

Diskin Clay

The Art of Platonic Quotation

In this anatomy of the philosophical art of quotation in the Platonic dialogues I argue three propositions: first, that when Plato quotes from a poet he has in mind and expects his reader to have in mind the full context of the passage from which he quotes; second, that, for all the Socratic criticisms of poetry in the Platonic dialogues, Plato suggests the possibility of a deeper reading of the passages Socrates either cites or holds up for criticism; and third, that Plato is capable of deliberate misquotation as an illustration of the dangers of an argument.

1. Socrates quotations of passages from Homer's Iliad in the Apology and Crito and his sustained allusions to Euripides' Antiope depend for their meaning on the reader's recalling the full context from which they are taken. Both Apology 28C (with its allusion to Iliad 18.95-99) and Crito 44B (with its allusion to Iliad 9.357-63) become meaningful in light of the paradigm of Achilles' heroism that is recast to establish Socrates as the philosopher heros. The sustained allusions to Euripides' agon between Zethos and Amphion and their respective ways of life (bioi) are meaningful as Plato has applied them to Kallikles and Socrates and the irresolvable antagonism between the political and philosophical life. This argument is initiated by Andrea Nightingale ("Plato's Gorgias and Euripides' Antiope, Classical Antiquity 11 [1992] 121-41). I would take this argument a step further and assess the meaning of the Euripidean deus ex machina (Hermes) for the Gorgias, which has no such tidy ending.
2. In Republic 3.378D Socrates brings up only to dismiss the possibility that the poetry of Homer conceals deeper meanings. His word is hyponoia. This possibility is illustrated in the progress of the dialogue. At first, Achilles' grim words on the vanity of ruling as lord over the dead (Odyssey 9.489-491) is rejected as inspiring cowardice in the young guardian (Republic 3.386C). But when he has reached the philosophical heart of his argument, Socrates quotes this same passage to show how insubstantial life on this earth is; he portrays it as life in Hades (Republic 7.516D).
3. I choose two quotations from poetry to show how misquotation is meaningful in the interpretation of the Platonic dialogues: the first is Socrates' notorious treatment of Simonides' skolion to Skopas in Protagoras 339B-346E (PMG 542 Page). Through Socrates' willful misinterpretation of this poem, Plato is subtly illustrating Protagoras' relativism and his position that "man [meaning each individual] is the measure of all things." In the Gorgias, Plato has Kallikles cite Pindar's startling illustration of the proverb nomos basileus ("custom is king") by the violence of Herakles stealing the cattle of Geryon (484B; Pindar fr. 152

Snell). Kallikles perverse reading of the text of Pindar illustrates Plato's point; Kallikles has high handedly done violence to Pindar.