

Nicholas RYNEARSON
Socrates as Critic: *Charmides* 155d-e

This paper examines Plato's representation of Socrates as a reader of poetry. The main focus is the intersection of the critical reading of poetry with self-knowledge and self-presentation in Socrates' citation of the lyric poet Cydias in the *Charmides*. Plato puts Socrates in the position of reader and critic of the poet in relation to his own experience of *erôs*. What kind of reader is Socrates and how does his reading of Cydias relate to his understanding of his own desire for Charmides and to his first-person narration of the dialogue as a whole? How does the relationship of Socrates to the words of Cydias relate in turn to the dialogue's themes of *sôphrosunê* and self-knowledge?

Plato's Socrates regularly treats poets as though they are making philosophical arguments - whether they intend to make such arguments or not - and therefore submits their words to the scrutiny appropriate to philosophical claims. This is the approach to Simonides in the *Protagoras*, for example, and to the 'wise men and women of old', poets or prose writers, in the *Phaedrus*. The reading of Cydias staged in the *Charmides* is, however, different. Here Socrates' experience of *erôs* prompts a judgment on the poet based on the extent to which his metaphorical language captures that experience. The judgment and citation are embedded in a miniature autobiographical narrative of desire: after describing his reaction to Charmides' beauty, Socrates declares Cydias the wisest (*sophôtatos*) in matters of love (*ta erôtika*), quoting a line that compares the powerlessness of the lover when confronted with his beloved to the helplessness of a fawn before a lion (*PMG 370*). 'I seemed to myself to have been snatched up by such a creature,' he declares, ending this brief and intensely introspective passage in the grammatical position of both subject and object of reflection (*moi edokoun*).

Socrates' experience of desire thus renders the self available as an object of investigation both for himself and, through first-person narration, for the reader - an unveiling parallel to the metaphorical stripping of Charmides through dialectic. As others have noted, one effect of this 'autobiography in miniature' is to raise the question of *sôphrosunê*'s relationship to strong passions, suggested by Socrates' interpretation of Cydias' verse as a warning about the dangers of *erôs*. More significantly, Socrates' reading of Cydias as a way of reading and expressing his own desire is implicated in the question of self-knowledge to which the investigation of *sôphrosunê* leads. But since self-reflection here takes a detour through the language of another, it stages a triangulation in which poetry intercedes between self as subject and self as object. The scene thus invites an investigation of the relationship of interpreting poetry to both 'reading' and displaying the self, a relationship shaped by a longstanding archaic tradition that links critical response to poetry with self-presentation in elite contexts such as the symposium. Finally, Socrates adds a layer of complexity to Plato's well-known hostility to poetry by attributing superlative wisdom to Cydias, an attribution all the more pointed because it falls within the field that constitutes a singular exception to Socrates' own disavowal of knowledge, *ta erôtika*.