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The Myth of King Midas in Plato's Symposium

In this paper I discuss the flirtatious interlude between Alcibiades and Socrates in light of the myth of King Midas' capture of the satyr, Silenus. I argue that Plato, in addition to the overt comparison of Socrates to a Silenus or Marsyas figure in Alcibiades' speech, alludes specifically to the Midas myth, but inverts some of its elements, in his philosophical critique of wealth, beauty, and sexual attraction.

The Midas myth was well-known to Greek poets, painters, and philosophers. Important literary sources include Theognis 425-28 and Aristotle's lost dialogue Eudemus (fr. 44 Rose). The most telling details, however, are preserved by Theopompus, who relates that Silenus was captured while sleeping by Midas' shepherds, who had tricked him by spiking a river with wine; whereupon, in exchange for his release, Silenus agreed to reveal to Midas hidden wisdom about the nature of the world (FGrH 115 F75b, apud Servius Danielis).

Both the apprehension of the satyr while sleeping and the interrogation that follows in Theopompus' account appear in the part of the Symposium where Alcibiades describes his unsuccessful romantic overtures towards Socrates at a sleep-over: Alcibiades approaches the satyr-sage in bed and asks if he is sleeping (218c3). By Plato's inversion, however, it turns out that Socrates, unlike the Silenus of myth, is fully awake—indeed, preternaturally sober and vigilant (220a4-5; cf. 223d9-13), in spite of the drinking "trick" (to sophisma) that Alcibiades tries to play on him at 214a4.

Socrates does, however, like Silenus, engage his would-be captor in conversation, imputing a motive to Alcibiades for his attempted "capture": Not unlike Midas in the myth, Alcibiades, he suggests, wants to strike a deal with him and exchange kallos anti kalous, specifically his own kallos eumorphias for Socrates' "entirely different" Silenic beauty and wisdom—as qualitative a difference, Socrates informs us, as that between an opinion about beauty and the truth, or between brass and gold (218e2-219a1). Though the mention of gold here refers primarily to Iliad 6. 236, in the larger context it also recalls the Midas story, for in the myth it is in return for Midas' hospitality to his wayward satyr-soldier—contrast Socrates' bravery at Delium and Potidaea (219a; 221a)—that Dionysus grants the king the gift of the golden touch (Hyg. Fab. 191.11-13).

The representation of Alcibiades in literature as a man given over to oriental luxury and ostentation is well known and has been fully documented by Gribble (Alcibiades and Athens [Oxford, 1999]). Plato's portrayal of Socrates as a satyr-silen, especially in his capacity as a tutor and supposed sexual predator, has parallels as well, notably at Clouds 223 (where a scholiast preserves a relevant fragment of Pindar [fr. 157 Maehler/Race]), and in the lost Zopyrus of Phaedo. In this paper I show that Plato too employs these stereotypes in the Symposium by reworking the Midas myth and putting it to philosophical use, as Theopompus and Aristotle were to do later.