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978-0-521-54600-3 - Plato: Gorgias, Menexenus, Protagoras

Edited by Malcolm Schofield

Excerpt

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Gorgias

Dramatis personae

Dates of birth and death given below are conjectural, except for Socrates.

CALLICLES His boyfriend Demos, son of Plato's stepfather Pylilampes, was in Dodds's words (*Plato: Gorgias*, p.261, relying here primarily on Aristophanes' *Wasps* 98) 'a leading beauty about 422'. On usual assumptions about relative ages of lover and beloved, we might infer that Callicles was probably in his mid to late twenties at the same point in time. Although his ambition to succeed in politics makes Socrates describe him as lover of the Athenian demos (punning on Demos), this behaviour must be interpreted as opportunistic on Callicles' part. The views Plato attributes to him are anything but democratic. And it is probably significant that of the friends of Callicles mentioned at 487c, one at least – Andron – is known to have been a member of the short-lived oligarchic regime of the Four Hundred in 411, and the other two probably to be identified with Athenians known from other evidence to have been wealthy men. There is no trace of Callicles in history outside the *Gorgias*. It seems likely that for whatever reason his ambitions were unfulfilled.

CHAEREPHON (467–401) One of Socrates' oldest and closest friends, and a well-known figure in the Athens of the Peloponnesian War, frequently the topic of jokes on the comic stage, perhaps in part because of his demonic energy (*Apology* 21a, *Charmides* 153b).

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Aristophanes treats him as Socrates' partner in running the bogus philosophical school portrayed in the *Clouds* of 423 BC. Plato's *Apology* tells us that it is he who consults the Delphic oracle and is told that there is nobody wiser than Socrates. Chaerephon went into exile with other democrats when the regime of the Thirty seized political control in Athens in 404, and was among those who returned under the leadership of Thrasybulus the following year. But by the time of Socrates' trial (399) he was dead.

GORGIAS (485–380) In 427 led a delegation to Athens from his home city of Leontini in Sicily to enlist support against its neighbour Syracuse. His speech on that occasion is said to have dazzled the Athenians with what was to them its novel use of balancing antitheses, assonance, and rhyming endings. These and other artifices are apparent in his surviving display orations, especially *Defence of Palamedes* and *Encomium of Helen*, and were hugely influential on writers as diverse as Agathon (who is made to speak Gorgianic prose at its most relentless at *Symposium* 197c–e), Thucydides, Lysias, and Isocrates. The *Gorgias* is clearly reacting against Gorgias's basic conception of the art of speech as 'incantatory power' enchanting, persuading, and transporting the soul by its 'bewitchment' (*Helen* 10). The fictitious second visit to Athens that the dialogue stages, perhaps fifteen or so years on from 427, imagines what might be the logical sequel to the first – as an occasion not for enchantment, but for vigorous disagreement.

POLUS A professional teacher of rhetoric, like his idol Gorgias from Sicily, though in his case from the city of Acragas (modern Agrigento). He is portrayed in the *Gorgias* as thoroughly convinced that rhetoric is the key to power, although there is no strong suggestion that he had political ambitions for himself. Polus is a young man: Socrates puns on his name – he behaves like the colt (*pólos*) that he is (463e). However, he is spoken of as already the author of a handbook on rhetoric (462b), and the speech to Chaerephon about the basis of the arts and sciences that Plato gives him at 448c is obviously designed to give a flavour of what the book was like. Elsewhere Socrates quotes some of his technical vocabulary: 'reduplication', 'sententiousness', 'imagery' (*Phaedrus* 267b–c). Whether Polus's book would really have been available for Socrates to read in (say) 410 BC, or alternatively a fourth century production, is impossible to know, given Plato's insouciance in matters of chronological consistency.

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Dramatis personae

SOCRATES (469–369) The *Gorgias*'s Socrates resembles the Socrates of the *Apology* and the *Crito* in holding firm views about the philosophical life (to which his passionate commitment is explicit), and about what it requires of us, especially in regard to justice and injustice. In its way, the *Gorgias* is as much preoccupied with his trial and death as are those earlier works. On the other hand, as the sophistic intellectual style seems to rub off on Socrates himself in the *Protagoras*, so too does the rhetorical style of his interlocutors in the *Gorgias*. Although Socrates here deprecates the use of long speeches instead of proper conversation, Plato makes him quite self-consciously adopt this mode of argument himself, and in fact there is a great deal of sustained Socratic rhetoric of various sorts (including allegory and myth) in the later stages of the dialogue.

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Analysis

447a–e – The initial encounter

447c–461b – Conversation with Gorgias

- 447c–449c: Gorgias's art: rhetoric
- 449c–451a: Defining rhetoric: speech
- 451a–453a: Defining rhetoric: persuasion and power
- 453a–455a: Defining rhetoric: the function of persuasion
- 455a–457c: Defining rhetoric: its universal scope and moral status
- 457c–458e: Interlude: the nature of philosophical discussion
- 458e–459c: Examining rhetoric: persuading without knowledge
- 459c–461b: Examining rhetoric: knowledge of justice and injustice, and its consequences for rhetoric

461b–481b – Conversation with Polus

- 461b–463a: Socrates on rhetoric: an unscientific technique for producing pleasure – sycophancy
- 463b–466a: Socrates on rhetoric: classification of forms of sycophancy
- 466a–468e: Socrates on power: why orators and tyrants have little power
- 468e–470e: Socrates on power: why justice is key to securing benefit and happiness
- 471a–472c: Interlude: rhetorical and dialectical refutation
- 472d–476a: Proof that doing injustice is worse than suffering it
- 476a–479e: Proof that escaping punishment is worse than being punished
- 480a–481b: Socrates on rhetoric: its proper use is to expose crimes of friends and ensure enemies are not punished

481b–527c – Conversation with Callicles

- 481b–482c: Philosophy vs rhetoric: Socrates' challenge to Callicles
- 482c–484c: Callicles on power
- 484c–486d: Rhetoric vs philosophy: Callicles' reply to Socrates
- 486d–488b: Interlude: Socrates on the real question, of how to live one's life
- 488b–491d: Examining Callicles' thesis: who are the better and superior?
- 491d–492e: Callicles on the power to satisfy one's desire
- 492e–494e: Socrates' critique (i): the leaky jar analogy

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- 495a–497d: Socrates' critique (ii): proof that because pleasure and pain can coexist, hedonism is false
 - 497d–499b: Socrates' critique (iii): proof that courage and wisdom would be devalued if hedonism is true
 - 499b–500a: Callicles abandons hedonism
 - 500a–503d: Distinguishing good from bad rhetoric: critique of rhetoric as sycophancy
 - 503d–505b: Distinguishing good from bad rhetoric: order and justice and restraint in the soul
 - 505b–506c: Interlude: Callicles withdraws from the conversation
 - 506c–509a: Socrates recapitulates and develops his thesis that happiness comes from restraint and justice
 - 509b–c: Power: Callicles agrees that inability to avert what harms us most is most shameful
 - 509c–511a: Power: friendship with tyrants or the current regime
 - 511a–513c: Rhetoric: if self-preservation is the goal, sycophancy is the only option for the orator
 - 513c–515b: Politics: the real test of a politician is, has he made the citizens better?
 - 515b–519a: Politics: the test is failed by Themistocles, Pericles, and other celebrated Athenian politicians
 - 519b–520e: Politics: the analogy between politicians and sophists
 - 521a–522e: Politics: Socrates is the only true politician in Athens, incapable of saving his life by sycophancy
 - 523a–524a: The myth: narrative
 - 524a–525d: The myth: the way punishment benefits the soul
 - 525c–527a: The myth: prospects for politicians and philosophers
 - 527a–e: Resumé of the entire argument of the dialogue

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Gorgias

CALLICLES: You're in nice time, Socrates. For a war or battle, as the saying goes. 447

SOCRATES: Does that mean we're too late? Have we missed the feast, as they say?

CALLICLES: Yes, and what a feast of culture it was! Gorgias has just been putting on a wonderfully varied demonstration for us.

SOCRATES: Not my fault, Callicles. Blame Chaerephon here. He kept us hanging around in the agora.¹

CHAEREPHON: Don't worry, Socrates. Let me also be the one to put things right. Gorgias is a friend of mine. He'll put on a demonstration for us – now, if you like, or, if you prefer, some other time.

CALLICLES: Is that it, Chaerephon? Does Socrates want to hear Gorgias?

CHAEREPHON: That's exactly what we are here for.

CALLICLES: Well, any time you care to come here to my house. Gorgias is staying with me. He'll put on a demonstration for you.

SOCRATES: Thank you, Callicles. But would he be prepared to have a discussion with us? I want to learn from him what the power of the man's art is, and what it is he promises and teaches. The other stuff – the demonstration – well, he can put that on another time, as you suggest. c

CALLICLES: Nothing like asking the man himself, Socrates. Indeed, that was one feature of his demonstration. He's just been telling the people indoors to ask whatever question any of them wanted, and saying he would answer all questions.²

SOCRATES: That's a good suggestion. Ask him, Chaerephon.

CHAEREPHON: Ask him what?

SOCRATES: What he is. d

CHAEREPHON: What do you mean?

¹ The agora was the main public space at or near the centre of an ancient Greek city, where people would congregate and talk, and where a good deal of commercial exchange took place. Hanging about in the agora is characteristic of the demotic component of Socrates' lifestyle.

² Socrates and Chaerephon have evidently made for a gymnasium or other public building where a lecture by Gorgias has been advertised. They appear to have met Callicles emerging, ahead of Gorgias (and no doubt others of the company), perhaps in the portico of the building. But Gorgias has by now come out himself, and is free enough of immediate company for Chaerephon to be able to put a question to him without any preamble.

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SOCRATES: Well, suppose he were in fact a maker of shoes, the reply he'd give, I imagine, would be that he was a leather cutter. Or do you not see what I'm getting at?

CHAEREPHON: No, I do see. I'll ask him. Tell me, Gorgias, is Callicles here telling the truth when he says you promise to answer whatever question anyone asks you?

448 GORGIAS: Yes, Chaerephon, he is telling the truth. That is indeed exactly the promise I was making just now. And I can tell you that it's many years now since anybody asked me anything new.

CHAEREPHON: In that case, Gorgias, I'm sure you'll have no trouble answering.

GORGIAS: By all means put it to the test, Chaerephon.

POLUS: For heaven's sake, Chaerephon. Why not ask me, if it's all the same to you? Gorgias has just been explaining all sorts of things. He's really had enough, in my view.

CHAEREPHON: What, Polus? You think you can answer better than Gorgias?

b POLUS: Does that matter, if my answer's good enough for you?

CHAEREPHON: Not in the least. If that's what you want, you answer.

POLUS: Ask away.

CHAEREPHON: Very well, here goes. If Gorgias were in fact an expert in the science³ in which his brother Herodicus is an expert, what would be the right thing for us to call him? Wouldn't we call him the same thing we call Herodicus?⁴

POLUS: We certainly would.

CHAEREPHON: In which case, we wouldn't go far wrong in calling him a doctor.

POLUS: Indeed.

CHAEREPHON: And if he were an expert in the art practised by Aristophon the son of Aglaophon, or his brother, what would be the correct thing for us to call him?

³ 'Science' here translates Greek *technê*, from which English 'technical', 'technique', 'technology' derive. Sometimes 'art' or 'art and/or science' is more appropriate. 'Craft' or 'skill' (but see 462c below) might on occasion be a workable rendering. Polus's thesis that 'experience is what makes science' (in Aristotle's formulation: *Metaph.* 1.1, 981a3–5) may have been inspired by ideas of the Presocratic Anaxagoras: see further notes on 462c, 465d.

⁴ This Herodicus is not to be confused with the more famous physician of the same name (mentioned at *Protagoras* 316e). Gorgias reintroduces his brother into the conversation later on (456a–b). Aristophon's more famous brother was the painter Polygnotus, an associate of the Athenian politician Cimon.

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POLUS: A painter, obviously. c

CHAEREPHON: As it is, however, since he is – well, what art or science is he an expert in? What *would* be the right thing for us to call him?

POLUS: Chaerephon, there are many arts and sciences among men. They have been discovered experimentally, through experiences. Experience makes our life advance scientifically, lack of experience haphazardly. Among all these arts and sciences, some people are involved in one, some in another, but the best are the preserve of the best people, of whom Gorgias here is one, and the art he is involved in the finest there is.⁵

SOCRATES: Well, that's quite a way with words Polus seems to have developed, Gorgias. For what it's worth. But he's not keeping his promise to Chaerephon.

GORGAS: How exactly is he not keeping it, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I don't think he's even begun to answer the question that was asked.

GORGAS: *You* ask him then, if you prefer.

SOCRATES: Not if you're willing to answer yourself. I'd much rather ask you. It's quite obvious, even from the little he has said, that Polus has had more practice at what is known as rhetoric than at discussing things.

POLUS: Why, Socrates? e

SOCRATES: Because, Polus, Chaerephon asked you what art or science Gorgias was expert in, and you make a speech in praise of his art – as if someone were criticising it – but you didn't answer the question '*what is it?*'

POLUS: Yes, I did. Didn't I say it was the finest?

SOCRATES: That's certainly what you said. But nobody asked what Gorgias' art was like; they asked what it was, and what we should be calling Gorgias. Think of the examples Chaerephon offered you earlier, and the excellent, brief answers you gave him, and in the same way now tell us what Gorgias' art is, and what we should be calling him. Or better, 449 tell us yourself, Gorgias, what we should call you, and on the strength of expertise in what art?

GORGAS: The art of rhetoric, Socrates.

⁵ Polus's reply to Chaerephon is couched in a highly artificial rhetorical style modelled on Gorgias's own (as attested in his surviving display speeches, such as *Encomium of Helen*), in sharp contrast to the informal conversational Greek all speakers have employed up to this point. Socrates regards it as inappropriate for 'discussing things' (compare his contrast at 447b–c between 'demonstration' and 'discussion', *dialegesthai*).

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SOCRATES: In which case we should call you an orator?

GORGIAS: Yes. And a good one, Socrates, if you want to call me what, in Homer's phrase, 'I make it my boast' to be.

SOCRATES: Yes, that's what I want.

GORGIAS: Then call me that.

- b SOCRATES: And are we to say you have the ability to turn others into good orators as well?

GORGIAS: That is exactly what I claim – not just here today, but in other places I've been to as well.⁶

SOCRATES: Well then, Gorgias, would you be prepared to go on with the kind of discussion we are having at the moment – now asking a question, now answering one – and put off to another time the kind of lengthy disquisition Polus made a start on? Be true to your promise, and be prepared to give a short answer to what is being asked.

- c GORGIAS: There are some answers, Socrates, which necessarily call for a lengthy explanation. All the same, I will try to answer as concisely as possible. That is another of my claims, actually, that no-one can match me for conciseness of speech.⁷

SOCRATES: Well, that's certainly what we need, Gorgias. Please give us a demonstration of exactly that – of speaking concisely. Speaking at length can wait for another time.

GORGIAS: I will do that. And you will agree that you have never heard so concise a speaker.

- d SOCRATES: Let's make a start, then. You say you're an expert in the art of rhetoric, and that in addition to that you can turn someone else into an orator as well. Now, this rhetoric – what kind of thing is it actually concerned with? For example, the art of weaving is concerned with the production of clothes, isn't it?

GORGIAS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the art of music with the making of tunes?

GORGIAS: Yes.

SOCRATES: My word, Gorgias, I do like your answers. They are the shortest anyone could possibly give.

GORGIAS: Yes, Socrates, I think I'm making a pretty good job of it.

SOCRATES: And you're right. So come on, give me the same kind of answer about rhetoric as well. What kind of thing is it knowledge of?

⁶ Like Protagoras (*Prot.* 335a; cf. 316c-d), Gorgias draws attention to his success among the Greeks in general.

⁷ Compare Protagoras's reported versatility (*Prot.* 335a).

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GORGIAS: Speaking.

SOCRATES: What sort of speaking? Is it the sort which makes clear to e those who are sick what regimen they must follow if they are to regain their health?

GORGIAS: No.

SOCRATES: In which case, rhetoric is not concerned with *all* speaking.

GORGIAS: No, certainly not.

SOCRATES: Though speaking *is* what it makes people good at.

GORGIAS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And also presumably understanding the things they speak about?

GORGIAS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Now, take the science of medicine we've just been talking 450 about. Does it make people good at understanding and speaking about the sick?

GORGIAS: No question.

SOCRATES: In which case, medicine is also to do with speaking, apparently.

GORGIAS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Speaking about diseases, if nothing else.

GORGIAS: Precisely.

SOCRATES: And the science governing physical training also has to do with speaking – about the fitness or unfitness of our bodies.

GORGIAS: Exactly.

SOCRATES: And the other arts and sciences, too, Gorgias, are the same. Each of them has to do with just that branch of speaking which is con- b cerned with the subject belonging to the particular art or science it is.

GORGIAS: Apparently so.

SOCRATES: Then how come you don't call the other arts which are to do with speaking arts of rhetoric – if you call any art to do with speaking an art of rhetoric?

GORGIAS: Well, Socrates, for the other arts, virtually all their knowledge is to do with manual techniques and activities of that sort, whereas rhetoric has no manual output of that kind. Its whole operation and authority depends on speaking. That's why I hold that the art of rhetoric is about c speaking. And rightly, I maintain.

SOCRATES: So, do I understand now the kind of thing you want to say rhetoric is? Well, I shall soon have a clearer idea. Answer me this: we have arts and sciences, don't we?