

## IS GORGIAS AN EARLY DRAFT OF AN UNFINISHED DIALOGUE?\*

The speeches in *Gorgias* demonstrate Plato's "ability to write in a way which combines to a unique degree dramatic power, convincing characterisation, vitality and elegance."<sup>1</sup> The conversations between Socrates and Gorgias and between Chaerephon and Gorgias display the heights of Athenian urbanity (ἀσπεῖοι λόγοι) whereas the conversation between Socrates and Calicles ultimately dissolves entirely after a descent to unmannerly exchanges. The high literary level of the speeches in *Gorgias* is unchallengeable. My argument that *Gorgias* is an early draft rests on non-literary considerations. The location of the conversation of the interlocutors in *Gorgias* is indeterminate. (The expressed content of the participants' speeches are the core of Plato's dialogues and presumably would have been composed first. Supplying a physical location for the discussions would have been a secondary task). In all early and middle period Platonic dialogues, the locations of the conversations and even the bodily posture of the interlocutors are specified with the possible exception of *Meno* regarding location.<sup>2</sup>

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\* I follow the text of John Burnet, *Platonis Opera*, 1901–06, Oxford. Translations of the text are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth J. Dover, 1978, 1989, *Greek Homosexuality*, 13, Cambridge MA.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Terrence H. Irwin, 2019, "The Platonic Corpus," 69, *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*,<sup>2</sup> Gail Fine ed. Oxford: "Among those that modern students have doubted are *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Menexenus*, *Alcibiades I-II*, *Hipparchus*, *Amatores*, *Theages*, *Clitopho*, *Minos*, and *Epinomis*." Those dialogues of questionable provenance are not discussed in this paper. In *Meno*, Meno is visiting Athens and has been engaged in conversation with Socrates for two or more days. They are seated as is indicated by Socrates noticing Anytus seated nearby at *Men.* 89e10. Apparently Plato felt it necessary to indicate the bodily posture of Socrates and his interlocutors be they seated, standing or reclining. (The locations of the participants' discussions are exactly specified in *Euthyphro*, *Euthydemus*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Protagoras*, *Phaedo*, *Crito*, the *Apology*, the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, the *Symposium* and *Laws*). In *Phaedrus* the interlocutors are represented as seated outdoors outside the city with their feet in the spring of Illissus under a plane tree. In the dialogues which take place in gymnasia (*Charmides*, *Euthydemus*, *Lysis*), and in private homes (*Protagoras*, the *Republic*), the speakers are seated. In the *Symposium*, they are reclining. In *Phaedo*, in prison after his leg-iron is struck off, Socrates sits up from the cot upon which he was lying. In *Crito*, Socrates is chained and apparently conducts his conversation with Crito while supine. Presumably Socrates remains standing in court in the *Apology*.

In *Gorgias*, Chaerephon has delayed Socrates in the *agora* and the pair arrive after Gorgias has delivered a demonstration of rhetoric inside a building perhaps a gymnasium. Socrates and Chaerephon encounter Callicles, Polus and possibly Gorgias all of whom have exited the building leaving the audience inside as is indicated by Callicles' remark at *Gorg.* 447c8 that Gorgias undertook to answer any question that anyone of those *inside* might wish to ask him (ὅτι τις βούλοιοτο τῶν ἔνδον ὄντων). At *Gorg.* 455c6–7, the audience inside the building is referred to again, this time by Socrates: “for it is quite likely that some one of those inside (τις τῶν ἔνδον ὄντων) wishes to become your student.” In a bewildering fashion, the audience of Gorgias' initial demonstration are twice located inside a building (*Gorg.* 447c8, 455c6) and once outside (*Gorg.* 458c3–5) listening directly to Socrates, Gorgias, Polus and Callicles who are outdoors unless Socrates and party are now magically inside.<sup>3</sup> Neither Thompson<sup>4</sup> nor Dodds<sup>5</sup> address this anomaly. However, it is noticed by Fussi:<sup>6</sup> “The spatial framing of the *Gorgias* is indeterminate. All we know is that Socrates, Chaerephon, and some unnamed comrades (*sic*) meet Callicles outside a building and then, as if by magic, find themselves inside it. The movement from outside to inside the building is not described but presupposed by Callicles' reference to ‘τῶν ἔνδον ὄντων’ (those inside) at 447c8.” Although she notices it, Fussi does not offer an explanation of the anomaly. The possible implications of the unexplained transfer of Socrates, Chaerephon, Polus and Callicles from outdoors to indoors (the text at *Gorg.* 458c3–5 may alternatively be read to suggest the transfer of Gorgias' audience from indoors to outdoors) are noted and interpreted by Benardete:<sup>7</sup> “Between the time of Callicles' suggestion that Socrates ask Gorgias himself about whether he is willing to converse and Socrates' telling Chaerephon to ask Gorgias who he is, Socrates, Chaerephon, and Callicles have passed from outside to inside the hall where Gorgias has just finished his display. *Nowhere else in Plato does anyone walk without its being noted in some way* (my emphasis) but here they proceed as if to will was to act and walls vanish at one's pleasure.”

In the process of writing a dialogue, Plato would naturally first compose the speeches which are primary and constitute its core. Inserting into the dialogue the specificities of location where

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<sup>3</sup> At *Gorg.* 458c3-5: Chaerephon says “You hear for yourselves, Gorgias and Socrates, the applause by which these gentlemen show their desire to hear anything you may say” (Translation of Walter Rangeley Maitland Lamb, *Plato III*, 1925, 297, Cambridge, MA.).

<sup>4</sup> William Henry Thompson, 1871, *The “Gorgias” of Plato*, London.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Robertson Dodds, 1959, *Plato “Gorgias,”* Oxford.

<sup>6</sup> Alessandra Fussi, “Why is the *Gorgias* so bitter?”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 33 (2000), 45.

<sup>7</sup> Seth Benardete, 1991, *Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, 9, Chicago.

the discussions take place would be secondary. The indeterminacy of location in *Gorgias* is evidence that the dialogue is unfinished.

There is a second compositional device peculiar to Plato's dialogues, namely the insertion of dramatic incidents and/or remarks which correspond to specific topics addressed in Socrates' speeches and those of his interlocutors elsewhere in a dialogue, sometimes confirming and sometimes refuting a specific opinion. Like the specifications of the location of the conversations, these too would have been worked into dialogues *after* the speeches were composed. A comprehensive examination of Plato's use of that device is beyond the scope of this paper. The following examples may suffice to illustrate its use which, so far as I know, has been overlooked in Platonic scholarship. In *Meno* at 71b8–c2, Meno expresses himself in the *pluralis majestatis*,<sup>8</sup> a mode of speech that employs the first person plural to signal the privilege of aristocratic status thereby contradicting Socrates' assertion at *Men.* 71b4–8 that it is impossible to know that the Thessalian is an aristocrat without knowing who he is. Meno's plural is read differently by Thompson and Klein.<sup>9</sup> At *Charm.* 153a5–6, Socrates tells an

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<sup>8</sup> Surprised by Socrates' avowal of ignorance regarding ἀρετή, Meno asks "if *we* may announce back home (*sc.* your eccentric opinions about ἀρετή)?" (The use of the *pluralis majestatis* survives in modern Western languages). Another instance of the *pluralis majestatis* occurs at *Chrm.* 155a7. Socrates proposes a conversation with Charmides, and asks Critias, an Athenian grandee holding court in the gymnasium of Taureas, to summon the young man. Critias is amenable to that proposal. He replies "We shall summon him."

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Thompson (note 4 above) 68: "The plural is used because Meno is speaking for himself and his party"; Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's "Meno,"* 1965, 1989, 42, Chicago: "Does Socrates really not know what human excellence is, he asks. And he adds, with a sweeping gesture—as we imagine—over the heads of the people who form his retinue and are witnessing the conversation on the spot: 'shall we spread *that* (original emphasis) news about you [which must be known here, in Athens] back home, *too?*'" That Socrates and Meno are engaged in a private conversation, aside Socrates' brief encounter with Anytus in Meno's presence, is indicated by Socrates' insults and scoldings of Meno that would transcend propriety if others were listening. Socrates is quite unpleasant to Protagoras throughout the *Protagoras*, but the insults there are wrapped in irony as is required by the presence of an audience. Plato takes great care in distinguishing private conversations (for example, that of Socrates with Euthyphro on the road to the law court or with Crito in the prison cell) from those with an audience (for example, the attendees

acquaintance that on entering the gymnasium of Taureas after returning from Athens' military campaign at Potidaea, he recognized individuals previously known to him but realized that there were others he was unacquainted with. That incident provides an real world example of knowing what one knows and knowing what one does not know, confirming the proposition that Socrates is at pains to deny later in the dialogue, that an ἐπιστήμη of itself and of ἀνεπιστημοσύνη is possible. At *Prt.* 310d2–3, Socrates' young friend Hippocrates is characterized as possessing ἀνδρεία. Already possessing ἀνδρεία, he yearns to be made wise by Protagoras (*Prt.* 310d5–6) which real world fact refutes Socrates' false assertion that ἀνδρεία is the same as σοφία at *Prt.* 350c4–5 and 360d4–5.

In *Gorgias*, there are two incomplete instances of this literary device. At *Gorg.* 487c1–d2 Socrates remarks:

“I know, Callicles, that four of you have formed a partnership in wisdom . . . and I once overheard you debating how far the cultivation of wisdom should be carried, and I know you were deciding in favor of some such view as this—that one should not be carried away into the minuter points of philosophy, but you exhorted one another to beware of making yourselves overwise, lest you should unwittingly work your own ruin.<sup>10</sup>

Where this conversation took place, indoors or outside, and how Socrates managed to overhear

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at Kallias' house, assembled and seated to hear Socrates converse with Protagoras [*Prt.* 317d5–e3]), or the scum pushing and shoving to sit on the bench on which Charmides is about to sit down [*Chrm.* 155c1–4]). Meno's entourage are menials who keep their distance unless summoned—like the slave-boy who is singled out for Socrates' geometry demonstration—and do not eavesdrop on their master's conversations. In contrast to that conventional social arrangement, Agathon in the *Symposium* at 175b7–c1, as an innovation, bids his house-slaves consider themselves to be the hosts who have invited him and the other guests to the feast. Alcibiades who arrives late notices that the house-slaves are listening to the guests' conversations, and instructs them to clap heavy doors on their ears that they not hear what he is about to say (*Symp.* 218b5–7).

<sup>10</sup> Translation of Lamb (note 3 above) 397.

it without its participants becoming aware of being overheard is not indicated.<sup>11</sup> Socrates goes on to say “Since I hear you advising me of the same things as to your closest associates, it is sufficient testimony that you are truly well disposed to me.” It is impossible to decide whether or not Socrates is taking note of the contradiction<sup>12</sup> between Callicles’ useful philosophical observation that praises the *nomos* of the natural world and oriental kingdoms according to which might makes right and deprecates the *nomos* of democratic cities in which the unilateral exercise of might was declared unjust and not right, and the statement in his next remark (*Gorg.* 484c4-8) in which he deprecates the pursuit of exacting philosophy as being the destruction of a man. The overheard conversation confirms that Callicles’ disavowal of the worth of serious philosophy was said in all seriousness. Of course that opinion does not impeach the worth of the philosophical observation regarding the two *nomoi*.

At *Gorg.* 481d5-10, Socrates remarks that he “always notices about you (αἰσθάνομαι οὖν σου ἐκάστοτε) that despite your cleverness, whatever your beloved says and how he says things are, you are not able to contradict but you are tossed up and down. And in the assembly, if you say anything that the *dēmos* of the Athenians denies to be so, you are tossed about and you agree with whatever they wish.” How Socrates would know Callicles’ affective state towards his beloved is not explained. Nor how Socrates who led a private life and notoriously shunned Athenian politics would perceive or notice Callicles’ behavior in the assembly.

#### WHY PLATO LEFT GORGIAS UNFINISHED

Why then did Plato never return to the task of specifying the location of the conversations and providing the missing details of the significant incidents—reported by Socrates—which

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<sup>11</sup> A mechanism to surreptitiously overhear a private conversation did not exist in antiquity. Plato could not anticipate the contemporary practice of placing hidden microphones in hotel rooms and, latterly, monitoring electronic messaging between interlocutors who believe that they are communicating confidentially.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Benardete (note 7 above) 64: “Callicles’ speech is in two parts (482c4-483c3, 484c4-486d3). They are not quite consistent with one another. . . . He uses philosophy to mount an attack on the city in the first part and in the second attacks philosophy in the name of the city.”

confirmed the sincerity of Callicles' expressed deprecation of philosophy and identified his subservience to his beloved Demos and to the *dēmos* of the Athenians? Writers report that characters in their books sometimes go off on their own by acquiring a kind of fictional autonomy of action and speech seemingly independent of the author's intention. This effect seems to have occurred in *Gorgias*: Callicles' core opinions radically contradict one another and as they stood could not be reconciled. Unlike Socrates' interlocutors in every other dialogues whose opinions are non-contradictory and of a piece, there was an essential contradiction between Callicles' innovative philosophical observation that the *nomos* of *physis* according to which might makes right differs from the *nomos* of democratic cities like Athens where might does not make right, and his opinion expressed immediately afterwards that excessive philosophical activity is to be rejected as destructive of successful life in the city. Tied in knots by Socrates' elenchus, Callicles goes so far as to endorse a life of unfettered gluttony which is in blatant contradiction with his intention to be a mover and shaker in Athenian politics. The latter ambition is incompatible with the life-style of a glutton.

Another unreconcilable contradiction is that between Callicles' theory that individually weak citizens whom he terms a "motley pack of slaves and a random assortment of worthless men" (συρφετός . . . δούλων καὶ παντοδαπῶν ἀνθρώπων μηδενὸς ἀξίων), set down the *nomoi* of what is just and the sympathy he expresses for the unjust strongman and the information supplied by Socrates that Callicles is a lover of the *dēmos* and obeys their every whim. In all the other dialogues, Socrates' interlocutors possess an unchanging character and their opinions express a unity of belief. Plato was interested in types; the malleability of a person's opinions and behavior, as are found in realistic novels, was a literary genre yet to be invented.<sup>13</sup>

The utter lack of specificity of location as well as the lack of fully realized incidents that sheds light on the worth of an argument, in contrast to their exact description in all the other Socratic dialogues, demonstrates that *Gorgias* was unfinished pending the author's future attention to the text. It is not impossible that Plato chose for some reason to publish *Gorgias* despite its

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<sup>13</sup> Callicles' contradictory opinions in *Gorgias* make him especially appealing as a subject of interpretation, which is evidenced by the number of learned articles and books that attempt to unify his character and expressed intentions. scholar.google.com (retrieved 6/27/2021) lists 72 learned articles and books with "Callicles" in their titles.

unfinished state. It seems more likely that the dialogue was found in the effects of its author after he died and that it was published by the Academy as executors of his estate.

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