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Aaron Johnson
Portland State University

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ALLUSIONS TO HOMER IN THE PROTAGORAS

Aaron Johnson

As with most Platonic dialogues, *The Protagoras* contains many details commonly shrugged off as unimportant. It is tempting to just skip over these and try to pull the “seeds” of knowledge from the “fruit” of the dialogue. But to do this would be futile, since Plato’s seemingly superficial details augment the dialogue, as I will show in the following.

The Protagoras begins with an unknown friend questioning Socrates’ conversation with the great sophist, Protagoras. This serves as an agent for including the reader in the dialogue, having him assume the role of the questioner. The reader, in a sense, is then having a conversation with Socrates.

Plato arranges this conversation around a small exchange about the legitimacy of Socrates’ and Alcibiades’ relationship, which takes on a disapproving tone about the lovers, but may in fact be a jealous remark towards the couple. Socrates responds by giving a “what of it” remark. His answer is rather rebellious against the norm of Greek society, reflecting his new and innovative thinking style, which is also disapproved of by many.

As Socrates retells his conversation, the dialogue switches from present tense to a past tense narrative. While this gives us insight into Socrates’ thoughts and intentions, we also

experience a one-sidedness in the dialogue, a slight bias towards Socrates and his views. The dialogue does possess a clear introduction, body, and ending, but that form itself appears through his narration.

The account begins at night, with Hippocrates coming to Socrates' bedchamber. Hippocrates questions Socrates about Protagoras' arrival and whether or not he should seek instruction from him. This scene represents more than the young scholar's zeal. The physical setting, being at night, has a two-fold significance.

It represents Hippocrates' state of being, philosophically and literally, "in the dark." He doesn't know what is the right choice and seeks advice from Socrates. It also presents him as a "voice," free from physical nature. Since Protagoras' teachings will have a beneficial or harmful effect on his soul, rather than his body, this seemingly incorporeal state helps the two ponder the question. This is also our first glimpse of the allusion to Hades that Socrates maintains throughout the dialogue. Socrates compares Hippocrates to the shadowy denizens that occupy Hades. From this point we catch a glimpse into Greek feelings towards the soul. It is viewed as invaluable and special care should be taken so that it won't be endangered or damaged. Socrates concludes that if Hippocrates is ignorant of the effects that Protagoras' teachings have, but is still willing to pay good money for them, then he must accompany him to meet Protagoras.

They set out when it is daylight, and after Hippocrates' "enlightenment," to the house of Callias. Another view of the allusion to Hades is shown. The doorman answers, sees the two, cries "Ha, Sophists!" and slams the door in their faces. The doorman serves as more than a comic relief. He also serves as the gatekeeper, not unlike the mythic dog, Cerberus, which stands outside the Gates of Hades. Socrates makes these comparisons to liken himself to Odysseus and his journey for knowledge in the depths of Hades.

Upon entry, Socrates and Hippocrates come upon Protagoras and his group of Sophist admirers. He begins his description of the party by quoting lines from Homer's *Odyssey*. These seem superficial, but are used to expose Socrates' attitude towards the Sophists. The passages are descriptive of Odysseus' descent into Hell and the souls he met therein. Of special note is the comparison between Prodicus and Tantalus. The latter is a soul that has been condemned to be eternally tempted by pleasures just beyond reach. Prodicus' situation is similar. He is encompassed by his bed, wrapped in rugs and blankets. This poses a barrier between him and the party of tempting young boys surrounding him. Protagoras himself is included in this allusion as well. He appears with a group of silent men that follow him aimlessly and resemble the mere shadows found in Hades.

A conversation ensues between Protagoras and Socrates. We see the two very different methods of debate each uses. Protagoras gives a long, eloquent speech during which there is no chance to answer. The Sophist way of teaching involves many such speeches that are to be accepted as truths and aren't always up for discussion. Socrates' method, by contrast, involves a question and answer style. This makes the recipient derive his own answers and not just accept others' beliefs. The physical location of the audience is of note as well.

The two speakers sit opposing, with the rest of the listeners forming a circle around them. This configuration resembles an audience in a theater, listening to actors, or in an arena, watching two gladiators. The dialogue also holds an allusion of Socrates being on trial. Protagoras, a master of rhetoric, represents the prosecuting attorney, and Socrates is forced to defend himself and his position. The audience serves as judge and jury. Protagoras even begins with a speech not unlike an opening statement. Socrates' question and answer style resembles the examining and cross-examining found in law

courts as well.

Early in his presentation, Socrates describes Greek society as preferring to consult its experts when making decisions that pertain to their field. People of lesser knowledge that try to contribute are beat down and rejected. These terms don't apply when it comes to governing people, where it is believed that all men share in the knowledge, as no one can become an expert. This is hypocritical in that the dialogue revolves around a seemingly ambiguous subject, on which no one is truly an expert, but is dominated by two speakers and the others present are unable to significantly contribute. They are considered of lesser status and knowledge on the subject to be able to add anything important. Even Hippias, a great scholar, is condemned indirectly by Alcibiades because he doesn't hold the confidence of the listeners. Only Prodicus is able to interject something, he being superior because Socrates was a pupil of his, but even then, his participation springs from another intent.

The speeches given by the duo seem disjunctive at first, but are actually quite similar in content. They base themselves on very polar resources, one being mythic and the other Simonides' poetry. Though they are composed with different material, the speakers are able to expose their likenesses, and relate them to their original argument.

After Protagoras' Simonides speech, which was excellently presented, Socrates begins his infamous question/answer dialogue. His mastery of this enables him to turn the answerer's replies against him and to put words into the others' mouths. He brings in an imaginary third party that becomes the questioner. He then becomes the second answerer, along with Protagoras, in order to persuade Protagoras to agree. He ends most of his questions with "wouldn't you?" and "don't you agree?" These attempts at trickery are brought to a climax when he then has the third party ask Protagoras to clarify previous statements that now

conflict with other statements. During this section of the dialogue, the audience is more apt to applaud the speakers for sharing their wisdom. But if we look closer, we notice that the listeners praise the best presentation, whether or not the content is good. To them, it doesn't matter what is said, so much as how it is said.

Ironically, though the whole discussion revolves around the importance of virtue, Socrates constantly uses dishonesty to overcome the Sophist. When discussing whether or not courage is knowledge, he leads him to believe that courage is knowledge of what is and is not hopeful. He also persuades Protagoras to recognize that all choices are made on a hedonistic basis. His third dishonesty is when he cites Pericles as his example of a wise man. These three prove not to be Socrates' true feelings as he later denounces all of them in later dialogues. In Pericles' case, there is also the fact that he was the only person that the sophists would consider wise, so Socrates doesn't claim himself as the wisest, to avoid conflict. Socrates also feels that this famous leader has only the lowest level of wisdom and virtue (Kraut, 265-267).

During Protagoras' speech, he recites a myth. The irony in this is that Sophists feel that myth is ignorant and should be done away with. Yet we have the greatest advocate of Sophistry telling myths this way and that. If we look deeper, we see that this myth does not exist to present a historical truth, but is used heuristically, in order to throw light on the subject (Versenyi, 23-25). Secondly, it shows that Protagoras' views towards his art are "haughty." He believes the art of rhetoric is the furthest along in the development of mankind and thus teaches people to be virtuous and moral. He says that Zeus himself had each man bestowed with virtue, but that he and his kind need to bring it out of the citizens. Thirdly, it foreshadows Socrates' fate. He is likened to Prometheus, who must suffer horrible pains because he wanted to enlighten mankind. Socrates too is later banished for trying to educate

men. The allusion is reinforced by Hippocrates' nightly visit, characteristic of the Tyranny of the Thirty, who come into power at a later date.

Towards the middle, an outward conflict is exhibited by the duo. Socrates, defeated by Protagoras' previous speech, starts to complain about his style. He makes an allusion to a runner, and says that he cannot keep up with him. He says he's forgetful and can't always remember what the speech was about once the Sophist is done speaking. This is a lame excuse, for Socrates is obviously able to recall lengthy orations and dialogues on the spur of the moment.

Protagoras also objects to not being able to use his "oratory" skill to its fullest and having to downgrade his abilities for his opponents' sake. The two start to bicker, and the company must restrain them from leaving and abandoning their discussion. The students and other teachers come to a compromise between the two, reflecting the growing power of the democratic many in society.

After this conflict, the pair engage in role switching, to an ironic degree. Protagoras renews the discussion by adopting the role of the Questioner, a position he finds unsavory. He presents a seemingly excellent rebuttal, by which Socrates is left feeling "like a man who has been hit by a good boxer." Even Socrates' feelings carry an overtone of conflict and competitiveness.

Socrates feels trapped by his own means of deriving truth, so he resumes the Questioner role, this time directing his inquiries to Prodicus. If he had started questioning Protagoras again he would have admitted defeat. Socrates promotes his points through Prodicus, thus leaving Protagoras temporarily to the side. He also quotes lines from *The Iliad*, in order to gain Prodicus' favor and to relate their struggle to a more familiar story. He then takes it upon himself to deliver a very long speech, a form of argumentation that he has just condemned.

Both speakers make frequent use of analogies and metaphors in illustrating their points. This is due to the fact that most of the education received by the young scholars present has been in the form of myth. It is easier for them to comprehend and remember concepts when they can attach a metaphor to it.

Allusions are frequently used throughout the work. These help to ground the abstract thoughts into more comprehensible terms for the sake of the less capable present. A certain allusion shows the importance of titles and roles in Greek society. As Phidias is the sculptor and Homer the poet, Socrates demands that Protagoras be labeled and recognized for a certain function in society. This later relates to the "face" allusion attributed to virtue. The Greeks felt that everyone should have a niche in society and thus become a part of the "social machine."

The dialogue ends with the speakers praising one another, showing the love of good-natured competition shared by all parts of Greek society. They leave with a sense of enlightenment and satisfaction, knowing they have gained insight. Plato's efforts in *The Protagoras* have not only explained the teachability of virtue, but have also shown us the true thoughts of two great philosophers.

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