

Interpretation

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Volume 46 Issue 3

- 443 Lisa Leibowitz Poetic Justice: An In-Depth Examination of Aristophanes's Portrait of Socrates
- 471 Alessandro Mulieri A Modern in Disguise? Leo Strauss on Marsilius of Padua
- 495 Devin Stauffer Locke on the Limits of Human Understanding
- 513 Charles R. Sullivan Churchill's Marlborough: The Character of a Trimmer
- 533 Ying Zhang The Guide to *The Guide*: Some Observations on "How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*"
- Book Reviews:**
- 565 Marco Andreacchio *Dante's Philosophical Life: Politics and Human Wisdom in "Purgatorio"* by Paul Stern
- 573 Elizabeth Corey *Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss: The Politics of Renaissance and Enlightenment* by David McIlwain
- 579 Emily A. Davis *The Life of Alcibiades: Dangerous Ambition and the Betrayal of Athens* by Jacqueline de Romilly; translated by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings
- 585 Jerome C. Foss *The Catholic Writings of Orestes Brownson* by Michael P. Federici
- 589 Steven H. Frankel *Debunking Howard Zinn: Exposing the Fake History That Turned a Generation against America* by Mary Grabar
- 595 Raymond Hain *The Soul of Statesmanship: Shakespeare on Nature, Virtue, and Political Wisdom*, edited by Khalil M. Habib and L. Joseph Hebert Jr.
- 601 Richard Jordan *Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies* by William S. Smith
- 607 Spencer Krauss *Homer's Hero: Human Excellence in the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey"* by Michelle M. Kundmueller
- 613 Lucien Oulahbib *Lacan contra Foucault: Subjectivity, Sex and Politics*, edited by Nadia Bou Ali and Rohit Goel
- 627 Jan P. Schenkenberger *Briefwechsel 1919–1973* by Martin Heidegger and Karl Löwith, and *Fiala: Die Geschichte einer Versuchung* by Karl Löwith
- 639 Mark A. Scully *Bureaucracy in America: The Administrative State's Challenge to Constitutional Government* by Joseph Postell
- 645 Benjamin Slomski *The Rediscovery of America: Essays by Harry V. Jaffa on the New Birth of Politics* by Harry V. Jaffa, and *Unmasking the Administrative State: The Crisis of American Politics in the Twenty-First Century* by John Marini
- 655 Scott Yenor *Sparta's First Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 478–446 B.C.* by Paul A. Rahe

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Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Life of Alcibiades: Dangerous Ambition and the Betrayal of Athens*. Translated by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019, 228 pp., \$29.95 (hardcover).

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“Alcibiades—I feel I have always known him” (xiii). In the preface to her book *The Life of Alcibiades*, distinguished classicist Jacqueline de Romilly demonstrates her lifelong devotion to studying the character of this “colorful adventurer” (xi). Originally published in 1995, the book appears in a new translation by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings, who argues that present-day readers will draw worthwhile lessons from it—particularly the message that “a charismatic, amoral, and narcissistic leader imposes enormous risks on a democratic state” (x). It is unsurprising, therefore, that de Romilly cites Alcibiades’s “overwhelming...contemporary relevance” (xii–xiii) as the main inspiration for her work. Yet it is puzzling that she offers no explanation of this relevance beyond the claim that Alcibiades, a statesman destroyed by his own ambition, should serve as a warning for modern politicians. When many statesmen throughout history could provide such a warning, why study Alcibiades in particular? It seems strange that de Romilly would dedicate meager discussion not only to what she insists is the linchpin of her book, but also to what might help readers better understand the enduring significance of Alcibiades: his relationship with Socrates as described by Plato.

De Romilly does draw on Plato at the beginning of her book, saying he gives Alcibiades the perfect introduction in the *Symposium*. Alcibiades arrives at the famous party late, drunk, leaning on a flute player, and “thickly

crowned with ivy and violets.”¹ The symposiasts, however, still receive Alcibiades eagerly. According to de Romilly, his fellow citizens adored him because he possessed six irresistible qualities: beauty, aristocracy, wealth, intellectual superiority, Socrates’s friendship, and youth. All of these qualities increased Alcibiades’s popularity, de Romilly claims, but it was Socrates’s friendship that made him “not just the archetypal ‘golden boy’” (12). She says that Socrates and Alcibiades loved each other, that Alcibiades was deeply moved by Socrates, and that this emotion gave him “deep comprehension, at least temporarily or sporadically, of another Socratic ideal, the desire to follow the path of goodness, which reveals an exceptional understanding and admiration” (10). Later, however, de Romilly contradicts this claim, raising the question whether this “exceptional understanding” really existed.

Between the chapter detailing the scandals of Alcibiades’s early life—the insults he leveled against everyone from his schoolteacher to his father-in-law, his numerous affairs, his refusals to be held accountable for his actions—and the chapter about his entry into politics, de Romilly places an “interlude”: “Alcibiades between Two Lifestyles” (31). Here, she argues that Plato wrote *Alcibiades I* to show that Alcibiades missed his opportunity to follow the Socratic teachings. Before his political career began, he could have chosen philosophy over “immediate success”—and yet he “not only failed to choose, but he was not even aware there was a choice” (32). Suddenly, it seems that Alcibiades had no understanding at all of Socrates nor of their many conversations. And it is here, just where any reader would want to dig deeper into Alcibiades’s rejection of philosophy, that de Romilly leaves Socrates and Plato behind. She turns to Thucydides because “Alcibiades begins to act” (34).

Though she also draws on Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus, Cornelius Nepos, and Xenophon, de Romilly dedicates the largest portion of her book to Alcibiades’s life as described by Thucydides. She is clearly a careful reader of the famous historian. When discussing Alcibiades’s first political success—his negotiation of an alliance between Athens and Argos, which he convinced the Spartans not to prevent—de Romilly acknowledges that many scholars find his persuasion of the Spartans implausible and try to correct Thucydides on this point. De Romilly, however, argues that “these explanations for the weaknesses and ambiguities in the text do not mean we should reject his version of the facts for the sake of psychological rationalism” (44). Instead, readers should ask whether those ambiguities, when considered in context,

¹ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 212d4–e2.

bring realizations about Alcibiades's character to light. De Romilly thinks Thucydides makes Alcibiades's securing of the Argive alliance seem incredible for a reason: to emphasize that Alcibiades, with his extraordinary charm, cleverness, and manipulative genius, could do what the average person would find impossible.

This idea runs throughout de Romilly's discussions of the Sicilian expedition, Alcibiades's betrayals of both Athens and Sparta, and his eventual return to Athens, as does the idea that "Alcibiades acted solely out of self-interest" (36). De Romilly presents him as a statesman whose ambition knew no bounds, who "preferred opportunity to principle" (37), and who would always further his own aims or settle a personal vendetta before considering the common good (if he ever considered it). She also links Alcibiades's character to that of Athens. De Romilly claims that during the speech that inspired the Athenians to undertake the Sicilian expedition, Alcibiades "was, as an individual, the image of Athens" (63): enterprising, imperialistic, and desirous of conquest.

De Romilly goes further. She argues that through this address, Alcibiades showed himself to be "the first theoretician of activism for its own sake" (65). Though she recognizes that it was Thucydides who wrote the speech, she insists that "there can be no doubt: this bold philosophy, proclaimed boldly, was [Alcibiades's]" (66). De Romilly says some listeners must have questioned his exhortations and wondered what ultimate purpose their actions would serve, but she rests assured of the "clarity" of Alcibiades's own ideas (65). Plato's depiction of Alcibiades, however, shows that his motives were more complicated and confused than de Romilly makes them out to be, even after his break with Socrates.

It is true that in his speech, Alcibiades seems to focus on maintaining and expanding Athens's power simply because he fears what will happen if it is lost. He associates no virtuous end with that power, appearing to desire it, as de Romilly claims, for its own sake.² Alcibiades presents himself in this same way at the beginning of *Alcibiades I*. When Socrates prompts him to say that a good war is called a just war, for example, Alcibiades cannot think of the term "just," even after consideration.³ Yet Socrates has approached Alcibiades

² *The Landmark Thucydides*, trans. Richard Crawley, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996), 6.18.

³ Plato, *Alcibiades I*, trans. Carnes Lord, in *The Roots of Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 108d9–109a9. My discussion of *Alcibiades I* relies on Christopher Bruell, "Alcibiades," in *On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic*

not only as his “first...lover,” but also as the lover who “alone persist[s],” even after the rest have moved on (103a1–5). Socrates would not be so determined if he did not see some unrealized potential in Alcibiades—some longing, perhaps, that Alcibiades cannot quite accept or understand.

As the dialogue progresses, Socrates attempts to uncover that potential by broadening Alcibiades’s focus and questioning his poise. When he finally realizes that Socrates wants him to talk about justice, Alcibiades scoffs at the idea that anyone smart would prize a concern for this virtue over his own profit (113d1–8). By getting Alcibiades to claim that it is noble to rescue a fellow soldier at one’s own risk, however, Socrates reveals Alcibiades’s regard for justice and makes him admit that “I myself don’t know what I am saying” (115a1–c5, 116e3–4). Socrates takes advantage of this aporetic moment to weave an enthralling vision for Alcibiades—a vision in which Alcibiades, having reached the last frontier of political success, has become “renowned among the Greeks and the barbarians—for which you have a greater love, it seems to me, than anyone has ever had for anything” (124b4–6). Socrates tries to convince Alcibiades that if he wants to achieve this goal, he must always aim for justice in his political endeavors, a practice that will make him “dear to the gods” (134d1–e7). By the end of the dialogue, Alcibiades seems to have placed himself entirely in the hands of Socrates and his “god” (135d1–e9). His promise to “take trouble over justice” (135e4–5) from now on, however, shows that he still does not understand how attached to justice he has already been, which means he is not as ready to examine it as he appears.

The Alcibiades of the *Symposium*, who has clearly undergone a painful and confusing separation from Socrates, bears out this ominous possibility. As de Romilly mentions, Alcibiades arrives at the party with a crown on his head—a crown that initially obscures his vision, preventing him from seeing Socrates (*Symp.* 213a6–b2). When Alcibiades does notice the philosopher, he is unnerved and claims their break is permanent, but also expresses a desire to commend him (213e3–5). After deciding to make a speech in praise of Socrates, Alcibiades swears to “tell the truth,” but then equivocates, saying that “as far as my wish goes, I shall not lie” (214e6–11). Some part of Alcibiades seems to know that he will not tell the whole truth about Socrates, for he either cannot fulfill his “wish” to do so or does not feel it strongly enough.

Alcibiades says he will praise Socrates “through likenesses...for the sake of the truth” (215a4–6). This method—discussing likenesses or images as a way of eventually seeing beyond them to what is real—is one that, according to Socrates, people who “always want the good things to be theirs” use. They behold beauty in the “pursuits and laws” of their city, and their longing to possess this beauty is so great that they need to ensure it really is beautiful—that it is not simply “imagined by [them]” (205a7–211a7). The problem, however, is that investigating whether something is truly beautiful requires confronting the possibility that it may not satisfy the hopes invested in it—and having the courage to accept that one’s cherished customs and beliefs might merely be likenesses. In acknowledging that he may not hit the truth, Alcibiades demonstrates some understanding that he lacks that courage. Furthermore, though he claims to look deeply inside Socrates in his speech, he sees only “images of gods” (215b3–4)—images, not truths. Though Socrates awakened Alcibiades’s desire for “the good things” in *Alcibiades I*, Alcibiades cannot bear to think his greatest love—the renown, both earthly and eternal, that he hopes his political successes will bring him—might not be as real or lasting as it looks. The crown, which keeps Alcibiades from seeing Socrates clearly, has also kept him from following the philosophic path.

Both of de Romilly’s claims about Alcibiades, then—that he possessed an “extraordinary understanding” of Socrates, and that he nonetheless “was not even aware there was a choice” between politics and philosophy (10, 32)—are exaggerations. Additionally, the connections that she draws among Alcibiades, Athens, and contemporary political life could be deepened by further exploration of Alcibiades’s relationship with Socrates. In many sections of her book, de Romilly mentions the lesson that current political leaders should draw from the eventual downfall of both Alcibiades and Athens: that unchecked ambition, prized above the common good, ruins individuals and cities (14, 30, 40, 63, 81, 85–86, 125, 185, 195). Though this lesson is a worthy one, de Romilly simply repeats it in different ways rather than examining what it is about Alcibiades’s ambition that makes it so relevant to modern readers. There have been many overly ambitious statesmen, and, although de Romilly’s portrayal of Alcibiades as a power-hungry activist should resonate with her audience, it does not provide a strong enough argument for studying this statesman in particular. A more nuanced picture—that of a man who pursues political dreams because he longs for the noble, but cannot look beyond those images to the truth—would hit much closer to home.

