for Wisdom in Four Platonic Dialogues

ELIZABETH S. BELFIORE
For Peter
Contents

Preface page xi
Acknowledgments xv
Abbreviations xvii

Introduction: overview of the erotic dialogues 1
1.1 Eròs and Philosophia 1
1.2 Eròs, sex and interpersonal love 8
1.3 Technè 13
1.4 Setting and characterization 18
1.5 The erotic dialogues in context 21

PART I SOCRADES AND TWO YOUNG MEN

1 “Your love and mine”: eròs and self-knowledge in Alcibiades I 31
1.1 Puzzles about eròs 31
1.2 Acquiring the greatest power 34
Stage i 36
Stage ii 38
Stage iii 41
Stage iv 43
Stage v 45
Stage vi 48
Stage vii 50
1.3 Eròs for the greatest power and interpersonal eròs 51
1.4 The eye and the soul 56
1.5 Eròs the stork 65

2 “In love with acquiring friends”: Socrates in the Lysis 68
2.1 Impasse as success 68
2.2 Linguistic and conceptual issues 74
2.2.1 Greek friendship terms 74

vii
Contents

2.2.2 Philos and philein in the Lysis 77
2.2.3 To like wisdom (philo-sopein) 82
2.3 Socrates’ daimonic art 88
2.3.1 “I am inferior and useless” 89
2.3.2 “I am in love with acquiring friends” 89
2.3.3 “This has been given to me by god” 93
2.3.4 “This is how one should converse with one’s beloved” 96
2.4 Socrates and his interlocutors 98
2.4.1 Hippothales: the lover 98
2.4.2 Lysis: the beloved 103
2.5 Conclusion 108

PART II ERÔS AND HYBRIS IN THE SYMPOSIUM

Introduction to Part II: the narrators of the Symposium 110
3 In praise of Eros: the speeches in the Symposium 117
3.1 Victories in words 117
3.2 The first five speakers: the best and most beautiful of the gods 120
3.2.1 The symposiasts and the poets 120
3.2.2 Phaedrus: courage 122
3.2.3 Pausanias: education 125
3.2.4 Eryximachus: medicine 127
3.2.5 Aristophanes: comedy 131
3.2.6 Agathon: tragedy 134
3.3 Socrates: Eros the philosopher 137
3.3.1 Interlude: Socrates and the Gorgon 137
3.3.2 Socrates and his teacher 140
3.3.3 Pregnant men on ladders: the Lesser and the Greater Mysteries 146
3.3.4 “I am persuaded and I try to persuade others” 153
3.4 “You are hubristic”: Socrates, Alcibiades and Agathon 161
4.1 Alcibiades’ Silenus-statues 161
4.2 Disdain, hybris and satyrs 163
4.3 Agathon 168
4.4 Alcibiades 177
4.5 Three men on a couch 180
4.6 Socrates as daimôn and satyr 187
Contents

PART III LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP IN THE PHAEDRUS

Introduction to Part III: the erotic art in the Phaedrus and Symposium 198

5 The lover’s friendship 211
  5.1 Lysias’ speech 211
  5.2 Socrates’ first speech 215
  5.3 Socrates’ second speech 222
    5.3.1 Divine madness and the arousal of the lover 222
    5.3.2 Lover and beloved 228
    The search for remembered beauty (passage A: 252c3–253c6) 230
    Persuasion, love, and friendship (passage C: 255a1–256e2) 232
  5.4 Socrates and Phaedrus 239

6 The lovers’ dance: charioteer and horses 247
  6.1 Introduction 247
  6.2 Charioteer and horses (passage B: 253c7–255a1) 250
  6.3 Horses, satyrs and Socrates 257
  6.4 Dancing with the gods 264
  6.5 Conclusion 270

Conclusion 272

Glossary 274
Works cited 276
Index 297
Preface

This study examines Plato’s characterization of Socrates in four dialogues: *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Lysis*, and *Alcibiades I* ("the erotic dialogues"). It focuses on the specific ways in which the philosopher is represented as searching for wisdom together with his young interlocutors, using an art that he himself calls the “erotic art” (*erōtikē technē*) in the *Phaedrus* (257a7–8). In focusing on Socrates’ erotic art, I hope to shed light on a number of important dramatic and philosophical issues, including: the relationship between *erōs* and philosophy; the interconnection between love of wisdom and interpersonal love; Socrates’ treatment of his interlocutors and their responses to this treatment; the relationship between Socrates’ claims to have knowledge or wisdom about *ta erōtika* (erotic matters) and his recognition of his own lack of wisdom. Above all, I hope to demonstrate that Plato’s Socrates is not represented as a figure associated with *erōs* merely because this association was a traditional theme in the works of many ancient writers, and one that provided considerable dramatic interest. In Plato’s erotic dialogues, Socrates is not a philosopher who happens to have erotic interests, but rather a man whose *erōtikē technē* is skill in practicing philosophy.

An Introduction provides an overview of Socrates’ erotic art. I argue that it is not craft-knowledge, but another kind of art or skill, based on both experience and reason, and that it has five distinct, but interrelated, components. I also claim that Socrates’ art is erotic, not in a sexual sense, but in that it is closely associated with the characteristics of the philosopher-daimôn Eros in the *Symposium*. This Eros, like every *daimôn*, is a being neither god nor mortal, but in between both (202d8–e1). Neither wise nor ignorant, he is a marvelously skilled hunter after the good things he recognizes that he lacks and passionately desires to obtain (*Symp.* 203c1–204c6). Socrates’ art can thus be called “daimonic” as well as “erotic.” The chapters of this study show how, in each of the erotic dialogues, Socrates practices this art in response to different dramatic situations and interlocutors.
My work is indebted to many previous studies, whose methodology it follows in some important respects. Partly in reaction against the influence of Gregory Vlastos and others, who concentrated on the arguments in the dialogues, many scholars in recent years have emphasized the importance of studying Plato’s dialogues as literary works, in which “literary” and “philosophical” aspects are inseparably interrelated. They hold that the dialogues are, above all, works with characters who speak and act, dramas with settings, plots, and narratives. Attention to the dramatic aspects of the dialogues has also encouraged many scholars to argue that we cannot assume without question that any character in them, even Socrates, speaks for Plato. I have been influenced by these scholars in many ways. I do not assume that any character speaks for Plato; I pay particular attention to the characterization of Socrates, and I study the dialogues as both philosophical and dramatic works, considering many connections with Greek culture, especially poetry and theater.

I hold, moreover, that the Socrates of the erotic dialogues sincerely avows ignorance and disclaims craft-like knowledge, even though he has beliefs and opinions, and sometimes even claims to have god-given true belief. I therefore disagree with those scholars who argue that these disavowals are ironic or insincere. I also disagree, at least as far as the erotic dialogues are concerned, with those who claim that the author Plato makes use of Socratic aporia (impasse) in order to promote his own, more positive, views. My views, then, are closer to those of Michael Frede and Debra Nails than to those of Gregory Vlastos 1991 has been especially influential. Among the few recent monographs that successfully combine philosophical with literary approaches are Blondell 2002; Blundell 1989; Ferrari 1987; Nightingale 1995 and 2004. Helpful surveys of approaches to Plato’s dialogues include those of Annas 2003; Corlett 2003; Gerson 2006; Gonzalez 1995a and 1998: 1–16; Nails 1995: 3–31 and “Socrates,” section 2, with bibliography; Osborne 2006; Press 1996 and 2007: 39–54; Ralkowski 2007.

2 Good introductions to this issue are the essays in Gonzalez 1995c, in Griswold 1988, and in Press 1993 and 2000.

3 For example, Penner and Rowe 2005: 184 state: “[O]ur view is that there is no Platonic dialogue that is ‘genuinely aporetic’ in the way specified. We suppose that Plato’s general aim, when writing in ‘aporetic’ mode, is that we come to see for ourselves the kinds of ideas that he wishes, at the time, to promote.”

4 Frede writes: “[T]here are a large number of reasons why Plato may have chosen to write in such a way as to leave open, or to make it very difficult to determine, whether or not he endorses a particular argument. It seems that these reasons are at the same time reasons against writing philosophical treatises. . . the dialogues are not philosophical treatises in disguise” (1992: 219). According to Nails, the dialogues are “occasions to philosophize further, not dogmatic treatises,” and they demonstrate a principle of “double open-endedness,” according to which “it is not only the conclusions of philosophical argument but the assumptions on which those arguments are based that must remain radically open to further challenge” (1995: 3 and 218–19). Opinions similar in some respects to those
Preface

Vlastos. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to enter into the debate over “dogmatic” or “non-dogmatic” interpretations of Plato’s dialogues.

The focus of my work, however, differs in two main respects from that of previous studies of the erotic dialogues. First, I concentrate on the character Socrates in all four dialogues. Even though the secondary literature on these dialogues, and especially on the Symposium and Phaedrus, is very extensive, surprisingly few scholarly monographs focusing on Socrates and eros in these dialogues have been published in the last hundred years. Many books are concerned with one or more of the erotic dialogues only as part of a broader study of themes or characteristics of the dialogues as a whole. Other books concentrating on eros in Plato’s dialogues do not discuss all four dialogues, and are not primarily concerned with the persona of Socrates. Some monographs concerned with Plato’s Socrates discuss the erotic dialogues only tangentially, if at all. Second, my study differs from those that are concerned generally with the literary aspects – including Plato’s characterization of Socrates – of one or more of the erotic dialogues. I focus on a single aspect of Plato’s protagonist: his possession of an erotic or daimonic art that helps to make him unique, and to explain his philosophical activities. Taken together, the four erotic dialogues, I argue, create a coherent portrait of this man.

My interpretation differs in still another respect from that of many scholars. Gregory Vlastos has been especially influential in arguing that...
Preface

Socrates never wins over an opponent, and that, far from being friendly, Socrates is guilty of a “failure of love”: “there is a last zone of frigidity in the soul of the great erotic.” More recently, John Beversluis writes of the Socrates of the “early dialogues”: “His humor is always at someone else’s expense – usually demeaning, often unkind, and occasionally cruel.” My focus on Socrates’ erotic art in these four dialogues provides counter-examples to these claims, and support for those who argue that Socrates has a positive effect on his interlocutors. I hold that in portraying Socrates as practicing an erotic art, Plato represents him as succeeding, at least to a significant degree, in enlisting his interlocutors, with whom he establishes friendly relations, in his own search for wisdom.

This book is intended primarily for specialists and advanced students of both classics and ancient philosophy. It is also written so as to be accessible to all serious readers who have an interest in the ancient world. Translations of the Greek and a glossary of commonly used Greek words are provided. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own, and I use the following texts: Plato: Duke et al. (1995), for Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Cratylus, Theaetetus, Sophist and Statesman; Slings (2003), for Republic; Burnet (1900–1907), for other dialogues; Euripides: Diggle (1986–1994); Iamblichus: Dillon (1973); Olympiodorus: Westerink (1956); Proclus: Segonds (2003); Sophocles: Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990).

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12 Vlastos 1971: 2, quoted by Beversluis 2000: 5. 13 Vlastos 1971: 16–17. 14 Beversluis 2000: 259. Gill 2001 provides some helpful criticisms of Beversluis’ views, noting, for example (317), that Socrates varies his mode of discourse to match that of his interlocutor. 15 Opinions differ greatly about the effects of Socrates on others. Those who argue that Socrates fails to benefit his interlocutors include: Beversluis 2000: 34–6; Blondell 2002: 125–7 (citing passages in n.78), who notes (126) that sympathetic or youthful interlocutors are treated less harshly; Nehamas 1998: 65–6. Positive results are emphasized by, for example: Brickhouse and Smith 1994: 16–29; Michelin 1998; Rossetti 2000. Clay 2000: 179–89 contends that the elenchus (cross-examination) has a positive effect on Plato’s readers, although not on Socrates’ interlocutors within the dialogues. G. A. Scott 2000: 4 argues that Socrates achieves “some degree of success” in the two exceptional cases of Lysis and Alcibiades. Teloh 1986: 20–3 claims that Socrates fails because of the defects of the culture in which he lives. I hold that Socrates’ success is to be measured not only by his use of the elenchus, but also by his interactions of many other kinds with his interlocutors.
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Abbreviations

For ancient works, I usually adopt the abbreviations used in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn., eds. S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (Oxford, 1996). Some exceptions are, for Platonic works:

- *Lys*. *Lysis*
- *Sts*. *Statesman*

For the works of Aristotle:

- *NE*. *Nicomachean Ethics*
- *EE*. *Eudemian Ethics*

For modern journals, I follow those of *L’Année Philologique*. Other abbreviations are the following:

- *ARV²*. *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters*, ed. J. D. Beazley (Oxford, 1963, 2nd edn.)