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Writing and Reality in the Ancient Greek Tradition : A Special Study of Socrates and Plato

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Abstract. When canonical writers disagree then what happens? Consider this: Plato, who is one of the first canonical writers wrote regarding his educator Socrates, he puts him in one light while other contemporary, but almost equally important writers, Aristophanes and Xenophon wrote about Socrates, they chalk out an almost different account of Socrates. Which version is the correct version? It is important to note that Plato was the one who was against the form of writing, and therefore for him "literature" is a faulty illustration in his *Phaedrus*. When Athens was defeated in the Peloponnesian War, Socrates was put on trial in 399 B.C. as a victim, and like a courtroom record, the *Apology of Socrates* epitomizes trial by a bench of judges as an additional democratic creation of Athens. Socrates smartly utilizesthe language in the courtroom for making sure that he gets executed, just like a tragic hero for the betterment of the state. Hence, this version gets the upper hand (to answer the starting question) because networksare important in canon formation and Plato's network was the strongest because his student's (Aristotle) student (Alexander the Great) helped to spread his word all over the world, and therefore Plato's version of Socrates wins out.

Keywords : Canon; writing; reality; Art/Literature.

Since the invention of writing,the function of literature has been to preserve things, facts and information from the ravages of oblivion. Those Mesopotamian list makers were trying to preserve knowledge. Gilgamesh tries to preserve his great adventure-stories by carving them on the walls to his city (Harris, 25). Herodotus says at the very beginning of his *Histories* that he wants to preserve the great deeds of men both Greeks and barbarians (Herodotus Gutenberg).As a result,general historians and historians of literature sometimes feel like they know every great deal about some figure of the past; and sometimes we know who they are very little. In the case of Socrates where we have a strange case where we don't know whether we know a great deal or very little because the evidence itself is contradictory. Socrates appears over and over again in the Dialogues of Plato as a character and as a speaker whom we think we know pretty well (Peterson, 11). One of the earliest of these Platonic writings is probably the *Apology of Socrates* and this records

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Socrates'defense in 399 B.C., a trail of which he has been placed because he has been charged with two issues: one, disrespect to the gods and two, corrupting the youth of Athens. And so, we think we know Socrates pretty well from this transcript.However, there is another account of the same trial by Xenophon, another one of Socrates' students and a very important writer. One of the things that Xenophon apparently did was to add a continuation on to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. He is avery estimable person. And yet his account of Socrates and the trial is different. He shows Socrates as an old man at around 70s who is actually welcoming execution as a form of euthanasia, a very different figure than what we get in Plato's illustration (Strauss, 33). But wait there is more; the great comic playwright of the period Aristophanes also gives us an account of Socrates in his play the *Clouds* and in his comic version Socrates becomes a kind of clown who twists and manipulates logic to bamboozle his way out of debt (Aristophanes, 30). And again, Aristophanes knew the man himself.

There is another Plato's Dialogue called the *Symposium* and it describes that victory party that the tragic playwright Agathon through to celebrate his victory and among the guest are Socrates and Aristophanes. They knew each other and so here are three great writers in the western tradition all writing about Socrates but giving us different versions of the man. There is a real question which is the true witness to the representation of the reality of the man called Socrates. Or do we have an early instance of a justified skepticism about the ability of any storyteller to give you the right and truly authentic version. It is important to consider the fact that we must suspect story-tellers. Consider for example in Homer's *Odyssey,*Odysseus tells us great, overblown version of his adventure to the strange lands but when he gets home to his wife Penelope, he tones down the story and definitely omits any account of his philandering with the various nymphs and goddesses that he's met along the way. And so here you have a sense of not only story tellers but more so of writers themselves that they can't always be trusted. Writers perhaps less so because actually they don't have to confront their audiences face to face and account for their reliability of their story, they put it down in writing and walk away and don't have to take any responsibility. Athens can be considered as the birthplace of western literature as we have come to know it and yet in a sense Athens remains a very oral culture. Greek tragedy as well as Greek comedy were still being performed more like Opera than written texts being studied in school yet. There is also the Homeric epics being performed by live specialists.

Plato actually writes a Dialogue called the *Ion* concerning one of these professional reciters called a Rhapsode who is doing live performances with musical backup group in Athens at this time. Herodotus comes to Athens so that he can do live performances of his *Histories* as a kind of ongoing work of literature as well. And so,Athens for all its literacy is also a very oral culture (Norton Anthology of World Literature).

Plato writes another dialogue called the *Phaedrus* where he actually criticizes the invention of writing because he thinks it is a bad thing because it induces forgetfulness. People stop training their memories and start relying on written accounts, texts, files and so on to help them remember the past (Phaedrus, 42). There is also a sense that if you publish a text in a written form, you as an author lose control over it. The people will read it, understand it the way they want and interpret it in the ways that, may be the author did not intend. But the flip side of this is that the author does not have to take responsibility for his texts also.He can walk away and let the audience or readership make of the text what they want. Socrates himself did not have this problem with texts. He did not write anything. If you want to describe Socrates, he was more like a performance artist, working in the streets of Athens and talking to the people he's metin the course of his travels like craftsmen, politicians whoever, talking to them, imposing his ideas, probing their ideas and so on.

Inversion of Binaries

So here we have in our first encounter anyway with the major figure in the western tradition or even the world's textual, religious, historical tradition who did not write down anything. This line of people is very impressive; it would include Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Mohammed. All of these great teachers did just that, they taught.It was upto their students, their disciples, their later generations to put down in some sort of written form what the teacher had transmitted (Muesse, Part 1). And Socrates fits into this group of a great teacher who is not a writer and left it up to his students, Plato and Xenophon to put down the wisdom that he had transmitted orally. So, when we get to a text like the *Apology of Socrates,* we are dealing with the text that was never meant to be literature. It is Socrates' courtroom defense in 399 B.C. under the true criminal charges: corrupting the youth and disrespect to the state gods. And of course, disrespect to the state religion means disloyalty to the state. That is why it becomes a criminal matter for them. And because it is meant to be a court transcript, this is the one moment when we think we catch Socrates

at his most accurate. There is a jury of 501 male citizens of Athens and then there were many spectators at the gallery. One of the spectators we know from the text itself was Plato. He was an eye witness. This is what the Greeks called the *autopsy*, which means eye witness and it was meant to be one of the most reliable forms of history writing. It is one that Herodotus involves himself with. He will actually say that he actually saw this so that you can believe it. And so, the *Apology of Socrates* comes off as a court transcript, eye witnessed, recorded by one of those present Plato himself (*The Apology*, 11).

The courtroom becomes interestingly another aspect of Athenian democracy, trial by jury. It also means that rhetoric, speechifying the uses of logic and persuasion are also central to the events of the courtroom. It is one of those things that comes down to the modern world. Socrates in his *Apology* (it is a Greek word which means defense) is not apologetic as it will turn out and he is serving as his own lawyer, which even to this day they tell you never to do, never act as your own attorney. And not only does he act as his own attorney, but he actually flips the whole strategy of a defense i.e., he turns it topsy-turvy to ensure and guarantee his conviction according to the charges. The text needs to be divided into the traditional phases of any trial and the first phase would be the defense itself. And in this, Socrates says that instead of showing disrespect to the gods and the state religion, he is in fact devoted his entire life to showing respect. Going back to the time that somebody sent to the Delphic oracle and the question put to the Delphic oracle was, 'who is the wisest of all men?' and the Delphic oracle rendered its pronouncement, we actually have this preserved in the original Greek and this is what the Delphic oracle said, "Sophocles is wise – Euripides is wiser – but of all men the wisest is Socrates." (Chadwick, 399)It is a very interesting line-up. Here are the canonical figures, Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates. But it is the pronouncement of the Delphic oracle and from earliest times in those Mesopotamian Tablets interpreting oracles was one of the primary functions of literacy and books. People wanted to find out what the oracles really meant. These oracles were usually ambiguous, you had to interpret them.

Remember King Croesus of Lydia, who thought he was the most prosperous of men and Solen said wait until you see how your life turns out. At the end of his life, King Croesus thought that he might want to go to war against the Persians and so he sent to the Delphic oracle. The Delphic oracle said, if you fight the Persians, a great empire will fall. This emboldened King Croesus and indeed the prophecy was true, a great

empire did fall but it was his own. And so, you always have to look for the ambiguities within the oracle. The amazing thing about this pronouncement however, is that there is no ambiguity. The oracle said, "Socrates is the wisest of all men". And so, what Socrates has done is to spend his whole career challenging that unambiguous pronouncement of the gods, oracles at Delphic. And so, it would seem to be an admission of guilt, that he has shown disrespect for divine prophets. And in the course of his defense, he says that he has always gone around questioning people looking for someone smarter, wiser than him. He went to the statesman since they run the country, they must be wiser, but no.He went to the playwright, the poets, the tragic masters,asked them about their work; but no, they weren't wiser. He even went to the craftsmen, by whom he meant the artisans who were the great sculptors, asked them about their work, they could not explain it, they could not talk about it. And so, he is constantly offended everyone at Athens and he reminds people that he spent his career humiliating people in public and this of course rousing further antagonism in that jury of 501 many of whom would contain victims of his public humiliation. In the course of this argument whether he has been disrespectful to the divine forces, he says that instead of being sort of out of tune with the divine, he is actually been an agent of God. And it will actually sort of go so far as to say 'I am god's gift to Athens', (Weiss, 26) and to make the point he delivers a famous allegory in which Athens figures as a great, sleepy horse and he is a gadfly or horsefly trying to awaken the great stead into consciousness awareness. And this is what he says:

> The state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. You will not easily find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me. (*Apology*, 21)

So, this claim that he is god's gift to Athens is only further rendering the jury hostile. But notice he uses an allegory that the state is like the horse; he is like a gadfly. This is something we are going to see over and over again in the Western tradition. The Greek word 'allegory', meaning basically to say one thing and to mean another. So, over and over again, teachers and writers will use allegory. Jesus for example taught in parable; like the

parable of the Prodigal Son, to make a point about the Kingdom of Heaven. And eventually readers of literature, critics of literature will read other works allegorically. So, the time will come when readers look at Homer's Odyssey and see this as an allegory of man's journey from the city of destruction, Troy to the true home of Ithaca, a sort of moral allegory of the spiritual life of man.Modern critics believe in novels with sort of extraordinary leaps of allegorical interpretation so that they will find in Jane Austen's novels for example allegories of capitalism and early imperialist economic systems (Xu and Li 184-187). But these are all allegorical reading, allegorical understandings and here we see a kind of classic sturdy point for that practice in Socrates' use of the allegory of the horse and the gadfly.

In the second phase of the trial, Socrates enters the sentence scene phase and here is where he gets to sort of conjure up the possible penalties that will come down to him. And there are possibilities, exile would be one, large fine would be another. The worst possible penalty would be execution. So, he systematically eliminates the lesser penalties. For example, he says if he were to sentenced to exile, he would continue to question people and look after the truth following his divine mission and in the course of this, he drops one of the great one-liners, not even a whole line, just a phrase: "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Six Great Dialogues, 18). And that phrase, that concept embedded in this larger speech will have tremendous resonance throughout the tradition. It is the idea of self-examination. It is there in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, it is really a kind of examination of his life, his emotional life, his spiritual life that will continue on till Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* and all the way through the tradition that talks about self-examination, examining your own life. As has been stated, it is the jury of 501 men, that is actually a mid-sized jury in Athens of the time, might as well be 100 for as many as a 1000. That is not like the trial of the century, as far as the Athenians are concerned. The vote to find him guilty was 280 to 221, the vote for the death penalty is 360 i.e., a larger number of the jury members voted to sentence him to death, than originally voted to condemn him as guilty (Wilson, 49). And so, he has done his job, he has really riled up the jury here.

The third phase of the trial is the Appeals phase. It is where one is supposed to ask for a lesser sentence or pardoning in some form. You are supposed to come into the courtroom ripping your garments and tearing your hair, bringing your wife and small children. You are really supposed to get sympathy of the jury at this point. That is not what

Socrates does. When threatened with execution he actually says, "Hmm, death. I wonder if that is such a bad thing. Maybe it is actually a good thing." And he begins to reason along these lines :

> …there is great reason to hope that death is a good; for one of two things – either death is state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. (Six Great Dialogues, 21)

Notice the phrase, "as men say", the skepticism is almost another admission of guilt. He does not accept whole-heartedly the traditional teachings. And when he thinks about the soul going to the other world, what he imagines is the opportunity to talk with the great figures of the past. He recalls that opportunity that Odysseus had to question Agamemnon and Achilles and Tiresias. But Socrates says that he can go and talk to the great men of the past who were condemned by unjust juries. Again, he is guaranteeing that there is going to be no reversal of the death sentence for him. And with that that is how things turn out.

Psychology of Sacrifice

What is really going on in this speech, why does Socrates rigged the defense to guarantee his execution. Consider this explanation, 5 years earlier the Peloponnesian War had ended and Athens lost and lost also many of its democratic institutions. So, what Socrates is doing is using the rhetoric of the period they call forensic rhetoric or courtroom rhetoric to insult the jury to make himself into a scapegoat. He is offering himself up as a sacrificial victim for the Athenian loss in the Peloponnesian war and its oppressive aftermath. And why does he have to be the fall guy, because it was his student particularly Alcibiades who is much to blame for the reversal of fortunes for the Athenians. But Alcibiades is dead, he is not available for that kind of fall guy and so the teacher Socrates steps up to accept that responsibility. Remember that one of the charges was corrupting the youth and this was at base what they had in mind, that he had taught his student like Alcibiades to think independently, to question authority, not to act in a mindless union, but in fact he sent not to be a good member of the course, not to be a team-player. And Alcibiades turned out to be a really extraordinary example of a bad team-player. He disobeyed orders when commanded to return from Sicily to Athens to face the music for what had gone wrong there. He went over to the other

side and offered strategic advice to Sparta. He fermented revolt and the tributary island of the Aegean; he even encouraged intervention against the Athenians by the Persian king Darius. So, he has been a traitor all up and down. He is dead now, he is ambushed, he is not there to suffer the consequences. So, in a sense Socrates is providing himself as a kind of sacrificial victim for this (Ober, 75).

In a sense then he is entering a tragic role. He is seeing himself as the protagonist of a great civic ritual of sacrifice. Consider for example to the last line of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, the chorus gets the last line, a very pessimistic one, "…count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last" (54). Now consider Socrates' closing lines because it sounds like the exit lines for the tragic protagonist, "The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways – I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows."That is a great exit line, wonderfully dramatic. And so, he is really offering himself as a kind of scapegoat to put closure to the trauma of the loss of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. He also becomes henceforth a kind of prototype for the martyr figure, the sacrificial figure. Early Christians would even identify Socrates with Christ (Hattersley, 39). This is very much in the Greek speaking world. In the first century this identification is made by Justin Martyr, in the second century Tertullianalso identifies Socrates with Christ. But drinking the Hemlock was pretty easy way out, compared to the suffering of Christ and some of the other Christian martyrs. But nonetheless, Socrates was first in 399 and so he establishes this as a kind of template upon which later figures would be written about, especially in the Greek, Roman and the Western tradition.

Plato's Connections in Writing

What else is going on here? Plato always wanted to write a tragedy. The rumour is that he actually drafted a tragedy, showed it to his teacher Socrates. Socrates grilled him on this, and actually he did not understand the craft and so Plato burned the tragedy. And so, what happens is, that the Apology becomes Plato's chance to write that tragedy with Socrates as the heroic protagonist figure. That tragedy that he had always wanted to write. He is also giving us something that is going to have a long legacy within the West. He is giving us courtroom drama. In a sense Athenian democracy encourage a kind of political theatre, that speechifying of the statesman, the rhetoric, the arts of persuasion, the skills that were taught by the sophists allowed a conflict and this conflict came into the courtroom on the one hand and it came to the theatre on

the other with the pitting of the protagonist as you can see antagonist of the tragedy and so courtroom conflict was ripe for this kind of dramatic interplay of personalities and causes and it has a long afterlife in the western tradition. Shakespeare loved to bring his plays into the courtroom. May be the most famous example is *The Merchant of Venice*, where Portia disguised as a young lawyer comes in to defend Antonio against Shylock who is demanding his "pound of flesh" (*The Merchant of Venice*,163). Sir Thomas Moore was wonderfully a courtroom figure and in the play *A Man for All Seasons* the great culminating event is that scene where Sir Thomas Moore comes before Parliament to defend himself and eventually to offer himself again as a kind of martyr to the catholic cause in England.

And so it goes, Plato actually breaks the mould by writing his philosophical treatises as dialogue. That is, he has taken drama into the realm of philosophy, characters talking to each other. They are written in a wonderfully dramatic way, comical, touching by turns. Hence, he is going to make sure that these dialogues also get written down. Unlike his student Aristotle was rather careless about his teachings. Plato was very careful apparently to get his dialogues published in written form. How do we know because all of them survive. It is a complete canon of a single author's works and this is so rare especially for the ancient world. We know for example about the loss of poems by Sappho, we know that we only have fragment of the tragedies by the great three playwrights of Athens. We may even have lost the third epic by Homer, the Nostoi. So, for all of Plato's dialogues to have survived in fact must mean that he took very careful precaution to get them written down, get them copied, get them transmitted out there (Rowe, 33). He is also going to be very lucky in his connections. His student is Aristotle and Aristotle has a pupil by the name of Alexander the Great. Alexander will spread the Greek culture by which we mean Athenian culture throughout his empire and his cultural legacy will long outlive the conqueror and his generals. So, in a place like Alexandria there will be the great library and this is going to be one of the places where the dialogues of Plato would continue to be copied, studied, edited and then made available throughout the world. Hence, in a very funny way, Plato was the one who criticized writing in the Dialogue of Phaedrus. He says that you should not really trust in writing, men don't train their memories if they put things in writing. And yet, often the case following the example of his teacher Socrates he flips things, he is very careful about getting his things into written form so that it can be read not only by his immediate audience but also by later audiences in later lands.

This is a great advantage of books as we come to see that they are transportable. Plays don't move very well. Remember the Greeks living in Sicily don't have the most recent plays of Euripides because they were live performances, scripts are being carefully guarded, there are reasons for keeping those scripts under wraps and so those have been transported. But Plato's works, written down are works that can go anywhere in the empire. They go to Alexandria, they are copied, they are edited, they are understood. And they will enter into a later literary tradition even not in their original forms. Platonism, the kernel of his teachings will enter into many writers over the coming centuries and even writers who have not read the original dialogues would consider themselves Platonists. A good example is Saint Augustine, who living in the western empire in the 3rd and 4th century can't read Greek or can't read it well or does not have the material available and yet he is read Latinized versions of Plato. He is absorbed Platonic thought, the Christian theology that Saint Augustine will devise and transmit to the West is strongly influenced by Plato without the author himself having read the original Platonic dialogues (Cary, 7). The last time we see Plato in the classical world is going to be with Severinus Boethius in the early 6th century A. D. Boethius saw himself standing at the end of classical civilization. He knows that Greek language is already been lost to the West and he has a project, it is literary and scholarly and philosophical project and this involves bringing the essential ingredients of Greek culture into the Latin language so that it might be preserved in the European West. And so, it is going to be Boethius' latinized versions of Plato that will circulate in Europe for the next thousand years until the rediscovery of the originals and their printing in their presses in Venice and elsewhere.

There is a cliché about Plato. It is said in philosophy departments that all philosophy is Plato and the rest is footnotes and how very true that is, nearly every topic of philosophical conversation in the West has some place within Plato (Durand, 1-3). Even contemporary philosophers like Jacques Derrida reconsidering the issues of Plato. He writes a wonderful work called *Plato's Pharmacy* which actually goes back and consider the dialogues of Phaedrus in which Plato challenges the whole technology of writing and putting things down on into books. But notice it is only because things are written that they can acquire footnotes and so this wonderful and true cliché presumes that Plato has written something down, he has created literature and that literature itself can now have footnotes.

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