

THE BEAUTIFUL GIRL: AN EROTIC READING OF SOCRATES’ FIRST ARGUMENT IN PLATO’S *HIPPIAS MAJOR**

ABSTRACT

This article looks to Attic comedy to explain Socrates’ first argument in Plato’s Hippias Major: his refutation of Hippias’ claim that the Beautiful is a beautiful girl. As part of his argument, Socrates introduces three examples of beautiful things—a mare (θήλεια ἵππος), a lyre (λύρα) and a pot (χύτρα)—all of which are used in comedy as metaphorical obscenities for sexualized women. The author contends that an erotic reading of the text accomplishes what no other interpretation can: (1) a unified account of the passage that (2) allows for Socrates’ successful refutation of (3) a proposal in keeping with Hippias’ character. In addition, it explains (4) Socrates’ choice of examples—in particular, the rarely cited χύτρα—and (5) Hippias’ otherwise inexplicable reaction to the χύτρα, as well as (6) the analogous relationship of monkeys and men to pots and girls.

Keywords: Plato; *Hippias Major*; Aristophanes; Pherecrates; comedy; beauty (τὸ καλόν); metaphor; sex

In response to the sophist Hippias’ first proposed answer (‘a beautiful girl’, 287e4) to the motivating question of the *Hippias Major* (‘what is the Beautiful?’, 287d11–e1), Socrates asks: ‘Shall I say that, if a beautiful girl is a beautiful thing, those things [you say are beautiful] will be beautiful because of that?’ (288a10–11).¹ He then lists what some of those beautiful things might be—a mare, θήλεια ἵππος (288b8–9), a lyre, λύρα (288c6) and a pot, χύτρα (288c10). After reluctantly agreeing that these three things may be beautiful, Hippias interjects: ‘But on the whole [the pot is] not worth judging beautiful, compared to a horse and a girl and all the other fine things’ (288e9). Socrates seizes on this: ‘If you put the class of girls together with the class of gods, won’t the same thing happen as happened when the class of pots was put together with that of girls? Won’t the most beautiful girl be seen to be foul?’ (289a9–b3).

Socrates’ argument here is notoriously difficult to reconstruct; indeed, some interpreters contend that he is actually making two separate arguments. I submit that the argument is more coherent if we accept an erotic reading of the text. An anonymous

* I am grateful to Gábor Betegh, Nick Denyer, Patrick Finglass, David Sedley and Tim Whitmarsh for helpful comments.

¹ I use the translation of P. Woodruff, *Plato Hippias Major* (Oxford, 1982) throughout. However, while Woodruff always translates καλός as ‘fine’ for the sake of consistency (see his page 110), I favour ‘beautiful’ because I am focussed only on Hippias’ first answer, which, as Woodruff himself acknowledges, is using καλή in the sense of “‘beautiful” or “sexually attractive”” (47). Moreover, ‘beautiful’ allows for greater ease when reading the passage alongside, for example, the *Symposium*.

excursus from 1831, later revealed to have been written by George Burges,² observes that Hippias' παρθένος, as well as Socrates' ἵππος and χύτρα, 'may all be applied to express ideas connected with sexual intercourse, carried on in the natural way'.³ This reading was subsequently swept under the rug, with Dorothy Tarrant noting only, 'Who will may read Burges' excursus on this passage as an example of perverted and perverse ingenuity'.⁴ Nearly two centuries after Burges's excursus and one century after Tarrant's dismissal, it is time to take another look.

I. A BEAUTIFUL GIRL

Discussion of Hippias' παρθένος has focussed primarily on ascertaining the extent to which Hippias misunderstands Socrates' question. Is he confusing a universal with a particular out of ignorance?⁵ Is he, rather, aware of the distinction between universals and particulars and offering what he believes to be a genuine definition of τὸ καλόν?⁶ Or is he wilfully ignoring the distinction in an attempt to appeal to the audience and mock Socrates?⁷ I do not hope to settle this dispute here. I do, however, wish to note that, whether or not Hippias is in on the joke, his answer comes across as absurd not only because it is so clearly not the answer Socrates is looking for but also because, even if Socrates were looking for an example of something beautiful, a beautiful *girl*, παρθένος, would presumably be low on his list.

On the one hand, this is because Socrates has little to say about παρθένοι generally. Outside of the *Hippias Major*, he utters the word παρθένος once in the Platonic corpus:⁸ in the *Phaedrus*, when reciting the epigram inscribed on the tomb of Midas the Phrygian

² Revealed in G. Burges, *The Works of Plato: A New and Literal Version, Volume IV* (London, 1851), 210.

³ [G. Burges], *Plato's Four Dialogues: The Crito, Hippias, Alcibiades, and Sisyphus with English Notes and Examination Questions* (London, 1831), 201. Burges argues that Socrates' examples parody examples of beautiful things from Hippias' Dissertation: ἀνὴρ, ὄνος and κάρδοπος, which 'all refer to the unnatural intercourse carried on by the priests, poets, and philosophers of Greece'. He posits that Plato wrote νευρά 'in *sensu nequiori*' to parody Hippias' own λύρα.

⁴ D. Tarrant, *The Hippias Major Attributed to Plato, with Introductory Essay and Commentary* (Cambridge, 1928), 49.

⁵ E.g. Tarrant (n. 4), 47; G.M.A. Grube, 'The logic and language of the *Hippias Major*', *CPh* 24 (1929), 369–75, at 370; J.M. Rist, 'Plato's "Earlier theory of forms"', *Phoenix* 29 (1975), 336–57, at 345; D. Sider, 'Plato's early aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35 (1977), 465–70; E. Heitsch, *Platon Werke. Übersetzung und Kommentar. Band VII 1: Größerer Hippias* (Göttingen, 2011), 60–3.

⁶ A. Nehamas, 'Confusing universals and particulars in Plato's early dialogues', *RMeta* 29 (1975), 287–306, at 297–303; T.H. Irwin, 'Plato's Heracleiteanism', *PhilosQ* 27 (1977), 1–13, at 8 n. 11; R.M. Dancy, *Plato's Introduction of Forms* (Cambridge, 2004), 156–66; V. Politis, 'Plato's Geach talks to Socrates: definition by example-and-exemplar in the *Hippias Major*', *Phronesis* 63 (2018), 223–8.

⁷ Woodruff (n. 1), 50–1, 106, 109, 129–30; F.V. Trivigno, 'The moral and literary character of Hippias in Plato's *Hippias Major*', *OSAPh* 50 (2016), 31–65, at 51.

⁸ I set aside the much-debated issue of the dialogue's authenticity (e.g. D. Tarrant, 'On the *Hippias Major*', *Journal of Philology* 35 [1920], 319–31, and id., 'The authorship of the *Hippias Major*', *CQ* 21 [1927], 82–7; G.M.A. Grube, 'On the authenticity of the *Hippias Major*', *CQ* 20 [1926], 134–48 and Grube [n. 5]; Woodruff [n. 1], 93–105). However, even if the dialogue was not written by Plato (I am not convinced that it was not), a student writing as faithfully in the style of his teacher as the one posited to have penned this dialogue would presumably have been aiming to produce a text that fits neatly in the corpus and may be read in conjunction with the rest of Plato's works. In other words, we may, either way, consult the corpus for insight into this text.

(264d2).⁹ In conversations with Socrates, then, *παρθένος* seems an unlikely candidate to serve as an example of *any* trait. But it is particularly unlikely in a discussion of τὸ καλόν. We know from the *Symposium* what sorts of things Socrates might think to name, were he to be asked to name beautiful particulars: Diotima tells Socrates that, once he has seen the Beautiful itself, αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν, ‘it won’t occur to you to measure beauty by gold or clothing or beautiful boys and youths [καλοὺς παῖδας τε καὶ νεανίσκους]—who, if you see them now, strike you out of your senses, and make you, you and many others, eager to be with the boys you love and look at them forever’ (211d3–6).¹⁰

About two of the three particulars listed here, Socrates and Hippias agree: Hippias says of both gold and clothing that they beautify the things to which or people to whom they are added. After Socrates refutes his first answer, *παρθένος*, Hippias will propose gold as his second (289e2), and shortly thereafter, when considering whether τὸ πρέπον is τὸ καλόν, he will say that ‘when someone puts on clothes and shoes that suit him, even if he’s ridiculous, he is seen to be more beautiful’ (294a4–5).¹¹ But while Socrates speaks of beautiful young boys, Hippias speaks of a beautiful young girl. In other words, Hippias’ *παρθένος* seems to be a direct perversion of Socrates’ own list of beautiful particulars.¹²

This perversion is all the more evident when we consider that, while Socrates in the *Gorgias* acknowledges that a woman *can* be καλή,¹³ never in the Platonic corpus does he call a real mortal female καλή. He says only that ‘the goddess who presides at childbirth ... is really ἡ Καλλονή’ (*Symp.* 206d2–3) and describes to Crito ‘a καλή and comely woman’ who approached him in a dream, foretelling his fate (*Cri.* 44a10).¹⁴ In contrast, he regularly describes males, and especially young boys, as καλοί: there is Alcibiades the Beautiful, Ἀλκιβιάδης ὁ καλός (*Alc.* 113b8–9, *Prt.* 316a4); Ctesippus, μάλα καλός τε κάγαθος τὴν φύσιν (*Euthyd.* 273a7–8); and Charmides, who is ‘amazing in stature and τὸ κάλλος’, even for one who is ‘a broken yardstick as far as τοὺς καλοὺς are concerned, because practically everyone of that age strikes me as καλοί’ (*Chrm.* 154b7–c2). The *Phaedrus*, meanwhile, contains Socrates’ ‘hymn to my master and yours, Phaedrus—to Love, who watches over καλῶν παιδῶν’

⁹ The word appears only three other times in the corpus, in the mouth of the *Laws*’ Athenian Stranger: twice in pronouncements about the education of the young (794c5 and 834d7) and once in the characterization of Dikē as the virgin daughter of Aidōs (943e1).

¹⁰ Transl. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, ‘*Symposium*’, in J.M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997), 457–505. There is no reason to assume, *pace* C.J. Rowe, *Plato: Symposium* (Warminster, 1998), 200, that this message is not addressed to Socrates. While it may be true that ‘“gold and clothes” hardly interest the real [Socrates] *nowadays* and ‘that he is no ordinary lover, starving himself for a glimpse of his beloved’, it seems perfectly possible that he was *once* interested in such things and that he wants us to view any change in him as the direct result of Diotima’s teaching. Moreover, Socrates would continue to find gold, clothes and boys beautiful even after seeing the Beautiful itself: A. Nehamas, ‘Beauty of body, nobility of soul: the pursuit of love in Plato’s *Symposium*’, in D. Scott (ed.), *Maieusis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat* (Oxford, 2007), 97–135, at 112.

¹¹ Hippias also obsessed over his own appearance: *Hp. mai.* 291a6–7, *Hp. mi.* 368b5–c7.

¹² It is not clear that the *Symposium* was written first. But even if Hippias’ answer is not a perversion of the passage in the *Symposium*, it is a perversion of Socrates’ well-known proclivities throughout the corpus and, presumably, in the ‘real world’ as well.

¹³ ‘I say that the καλόν and good person, man or woman, is happy’ (470e9–10); transl. D.J. Zeyl, ‘*Gorgias*’, in J.M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997), 791–869.

¹⁴ Transl. G.M.A. Grube, ‘*Crito*’, in J.M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997), 37–48.

(265c1–3).¹⁵ It is an account of love with a beautiful boy (237b2, 251c6), told for the benefit of a beautiful boy (252b2).

What is at stake in Hippias' perversion? For one thing, his answer is sexually charged.¹⁶ As Woodruff comments, it 'was probably supposed to provoke nudges and titters from his audience'.¹⁷ Beautiful virgins, in the ancient world as in our own, were invoked as objects of lust. We see this in literature: Pisthetaerus and Euelpides in Aristophanes' *Birds* express in graphic terms their carnal desire for the καλὸν little bird Procne, whom they pointedly liken to a παρθένος (667–71)—her resemblance to a παρθένος *explains* their desire for her. And we see it in history. Diodorus Siculus tells us that the Pythia at Delphi was originally a παρθένος, but (Diod. Sic. 16.26):

People say that Echecrates the Thessalian, having arrived at the shrine and beheld the virgin who uttered the oracle, became enamoured of her because of her beauty [ἐρασθῆναι διὰ τὸ κάλλος], carried her away with him and violated her; and that the Delphians because of this deplorable occurrence passed a law that in future a virgin should no longer prophesy but that an elderly woman of fifty should declare the oracles and that she should be dressed in the costume of a virgin, as a sort of reminder of the prophetess of olden times.¹⁸

In other words, men were not to be trusted around παρθένοι, who inspired in them the most fervent sexual desire. Giulia Sissa summarizes the Greek attitude towards virginity and sexual desire thus: *parthenia* 'is something subject to seizure (*lambanein*), a treasure that one guards (*phylassein*), a value that must be respected (*terein*). A seducer offers gifts in exchange for this prize, which he unwraps (*lyein*) with the first embrace'.¹⁹

But beautiful young boys were objects of lust, too—that much is clear from Diotima's account of Socrates' feelings towards them at 211d3–6. And we know, for example, that the sight of καλὸς Charmides sets Socrates ablaze and renders him 'quite beside myself' (*Chrm.* 155d3–4). Had Hippias answered πᾶς καλὸς καλόν instead of παρθένος καλὴ καλόν, the answer would still be sexually charged.

However, had Hippias answered πᾶς καλὸς καλόν, he would have been invoking what Socrates considers to be a higher form of eros. It is not that Socrates favours homosexual intercourse: in the *Phaedrus* he criticizes the man who both 'surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast, eager to make babies; and wallowing in vice ... goes after unnatural pleasure too, without a trace of fear or shame' (250e4–251a1). As Kenneth Dover explains, 'Here heterosexual eros is treated on the same basis as homosexual copulation, a pursuit of bodily pleasure which leads no further'.²⁰ Nevertheless, Socrates tells us, only homosexual eros of beautiful boys, at least when sustained without the sexual act,²¹ is capable of leading men to virtue.

This key difference between eros for beautiful boys and eros for beautiful girls is spelled out in the *Symposium*. All men, according to Socrates' Diotima, are pregnant in body and/or soul. Those who are pregnant in body 'turn more to women and pursue

¹⁵ Transl. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, 'Phaedrus', in J.M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997), 506–56.

¹⁶ For καλή as 'sexually attractive', n. 1.

¹⁷ Woodruff (n. 1), 51.

¹⁸ Transl. C.L. Sherman, *Diodorus Siculus, Library of History, Volume VII: Books 15.20–16.65* (Cambridge, MA, 1952).

¹⁹ G. Sissa (transl. A. Goldhammer), *Greek Virginity* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 77.

²⁰ K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA, 1978; 2nd edn 1989), 163.

²¹ Dover (n. 20), 164: Socrates advocated a homosexual eros 'which perpetually restrained itself from bodily gratification'.

love in that way, providing themselves through childbirth with immortality and remembrance and happiness, as they think, for all time to come' (208e2–5).²² And these women, we know, are beautiful: 'no one can possibly give birth in anything ugly [αἰσχροῦ]; only in something καλῶ' (*Symp.* 206c4–6).²³ But men who are pregnant in soul seek out beautiful boys instead, producing children who are 'more beautiful and more immortal' than human children (209c6–7)—that is, wisdom, moderation and justice (209a3–8)—via poetry and philosophy. They begin by loving καλὰ male bodies (210a4–8) through pederasty (211b5–6) and then ascend the *scala amoris* until, ultimately, they 'see the Beautiful itself [αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν], absolute, pure unmixed', thereby giving 'birth ... to true virtue' (211d8–212a7).²⁴

When, then, Hippias speaks of a beautiful girl instead of a beautiful boy, he is not simply choosing one possible object of lust over another; he is choosing the object of lust that can lead only downwards, towards matter, over the object of lust that helps man transcend matter. We return to the counterfactual: had Hippias answered παῖς καλὸς καλόν, Socrates might have mocked him for misunderstanding the question and answering τί ἐστὶ καλόν instead of τί ἐστὶ τὸ καλόν, but he could nevertheless have hoped, like Diotima, to lead Hippias up the *scala amoris*, redirecting him past beautiful boys and towards the Beautiful itself. A παρθένος καλή, however, has no place on the *scala amoris*. She will not help anyone give birth to 'true virtue'—only to human children, and even then, only when she is, in the strictest sense, a παρθένος no longer.²⁵

How is Socrates to respond? Since he cannot elevate the conversation, he debases it, introducing three particulars that are regularly cited as metaphorical obscenities for the sexualized female body.²⁶ We will first look at each particular individually, examining its potential metaphorical resonances, and then consider all three together in order to determine whether the metaphorical reading is indeed a desirable one.

II. A MARE, A LYRE, A POT

Why is Socrates' first example of another beautiful particular a mare? The only explanation in contemporary commentaries is that 'all the examples in this passage are feminine, presumably to keep distinct the substantial use of *kalon*' and that 'fine horses were bred in Hippias' country and raced at Olympia'.²⁷ Burges in 1851 gave a similar account: 'As the chariot-races in the Olympic games were run in the country of Elis, the people there had an opportunity of seeing the best horses, and of becoming, like persons living at Newmarket and Doncaster in England, the best judges of

²² The image here is that the man is 'pregnant' with semen: Rowe (n. 10), 183; M.F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic midwifery, Platonic inspiration', *BICS* 24 (1977), 7–16.

²³ This 'in' is ambiguous. Nehamas and Woodruff (n. 10), 489 n. 1: 'Diotima may mean that the lover causes the newborn ... to come to be within a beautiful person; or she may mean that he is stimulated to give birth to it in the presence of a beautiful person.' But the implication is that the man pregnant in body seeks out a beautiful woman to bear his offspring. If, instead, he were to come across an ugly woman, he would 'shrink back and ... not reproduce' (206d5–7).

²⁴ For the 'complex hierarchical structure' of eros, Nehamas (n. 10), 108.

²⁵ Sissa (n. 19), 73–123 explains what makes a παρθένος a παρθένος.

²⁶ For 'metaphorical obscenity', see J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (New York, 1975; 2nd edn 1991), 41–54.

²⁷ Woodruff (n. 1), 53.

horse-flesh; while from the number of prizes gained by mares, it was found that the female was better suited than the male for a long race.²⁸ But in 1831 he had hinted at another explanation: the ἵππος is connected with sexual intercourse.

We can expand on this. The *Hippias Major* reads like a comedy, in language²⁹ and in content.³⁰ Much of the comedic content hinges, Franco Trivigno has suggested,³¹ on the ‘connection between ridiculousness and refutation’ first brought out in this passage, when Hippias confidently asserts that anyone who tries to refute his answer of the beautiful girl will be a laughing stock, καταγέλαστον (288b2–3), and Socrates replies: ‘We’ll see about that’ (288b4–6). That is, the dialogue’s humour emerges when Socrates refutes Hippias, rendering *him* the laughing stock and exposing him as a classic comic imposter. The stage is thus already being set for a comedy when Socrates assumes the voice of the anonymous questioner, exclaims ὡς γλυκὺς εἶ (288b8), using an epithet, γλυκύς, of which Aristophanes was notably fond,³² and then proceeds to ask about horses. And how do horses and horsemanship function in Attic comedy? Frequently, Jeffrey Henderson tells us,³³ as sexual metaphors, with the horse-rider representing a man and the horse a woman—especially a whore.³⁴ There is a strong link between mares and sexualized women outside comedy as well:³⁵ in the poetry of Anacreon (fr. 417 *PMG*), Theognis (257–60) and Eubulus (fr. 84.2 K.–A.), in Euripidean lyric (*Hipp.* 545–6) and even in the zoology of Aristotle: ‘in eagerness for sexual intercourse, of all female [θηλειῶν] animals the mare [ἵππος] comes first ... Mares [ἵπποι αἱ θήλειαι] become horse-mad (hippomaniac), and the term derived from this one animal is applied by way of abuse to women who are inordinate in their sexual desires’ (*Hist. an.* 572a8–13).³⁶

That Socrates would not shy away from making use of this sexual connotation is evidenced in at least three places. First, in the *Phaedrus*, at 250e4–5 (cited above), when he likens heterosexual intercourse to ‘the manner of a four-footed beast’. Second, again in the *Phaedrus*, at 253d–254e, when the horse that represents a third of the soul is said to pull its chariot violently towards ‘the pleasures of sex’: as Jeremy Bell puts it, the horse metaphor is ‘invoked in order to illustrate ... eroticism’.³⁷ And finally, if we look beyond the Platonic corpus, in Xenophon’s *Symposium*, at 2.10, when Socrates and Antisthenes discuss how men should deal with, χρῆσθαι, their wives:

²⁸ Burges (n. 2), 226.

²⁹ Tarrant (n. 4), lxxviii–lxxx lists comedic words and expressions used.

³⁰ Trivigno (n. 7).

³¹ Trivigno (n. 7), 50.

³² Tarrant (n. 4), 49. For γλυκύς as a vocative appellation (in the superlative), Ar. *Ach.* 462, 467, 475; *Lys.* 79, 872, 889, 890; *Eccl.* 124, 241; E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address: From Herodotus to Lucian* (Oxford, 1996), 119. Pl. [*Hipparch.*] 227d4 is the only (pseudo-)Platonic use. For γλῦκων, Ar. *Eccl.* 985.

³³ Henderson (n. 26), 126–7, 165, 177; also C.M. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry: From Alcman to Simonides* (Oxford, 1961), 273 nn. 1–3.

³⁴ E.g. Ar. *Eccl.* 846, *Pax* 900–1, *Thesm.* 153, *Vesp.* 502; Anaxil. 22.10.

³⁵ For catalogues of the metaphor of woman as horse, D.E. Gerber, *Euterpe: An Anthology of Early Greek Lyric, Elegiac, and Iambic Poetry* (Amsterdam, 1970), 236–7; C. Calame (transl. D. Collins and J. Orion), *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece: Their Morphology, Religious Role, and Social Function* (Lanham, MD, 1997), 238–44.

³⁶ Transl. A.L. Peck, *Aristotle, History of Animals, Volume II: Books 4–6* (Cambridge, MA, 1970).

³⁷ J. Bell, ‘Taming horses and desires: Plato’s politics of care’, in J. Bell and M. Nass (edd.), *Plato’s Animals: Gadflies, Horses, Swans, and Other Philosophical Beasts* (Bloomington, IN, 2015), 115–30, at 128.

'If that's your view, Socrates', asked Antisthenes, 'how does it come that you don't practice what you preach by yourself educating Xanthippe, but live with [χρῆ] a wife who is the hardest to get along with of all the women there are—yes, or all that ever were, I suspect, or ever will be?' 'Because', he replied, 'I observe that people wishing to become expert horsemen [ἵππικοὺς] do not acquire the most docile ἵππους but rather those that are high-spirited, believing that if they can manage this kind, they will easily handle [χρήσεισθαι] any other. My course is similar.'³⁸

Socrates here compares his wife, Xanthippe, whose name is derived from ἵππος,³⁹ to a horse, while employing the verb χρᾶσθαι, which, as Bartlett observes, 'has a wide range of meanings, including ... "to have sexual intercourse"'.⁴⁰ In the sympotic context, an obscene undertone rises to the surface: Socrates may be seen to be alluding to the way in which he deals with his wife sexually. He is, perhaps, embracing the mythological tradition of using equestrian metaphors to describe the sexual union of marriage, especially, as Claude Calame has discussed, in 'myths in which characters ... have names formed on ἵππος, the horse'.⁴¹

Socrates regularly refers to horses and horsemanship throughout the Platonic corpus without innuendo.⁴² Nevertheless, only in the *Hippias Major* does he add the qualifying θήλεια, specifically designating a mare—the libidinous animal, Aristotle divulges, used to disparage loose women. While this may indeed be in an effort to continue using the feminine κολή, the comedic context suggests that there may be more to the story. Furthermore, Socrates is confronting Hippias, whose name, like Xanthippe's, is derived from ἵππος.⁴³ In other words, Socrates may be seen to be asking a male 'horse' whether he finds a female horse attractive. And in this way he summons the same triple entendre —'Hippias' as sex-related, as horse-related and as simply a name—used by Xanthias' 'slut' in Aristophanes' *Wasps*: 'My slut got sharp-tempered with me too, when I went to her place yesterday noon. I told her to ride me, and she asked if I was jockeying for a tyranny à la Hippias!' (500–2).⁴⁴

What is the immediate effect of this innuendo? Hippias does not yet get it: he boasts that 'we breed very fine mares in our country' (288c5). But to those who do get it, Hippias looks foolish, as he unwittingly allows Socrates to expose him as the kind of man who, it is said in the *Phaedrus*, 'is not to be moved abruptly from here to a vision of Beauty itself when he sees what we call beauty here'—an apt description of one who answers with a beautiful particular instead of a universal—'so instead of gazing at the latter reverently, ... surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast' (250e1–5). Hippias, the horse-man, is but a pleasure-seeking fool, with no knowledge of the Beautiful.⁴⁵

³⁸ Transl. O.J. Todd, 'Symposium', rev. J. Henderson, in E.C. Marchant and O.J. Todd, *Xenophon: Memorabilia, Oeconomicus, Symposium, Apology* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 560–661.

³⁹ E.g. D. Nails, 'The shrewish wife of Socrates', *EMC* 29 (1985), 97–9, at 98 and A.J. Bowen, *Xenophon: Symposium* (Warminster, 1998), 97.

⁴⁰ R.C. Bartlett, *Xenophon: The Shorter Socratic Writings* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), 138 n. 23.

⁴¹ Calame (n. 35), 242.

⁴² For a complete list of horse references, J. Bell and M. Naas, 'Plato's animal index', in J. Bell and M. Naas (edd.), *Plato's Animals: Gadflies, Horses, Swans, and Other Philosophical Beasts* (Bloomington, IN, 2015), 249–56, at 252–3.

⁴³ For Plato's puns on proper names, N. Denyer, *Plato Protagoras* (Cambridge, 2008), 140.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Ar. Lys.* 619.

⁴⁵ For Hippias as a pleasure-seeking fool, Trivigno (n. 7), 46.

Since the mare was too subtle for Hippias, Socrates will produce two more metaphorical obscenities. First, the lyre (288c6–7). Lyres in the Platonic corpus are often invoked as analogous to men and their bodies: faces are compared to lyres (*Tht.* 144d–e); the harmony of the healthy body is likened to the harmony of the lyre (*Symp.* 187a–c); and so on.⁴⁶ In the *Phaedo*, at 73d5–8, the lyre is said to evoke memories for the lover (ἐραστής) of the shape of the boy (τὸ εἶδος τοῦ παιδός) to whom it belongs. In other words, the lyre (along with the suggestive cloak, ἱμάτιον) serves as a kind of symbol for an erotic relationship.⁴⁷ This is in accordance with what Calame has written about the role of lyres in melic poetry: ‘it is the vast semantic field of music that most often provides the metaphorical vocabulary ... for evocations of amorous desire. Eros can be evoked by the sound of a lyre, the singing of a chorus of young people, the melody of a flute, or the song of a poet.’⁴⁸

If we accept that Socrates regularly compares bodies to lyres, then it is no great stretch to say that he makes a similar move in the *Hippias Major*: after speaking of human bodies and horse bodies, he introduces, for the sake of comparison, the body-like lyre. The passage from the *Phaedo*, however, indicates that Socrates is willing to link lyres not just with bodies but specifically with *eroticized* bodies. In the comedic context of the *Hippias Major* and following on the innuendo of the παρθένος and the θήλεια ἵππος, Socrates is invoking a literary trope: the lyre as a sexualized woman.

A fragment by the comic poet Pherecrates, which Bernhard Zimmermann calls ‘the most important and detailed source of comedy’s musical criticism’,⁴⁹ is our best evidence for this trope. Personified Lady Music laments the abuse she has suffered at the hands of various new musicians (Pher. *Chiron*, fr. 155 K.–A.):

(MUSIC) Melanippides was the start of all my troubles, being the first of them to grab me and loosen me up and make me slacker with twelve strings. But still this man was acceptable to me, compared with my current woes. Then Cinesias, that damned Athenian, by inserting off-key modulations in his stanzas, so completely destroyed me that in the creation of his dithyrambs his right seems to be his left, like objects in a mirror. But even he was an acceptable man for me. Then Phrynus thrust in his own whirlwind and just about killed me, turning and twisting me with his twelve harmonies on five strings. But still he treated me all right and if he did me wrong, he soon made it up to me. But now, my dear, Timotheus has buried and scraped me most indecently.

(JUSTICE) What’s this Timotheus like?

(MUSIC) A certain redhead from Miletus. He has caused me real problems and far outdone those other men I mentioned, leading me along his bizarre ant paths. If he meets me when I am out walking by myself, he has me stripped and undone on twelve strings.⁵⁰

Pherecrates criticizes musical innovation by likening it to sexual assault, accomplishing this ‘by means of a clever allegory that projects the figure of a κηταρίστρια (a hetaira proficient in music) into a more abstract embodiment of her skills: the active performance of music and passive submission to intercourse are fused and her body becomes a lyre’.⁵¹

⁴⁶ *Lach.* 188c–d; *Grg.* 482b–c; *Cleit.* 407e–408a; *Hp. mi.* 374e; *Phd.* 73d–e, 85e–86d.

⁴⁷ Socrates then (73e5–7) discusses the memory of a man evoked by a picture of a lyre and—in the same breath—a picture of a horse.

⁴⁸ C. Calame (transl. J. Lloyd), *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, 1999), 37.

⁴⁹ B. Zimmermann, ‘Comedy’s criticism of music’, in N. Slater and B. Zimmermann (edd.), *Intertextualität in der griechisch-römischen Komödie* (Stuttgart, 1993), 39–50, at 40.

⁵⁰ Transl. I.C. Storey, *Fragments of Old Comedy, Volume II: Diopieithes to Pherecrates* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

⁵¹ G.W. Dobrov and E. Urios-Aparisi, ‘The maculate Music: gender, genre and the *Chiron* of

Henderson advocates greater ambiguity in Lady Music's sexual status: perhaps she is 'less the hetaira or prostitute than the once-respectable woman who has fallen on hard times'.⁵² But however we interpret Music's sexual status, the metaphor remains essentially the same—a lyre represents a sexualized woman's body, and the language of musical innovation in lyre-playing represents the language of sexual assault.

If Pherecrates' fragment is our best evidence for such a trope, it is not our only evidence. Lucia Prauscello, arguing for a sexual reading of τὸ κιθάρισ[μα] αὐτῆς on a lead curse tablet (*Tabula Defixionis* 22[A].5–7 Ziebarth), assembles various instances 'of the metaphorical possibilities that the intersection between music and sex may enact':⁵³ in addition to Pherecrates' *Cheiron*, there is Ar. fr. 930 K.–A., in which a style of musical composition alludes to *pedicatio*;⁵⁴ Ar. *Ran.* 1305, where λεσβιάζειν alludes to *fellatio*, and 1327, 'where Euripides is charged with composing his own music ἀνὰ τὸ δωδεκαμήχανον Κυρήνης, with a clear reference to the *figurae Veneris* enacted by the well-known hetaira Kyrene';⁵⁵ and the anonymous *Anth. Pal.* 5.99, in which 'professional skill in playing the kithara becomes an image of another kind of virtuosity, the erotic one'.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Mariella De Simone, who argues that Euripides' Muse, dressed as a sexual entertainer in the aforementioned Ar. *Ran.* 1305, 'is the perfect incarnation of what Aristophanes makes Aeschylus assert about Euripidean lyric manner',⁵⁷ discusses what she calls 'the practice of inscribing poets' musical criticism onto the female body' in Attic Comedy.⁵⁸ In addition to Pherecrates' Lady Music, she cites Lady Nightingale of Aristophanes' *Birds* and the 'debauched flute-girl' of the *Wasps* (1346).⁵⁹

With these examples in mind, we return to the *Hippias Major*. To preserve a coherently obscene reading of the text, Burges emends λύρα to νευρά, seemingly supposing that λύρα cannot be taken sexually. We see now that no emendation is necessary: λύρα can have sexual undertones, at least in the right context, and the comedic *Hippias Major* is precisely such a context. But this will become clearer once we have discussed all three examples—including the pot.

When Socrates asks Hippias, in the voice of the anonymous Questioner, whether a beautiful pot, χύτρα, is a beautiful thing, Hippias reacts in horror: 'Who is the man, Socrates? What a boor he is to dare in an august proceeding to speak such vulgar speech that way!' (288d1–3). Why does he react so strongly? Or, as Woodruff puts it, 'What is

Pherecrates', in G.W. Dobrov (ed.), *Beyond Aristophanes: Transition and Diversity in Greek Comedy* (Atlanta, 1995), 139–74, at 155.

⁵² J. Henderson, 'Pherekrates and the women of Old Comedy', in D. Harvey and J. Wilkins (edd.), *The Rivals of Aristophanes: Studies in Athenian Old Comedy* (London, 2000), 135–50, at 143.

⁵³ L. Prauscello, 'A note on *Tabula Defixionis* 22(A).5–7 Ziebarth: when a musical performance enacts love', *CQ* 54 (2004), 333–9, at 336.

⁵⁴ Prauscello (n. 53), 336–7.

⁵⁵ Prauscello (n. 53), 337.

⁵⁶ Prauscello (n. 53), 338. Kevin Solez, arguing against Prauscello's reading of the 'kitharisma-curse', nevertheless agrees that 'lyre-playing is suggestive of erotic behaviour' and that '[m]etaphors involving lyre music and sex are highly productive in Greek literature': K. Solez, 'Zois the Eretrian, wife of Kabeiras (22 Ziebarth): music, sexuality, and κιθάρισμα in cultural context', *EuGeStA* 5 (2015), 85–102, at 94. Latin literature also contains many 'metaphors involving lyre music and sex': J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1982), 25.

⁵⁷ M. De Simone, 'The "Lesbian" Muse in tragedy: Euripides Μελοποιός in Ar. *Ra.* 1301–28', *CQ* 58 (2008), 479–90, at 488.

⁵⁸ De Simone (n. 57), 481.

⁵⁹ De Simone (n. 57), 484.

vulgar about the word *chytra*? Apparently, its only fault is that it refers to a household utensil.⁶⁰ A second and greater fault, however, is that, as Tarrant observes, *χύτρα* is ‘a comedy word, frequent in Aristophanes; this is the only Platonic instance’.⁶¹ Hippias reacts so strongly, I argue, because he has finally caught on to Socrates’ use of sexual innuendo. The philosopher has broken from his standard list of examples (a horse and a lyre) and introduced a word that belongs in obscene jokes, thereby dropping any pretence of subtlety and fully activating the underlying innuendo of the previous examples.

Cookery in ancient comedy provides a wealth of erotic double entendres, Henderson chronicles,⁶² and although he explicitly mentions *χύτρα* only once—in a short fragment by the comic poet Eunicus, where *χύτρα* ‘describes a kiss in which the ears are grasped like jug-handles’ (Eunicus, fr. 1 K.–A.)⁶³—a quick search through Aristophanes’ corpus will identify many other metaphorical uses where *χύτρα* signifies a sexualized woman and/or a sexually charged part of a woman’s body. For example, the Kinsman in the *Thesmophoriazusae* tells this story (503–9):

I know another wife who pretended to be in labor for ten days, until she could buy a baby, while her husband was running all over town buying medicine to quicken birth. An old woman brought it in a pot [*χύτρα*], the baby I mean, its mouth stuffed with a honeycomb so it wouldn’t cry. Then the old woman gave the signal and the wife yells, ‘Out you go, husband, out you go; this time I think I’m giving birth!’ Yes, the baby had kicked the pot’s belly [*ἦτρον τῆς χύτρας*].⁶⁴

‘By the reference to its “stomach”,’ Alan Sommerstein explains, ‘the pot is humorously spoken of as if it were the real mother of the baby; elsewhere *ἔτρον* always denotes the belly of a person or animal.’⁶⁵ Similarly, in the *Ecclesiazusae*, a *χύτρα* is personified as and stands in for a woman, with reference made to her reproductive capacity.⁶⁶ The Neighbour arranges his household utensils in the formation of a ritual procession and, after making the sieve his Basket Bearer, he looks for his Chair Bearer:⁶⁷ ‘Where’s my Chair Bearer? Cooking pot [*χύτρα*], come outside here. My God, you’re black [*μέλαινα*], as if it was you that boiled the concoction Lysicrates uses to dye his hair!’ (733–5).⁶⁸ The personified *χύτρα*, playing the role of the female Chair Bearer, is sexualized here by way of a common double entendre: she is black, *μέλαινα*, presumably because of smoke, and the word for a ‘black spot from smoke’ on a pot or oven is *τὸ μέλαν* (cognate, of course, with *μέλαινα*), which is, Henderson posits, a slang term for pubic hair.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ Woodruff (n. 1), 53.

⁶¹ Tarrant (n. 4), 49.

⁶² Henderson (n. 26), 142–4.

⁶³ Henderson (n. 26), 182.

⁶⁴ Transl. J. Henderson, *Aristophanes: Birds, Lysistrata, Women at the Thesmophoria* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

⁶⁵ A.H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Thesmophoriazusae* (Warminster, 1994), 189. Also C. Austin and S.D. Olson, *Aristophanes Thesmophoriazusae* (Oxford, 2004), 206.

⁶⁶ For more on the personification of containers in Aristophanes, J. Taillardat, *Les Images d’Aristophane: études de langue et de style* (Paris, 1965), 139–40.

⁶⁷ B.B. Rogers, *The Ecclesiazusae of Aristophanes* (London, 1917), 117 explicates this ritual procession.

⁶⁸ Transl. J. Henderson, *Aristophanes: Frogs, Assemblywomen, Wealth* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

⁶⁹ Henderson (n. 26), 143. Rogers (n. 67), 117 offers a less plausible explanation: ‘If the part could be taken by a slave (which, however, is hardly probable), it might be conjectured that there is an allusion here to Ethiopian slaves, who (some years later at least) were considered very fashionable at Athens.’

Again, in the *Ecclesiazusae*: the Second Old Woman tells Epigenes that he will ‘manage to man two boats with a single oar’ (another sexual metaphor)⁷⁰ ‘just fine—after you’ve wolfed down a χύτρα of love bulbs’ (1091–2). These aphrodisiac bulbs, Sommerstein comments, were shaped like testicles—the image is of a container of testicles. But that is not all χύτραι contained: Aristophanes cites pots of vegetable soup, ἔτνος, which ‘can refer to vaginal secretion’⁷¹ and ‘appears’, Henderson notes, ‘in obscene banquet catalogues’.⁷² In the *Frogs*, Persephone’s maid reports to the slave Xanthias, disguised as Heracles: ‘When the goddess heard you’d come, she started baking bread, heating two or three pots of split-pea soup [χύτρας ἔτνου], barbecuing a whole ox, and baking [ῥῥα] pies [πλακοῦντας],⁷³ dinner rolls too’ (504–7). As Sommerstein observes, that a goddess is doing all the work herself suggests a ‘desperate’, lust-fuelled eagerness to entertain Heracles.⁷⁴ While she awaits the anticipated sexual encounter, Persephone prepares euphemistic ‘food’: she makes ‘pots’ of ‘pea soup’ and she ‘bakes’—a ‘very popular term ... for sexual incendiarism’⁷⁵—her ‘pies’, a word denoting female genitals.⁷⁶ Similarly, in the *Birds*, the Slave reports how his formerly human master will ‘get a craving for [ἐρῶ] fish fry [ἀφύας] from Phalerum [Φαληρικᾶς], and I grab the pan [τρύβλιον] and run out for the fish. Or he’ll want lentil soup [ἔτνου], we need a ladle [τορύνῃς] and tureen [χύτρας], so I run for the ladle’ (76–9).⁷⁷ ἀφύα is a common epithet for courtesans,⁷⁸ and these are ἀφύα from Phalerum, an obvious pun on φαλλός,⁷⁹ to be served in a τρύβλιον, a word commonly used in descriptions of cunnilingus.⁸⁰ It seems that this Slave is being sent on missions to bring back the necessary ingredients and implements of a sexual encounter, including a χύτρα for the production of ἔτνος. And finally, if the metaphorical use of pots of soup remains too subtle, let us return to the *Ecclesiazusae*, where it is said that ‘the littlest girls are boiling pots of pea soup [χύτρας ἔτνου], and Smoeus is with them in his riding suit [ὑπικτὴν στολήν], licking the women’s bowls [τρύβλια] clean’ (845–7).⁸¹ It will not go unnoticed that the man eating the ‘pea soup’ is dressed to ride ‘horses’.

We will later learn that a bowl of ἔτνος is precisely the sort of thing Socrates has in mind when he introduces the χύτρα in the *Hippias Major*: ‘when someone boils the χύτρα we just mentioned, the beautiful one, full of beautiful bean soup [ἔτνου καλοῦ], is a gold stirring spoon [τορύνῃ] or a figwood one more appropriate?’ (290d7–9). As Tarrant points out, ἔτνος ‘is a comedy word, not used by Plato’;⁸² moreover, this is the only other instance in the extant literature before the Common

⁷⁰ A.H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Ecclesiazusae* (Warminster, 1998), 231.

⁷¹ A.H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Lysistrata* (Warminster, 1990), 209. Cf. Ar. *Lys.* 1061.

⁷² Henderson (n. 26), 145.

⁷³ Translation emended for literalness.

⁷⁴ A.H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Frogs* (Warminster, 1996), 202.

⁷⁵ Henderson (n. 26), 178.

⁷⁶ Henderson (n. 26), 144.

⁷⁷ Transl. Henderson (n. 64), slightly adapted.

⁷⁸ C.A. Shaw, “‘Genitalia of the sea’: seafood and sexuality in Greek comedy”, *Mnemosyne* 67 (2014), 554–76, at 570–1. For fish as female genitalia, Henderson (n. 26), 142, 144.

⁷⁹ Henderson (n. 26), 112–13.

⁸⁰ Henderson (n. 26), 143.

⁸¹ For ἔτνου here, Henderson (n. 26), 145 and Sommerstein (n. 70), 211. For ‘licking the women’s bowls clean’, Henderson (n. 26), 143 and Sommerstein (n. 71), 212. Henderson (n. 26), 144 also finds double entendres in the preceding list of food, though Sommerstein is sceptical.

⁸² Tarrant (n. 4), 54.

Era of χύτρα and ἔτνος falling within even twenty words of each other. By introducing the χύτρα of ἔτνος, is Socrates invoking an obscene Aristophanic trope—a trope that shocks Hippias, who exclaims, in comic fashion:⁸³ ‘Heracles! What kind of man is this! Won’t you tell me who he is?’ (290d10–e1).

One more passage to convince us that this is so—the culinary contest in Aristophanes’ *Knights* (1168–76):⁸⁴

SAUSAGE-SELLER: And I’ve got this spoon bread [μυστίλας], indented by the ivory hand [χειρὶ πῖλεφαντίνῃ] of the Goddess.

DEMOS: Sovereign Goddess, you must have a very big finger [δάκτυλον]!

PAPHLAGON: I’ve got pea soup [ἔτνος], fragrant and καλόν. And it was stirred [ἐτόρυνε] by Athena Battler at the Pylisades.

SAUSAGE-SELLER: Demos, I can see with my own eyes that the Goddess watches over you. Just now she’s holding over your head a χύτρα of beef broth [ζωμοῦ].

DEMOS: Of course; do you think there’d still be a city here, if she didn’t visibly hold her χύτρα over us?

Carl Anderson has argued convincingly for a sexual interpretation of this scene, beginning with the phallic scooping of spoonbread implied by μυστίλαι and δάκτυλος.⁸⁵ We are to take ἔτνος (notably described as καλόν) ‘as a double entendre for female love secretions, and ... the verb τορύνειν, “to stir,” as a double entendre for self-stimulation’. The Sausage-Seller’s offering of χύτραν ζωμοῦ, meanwhile, is a further reference to Athena’s secretions—this time, secretions in the service of Athens.⁸⁶ The Sausage-Seller misquotes a famous patriotic elegy by Solon,⁸⁷ replacing χειρὸς, ‘hands’, with χύτραν ζωμοῦ πλέαν: Athena’s self-stimulation protects Athens, and without her χύτρα, Demos agrees, the city would fall.⁸⁸ The particular relevance of this passage, however, lies in line 1169: the big hand doing the self-stimulation is said to be made of ivory, ἐλεφαντίνῃ. In other words, it is the hand of Pheidias’ statue of Athena Parthenos in the Parthenon⁸⁹—the very statue Socrates later brings up in response to Hippias’ answer that τὸ καλόν is gold, right before asking about the appropriate ladle, τορύνῃ, for a χύτρα of ἔτνος (290a8–b8). Socrates is subtly alluding to what we might imagine was an oft-quoted Aristophanic line: the obscene perversion of Solon’s elegy.

A final word on Socrates’ first mention of the χύτρα: after Hippias reacts in horror, Socrates elaborates on what makes the χύτρα something καλόν. ‘If the pot should have been turned by a good potter, smooth [λεία] and round [στρογγύλη] and beautifully fired [ὥπτημένη], like some of those two-handled [δίωτοι] pots that hold six choes, very beautiful ones—if he’s asking about a pot like that, we have to agree it’s beautiful’ (288d6–e1). Socrates describes the χύτρα as one might describe a woman: smooth and

⁸³ Tarrant (n. 4), 54.

⁸⁴ Transl. J. Henderson, *Aristophanes: Acharnians, Knights* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

⁸⁵ C.A. Anderson, ‘Athena’s big finger: an unnoticed sexual joke in Aristophanes’ *Knights*’, *CPh* 103 (2008), 175–81.

⁸⁶ Anderson (n. 85), 179: ‘The metaphorical uses of ζωμός point to plundering the allied states.’ For ζωμός as vaginal secretion, Henderson (n. 26), 145.

⁸⁷ For Solon, fr. 4.1–4 W., A.H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Knights* (Warminster, 1981), 205.

⁸⁸ Anderson (n. 85), 180.

⁸⁹ Sommerstein (n. 87), 205.

round, with two ‘handles’; indeed, the word λεία is specifically associated with femininity.⁹⁰ Moreover, the χύτρα is said to be beautifully fired, ὀπτημένη—a word, we saw in our discussion of Ar. *Ran.* 504–7, commonly used to describe sexual excitement.⁹¹ On one level, then, Socrates is asking about a pot, but, on the other, he is asking about a woman who is fired up and ready to cook ‘soup’.

A mare, a lyre and a pot: each individually carries sexual undertones, but it is the combination and build-up of the three, in the context of an already comedic dialogue, that clinches the interpretation—especially once we consider the consequences of that interpretation for our understanding of Socrates’ argument.

III. THE ARGUMENT

Before Socrates brings up the mare, the lyre and the pot, he asks Hippias, in the voice of the anonymous Questioner: “All those things you say are beautiful, will they be beautiful if the Beautiful itself is *what?*” (288a8–9). Then: ἐγὼ δὲ δὴ ἐρῶ ὅτι εἰ παρθένος καλὴ καλόν, ἔστι δι’ ὃ ταῦτ’ ἂν εἴη καλὰ; ‘Shall I say that, if a beautiful girl is a beautiful thing, those things will be beautiful because of that?’ (288a9–11). George Grube emends and translates the second question: εἰ παρθένος καλὴ καλόν ἔστι, διὰ τοῦτ’ ἂν εἴη καλὰ; ‘Am I to answer that, if a beautiful maiden is the Beautiful, it is through this that they are beautiful?’⁹² Either way, scholars generally agree, Socrates wants to know whether the beautiful girl, *qua* the Beautiful, can serve to explain why beautiful things are beautiful.⁹³

The standard interpretations, however, are unable to provide a coherent account of what follows.⁹⁴ According to Woodruff, the second question is actually an implicit argument, with ‘the obvious suppressed premise ... that no [beautiful] girl is general enough: there is not a [beautiful] girl in every [beautiful] law or every [beautiful] activity recommended for the young’.⁹⁵ Socrates’ list of examples, then, marks the beginning of a separate, unrelated argument: the beautiful girl is not *strictly* beautiful, because just as a beautiful pot is not beautiful when compared to a beautiful girl, so a beautiful girl is not beautiful when compared to a god. Russell Dancy, on the other hand, proposes that the two questions set up an implicit argument involving the list of examples: if a horse, a lyre and a pot can be beautiful, then being a beautiful girl is not a necessary condition for being beautiful.⁹⁶ However, the argument goes in an ‘unexpected direction’ when Socrates focusses not on necessary conditions but instead on the fact that the beautiful girl is ugly in comparison to a god.⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Henderson (n. 26), 220.

⁹¹ See page 145 and n. 75.

⁹² G.M.A. Grube, ‘Notes on the *Hippias Major*’, *CR* 40 (1926), 188–9.

⁹³ E.g. Woodruff (n. 1), 51, 150; Dancy (n. 6), 161; Heitsch (n. 5), 61, 64.

⁹⁴ I follow D.C. Lee, ‘Dialectic and disagreement in the *Hippias Major*’, *OSAPh* 38 (2010), 1–35, in taking Woodruff (n. 1) and Dancy (n. 6) as representative of two standard ways of interpreting the passage.

⁹⁵ Woodruff (n. 1), 49.

⁹⁶ Dancy (n. 6), 161–2.

⁹⁷ Dancy (n. 6), 163–5. It might be hoped that this ‘unexpected direction’ amounts to a proof that being a beautiful girl is not a sufficient condition for being beautiful and therefore that Socrates *does* argue coherently: he proves that being a beautiful girl is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition. However, Socrates shows no interest in a failure of sufficiency, as Dancy himself observes ([n. 6], 165–6); rather, he is concerned with proving that the beautiful girl is not paradigmatically beautiful.

By both accounts, we end up with two abruptly disjointed arguments, the first of which is implicit and based solely on specific interpretations of the general causal connection indicated by δι' ὃ or διὰ τοῦτ'.⁹⁸ Woodruff and Dancy explain neither why Socrates makes his first argument only implicitly nor why he makes two separate arguments in the first place. In response to every other answer Hippias proposes, Socrates provides only one argument. Why should this time be different? As David Lee writes in his takedown of Woodruff and Dancy, we should strive for a 'more unified interpretative hypothesis which accounts for the text without introducing other factors'.⁹⁹

Lee's own hypothesis, however, falls short for other reasons. According to Lee, Hippias is not proposing that the beautiful girl actually is the Beautiful; he is proposing a theory that can explain what makes her beautiful. The beautiful girl is merely an example Hippias uses to illustrate his theory of explanation, the theory that 'anything fine can be cited as an adequate explanation of its own fineness'.¹⁰⁰ Lee does not elaborate; he states only that Hippias 'holds that an adequate explanation of the girl's fineness can begin and end by pointing to the girl herself'.¹⁰¹

Lee unifies the text under one argument: after Hippias answers Socrates' questions at 288a8–11 in earnest, Socrates introduces other examples to demonstrate that Hippias' theory can only go so far—it cannot explain why one thing is more beautiful than another. This leads us, however, to the first of two fatal flaws in Lee's account: Socrates' argument does not actually disprove Hippias' alleged theory of explanation. Socrates proves that Hippias' theory cannot do all the explanatory work Hippias would like it to do (it cannot explain why one thing is more beautiful than another), but he inadvertently leaves open the possibility that the theory can still make sense of what Hippias initially set out to explain: that is, what makes the beautiful girl beautiful. Hippias' answer to τί ἐστὶ τὸ καλόν—the motivating question of the dialogue—remains legitimate.

Second, Lee's reading requires us to attribute to Hippias a level of sophistication far beyond his capabilities at this point in the dialogue. Hippias can rattle off names and calculations, but there is no indication that he develops abstract theories. In response to τί ἐστὶ τὸ καλόν he gives us 'gold' and 'burying your parents'—a material object and an activity. It is Socrates who puts forward more abstract ideas and categories: 'the appropriate', 'the useful', 'the beneficial', the 'pleasures through hearing and sight'.

Anticipating this objection, Lee highlights Hippias' comments at the end, when he accuses Socrates of 'knocking away at the Beautiful and the other beings by taking each separately and cutting it up with words. Because of that you don't realize how great they are—naturally continuous bodies of being' (301b4–7). According to Lee, the passage implies that Hippias holds 'broader theoretical commitments'.¹⁰² Even if this is true, Hippias did not necessarily hold the commitments at the beginning of the dialogue; on the contrary, he seems to have developed them in direct response to Socrates' methodology. Moreover, there is no indication that the commitments pertain to the kind of theory of explanation Lee wishes to attribute to Hippias. Rather, when,

⁹⁸ Woodruff (n. 1) suggests that to be the cause of their beauty, the beautiful girl must be 'in' beautiful things (he does not specify what this means), and Dancy (n. 6) looks for a necessary condition where none has been mentioned.

⁹⁹ Lee (n. 94), 26.

¹⁰⁰ Lee (n. 94), 13.

¹⁰¹ Lee (n. 94), 13.

¹⁰² Lee (n. 94), 17. Woodruff (n. 1), 85–6 questions the philosophical merit of the passage.

as Lee observes, Hippias reiterates his accusation against Socrates at 304a5–6, he immediately goes on to say that what is beautiful is ‘to be able to present a speech well and finely ... to convince them and go home carrying not the smallest but the greatest of prizes, the successful defence of yourself, your property, and friends. One should stick to that’ (304a6–b4). Hippias does not oppose Socrates’ methodology with a methodology rooted in some theory of explanation; he opposes it with the assertion that we should ‘stick to’ calling a particular activity beautiful. The implication is that Hippias has been interested in the beauty of particulars all along. He is not interested in theorizing explanation.

An erotic reading of Socrates’ first argument accomplishes what no other interpretation can: (1) a unified account of the passage that (2) allows for Socrates’ successful refutation of (3) a proposal in keeping with Hippias’ character. It also explains (4) Socrates’ choice of the three examples—in particular, the rarely cited χύτρα—and (5) Hippias’ otherwise inexplicable reaction to the χύτρα, as well as (6) the analogous relationship of monkeys and men to pots and girls, a subject ignored by other scholars.

“All those things you say are beautiful, will they be beautiful if the Beautiful itself is *what?*” Shall I say that, if a beautiful girl is a beautiful thing, those things will be beautiful because of that?” Since Hippias does not retract his proposal in response to this line of questioning, Socrates sets out to demonstrate what, exactly, it would mean for the beautiful girl to be the cause of things’ being beautiful.¹⁰³ Hippias denies that anyone could say that the beautiful girl is not beautiful (288b1–3). Accordingly, Socrates treats her as a paradigm for other beautiful things: other things are beautiful because they resemble this thing that is indisputably beautiful.¹⁰⁴ The resemblance will not be merely visual: the beautiful girl, we found in Part I, is deemed beautiful in so far as she is an object of sexual desire. If she is the paradigm, then beautiful things will resemble her in her functional capacity as an object of sexual desire. Socrates thus enlists well-known sexual metaphors. A horse, a lyre and a pot resemble a beautiful girl enough to serve as effective surrogates for her in comedy largely because they are treated as she is treated—ridden, plucked and fired for the production of soup. They can therefore help paint a picture of the beautiful girl as paradigm for sexualized beauty: if they are beautiful, a case could be made, they are beautiful because they resemble her.

If they are beautiful. Even as he takes seriously Hippias’ proposal, Socrates is preparing to quash it through *reductio ad absurdum*. His examples of items that may be said to be beautiful because they resemble a beautiful girl are, to begin with, innocuous—it is perfectly reasonable to call a mare or lyre beautiful. But there is no record of anyone referring to a χύτρα as καλή in the extant literature before the Common Era except for Socrates in this passage.¹⁰⁵ It is absurd to call a common

¹⁰³ Like Dancy (n. 6), 160, I take it that however Hippias intends his answer (see my nn. 5–7 above) Socrates treats it seriously.

¹⁰⁴ Dancy (n. 6), 120: ‘where we look for a paradigm for *F*s, we look for something, possibly repeatable, that possesses in a paradigmatic way, indefeasibly, the features that make something an *F*. For the girl as an explanatory paradigm, Dancy (n. 6), 158–66. Dancy, however, is unable to link this with the horse, the lyre and the pot.

¹⁰⁵ A possible exception is in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* (8.19.4–8.20.1), when Ischomachus, after describing how beautiful it is to see various household items arranged neatly, remarks that it is beautiful to see even pots, καὶ χύτρας, placed in good order. However, what is καλόν here is not a χύτρα but the *arrangement* of χύτραι. As Sider writes, ‘This ... seems less an aesthetic judgment than the pleasure expressed by a fussy housekeeper who believes in a place for everything and

piece of cookery beautiful ... and yet, if beauty is dependent on resemblance to a beautiful girl, then, Socrates suggests, the χύτρα, too, with its fired-up, smooth, round body, must be beautiful. After balking at the vulgar metaphor, Hippias is forced to admit that even the pot is beautiful, but he adds a caveat: the pot is 'not worth judging beautiful, compared to a horse and a girl and all the other beautiful things' (288e7–9). With this observation, Hippias has fallen squarely into Socrates' trap. Just as monkeys are foul in comparison to men, so pots are foul in comparison to girls, Socrates reasons, but aren't both men and girls foul in comparison to gods? (289a1–b7). The girl is not strictly beautiful, and so she cannot be the paradigm for beautiful things: she cannot be the Beautiful.¹⁰⁶ Socrates has, at last, refuted Hippias' first answer.

Crucially, though, a complete understanding of this argument rests on the erotic reading of χύτρα. Socrates aligns the comparison between pots and girls with the Heraclitean comparison between monkeys and men. Monkeys and men may be compared (and, indeed, often are—as, for instance, at Ar. *Ach.* 120, *Pax* 1065) because there is a certain resemblance between them: monkeys are humanlike, in appearance and in behaviour. But if Socrates' pot is just a pot and not a metaphor, then what sense does it make to compare it to a girl? Put another way: when Heraclitus says that 'the wisest of men is seen to be a monkey compared to god in wisdom and beauty and everything else' (289b4–5), we understand the image. But what if we replaced 'men' and 'monkey' with 'girls' and 'pot', as Socrates' analogy suggests we could? 'The wisest of girls is seen to be a pot compared to god in wisdom and beauty and everything else.' This comparison makes little sense—unless we are talking not about a pot but about a 'pot': a feminine object that may be invoked metaphorically with reference to a sexualized woman, just as 'monkey' may be used as a derogatory epithet for a boorish man. Our erotic reading demystifies an otherwise enigmatic analogy.

The erotic reading illuminates Socrates' argument, resolving difficulties found in other interpretations. But why does Plato have Socrates employ metaphorical obscenities? First, we found, it heightens the absurdity of Hippias, exposing him as a pleasure-seeking fool with no knowledge of the Beautiful. Second, it facilitates serious consideration of what it would mean for a beautiful girl to be the Beautiful: in so far as they are metaphors for sexualized women, the three examples may actually be understood as deriving their beauty from the beautiful girl, but this leads to a *reductio ad absurdum* that culminates in the determination that a beautiful girl is not strictly beautiful and is therefore not the Beautiful. Finally, it provides a neat transition between Socrates' argument against the girl and his next argument, against gold: as if making a clever nod to the first argument, he references in his discussion of gold both Pheidias' Athena (notably, Athena Παρθένος), known in comedy for her χύτρα, and the ladle for a χύτρα of ἔτινος. Gold, we saw, even Socrates himself is inclined to find beautiful, and so it does not

everything in its place. Socrates' aesthetic appreciation of a humble *chytra*, therefore, seems to be without literary parallel' (Sider [n. 5], 467–8). Moreover, to the extent that Ischomachus may be said to be calling χύτρας beautiful, he is highlighting the absurdity of the appellation, both by noting that a refined (κομψός) man would laugh (καταγελάσειεν) at it and by qualifying χύτρας with the word καί, 'even', as if to suggest that pots are the least likely of household items to be deemed beautiful. Another possible exception is Aristophanes' fr. 487 K.–A., where the adjectives χυτρεία and καλή are applied to the same λήκυθος. We have little context for this passage, but it is clear enough that a χυτρεία, καλή λήκυθος is different from a καλή χύτρα.

¹⁰⁶ Dancy (n. 6), 166: 'whatever explains the application of "beautiful" to all and only the things that are beautiful must itself be beautiful'.

provoke from him the raunchy, comic response that the beautiful girl did, but with these subtle references he continues to poke a little fun at his interlocutor.

'When correctly viewed, everything is lewd.' So sang Tom Lehrer in his 1965 hit 'Smut', and it may be true. However, there is compelling reason to believe that Socrates' argument in the *Hippias Major* is not accidentally lewd, as everything can be, but deliberately lewd ... and to great philosophic effect.

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