

1991

## Formal Analysis of Plato's Gorgias

Karen M. Burton  
*Portland State University*

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: [http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos\\_archives](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Burton, Karen M. (1991) "Formal Analysis of Plato's Gorgias," *Anthós (1990-1996)*: Vol. 1: No. 2, Article 4.  
Available at: [http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos\\_archives/vol1/iss2/4](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives/vol1/iss2/4)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Anthós (1990-1996)* by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

# FORMAL ANALYSIS OF PLATO'S *GORGIAS*

Karen M. Burton

Plato begins the *Gorgias* with Socrates attacking rhetoric. Arguing his case against Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, he is especially vociferous and boorish. Socrates silences all other argument, and, calling upon Homeric tradition to back him, speaks at great length relating a myth partially lifted from the *Odyssey*. In examining Socrates' behavior, we see that he is convincingly acting as the rhetorician himself—and disproving his argument at the same time. The entire dialogue is built around the concept of *agon*, a contest between two opposing views. But Socrates twists the views to be on the same side, and then sets them opposite their original position. The final mythopoeisis ends the dialogue by negating the point it sets out to prove. Socrates has thus, by assuming the role of rhetorician, devalued rhetoric.

From the beginning, Plato sets up an atmosphere of *agon*. Callicles' opening reference to battle frames the scene: Socrates and Chaerophon have come to Gorgias expressly to ask him questions. There is no pretense of a meal or a leisurely stroll by the river; this is a created situation not unlike a

speech competition or law trial. But there is first an introduction in the form of debate between Chaerophon (under the command of Socrates) and Polus (on the side of Gorgias.) This overture ends quickly, and Socrates and Gorgias take up the melody of short questions and answers attempting to define rhetoric. Although Socrates demands that Gorgias answer briefly—indeed chastises Polus for lengthy responses—his own comments demonstrate anything but brevity. Socrates also criticizes the persuasive nature of rhetoric, even while persuading everyone present to think as he does. In his defense, Gorgias alludes to Homer, placing the old Athenian educational tradition on the side of rhetoric. Later, Socrates reverses this and quotes Homer himself in his speech to Callicles. As the dialogue unfolds, the concept of *agon* is reinforced in descriptions of rhetoric as a competitive art. Gorgias characterizes rhetoric as that which is practiced in a court of law, yet not until late in the dialogue do the rhetoricians realize that they are being cross-examined. Witnesses are called in as Socrates takes examples from Athens, both noted leaders and hypothetical men. As the prosecutor he also makes personal attacks on the defense, insulting the memory of men whose profession is based on careful development of memory. Socrates' sarcastic use of "my friend" in addressing his verbal opponent sets a supercilious tone appropriate to the questioning of a witness. Yet these famed orators are powerless to defend themselves against Socrates' logic. They are forced to concede point after point and are reduced to silence, snide remarks, or humoring Socrates. He is beating the rhetoricians at their own art, and on their own terms.

Through analysis of Socrates' references and quotes it becomes evident that he is betraying the very points he purports to make. The most obvious allusion is Plato's metonymic reference to Aeschylean tragedy in the two-character focus of the dialogue. As in the Prometheus cycle and the *Oresteia*, usually only two characters speak at once: conversations involving three or more people are not used. This simulation of early drama gives Plato's message a strong background that is not rooted in Homeric tradition. On a more specific level, Socrates contradicts the cultural corpus in his choice of examples. Early in the dialogue, he presents Nicias, Aristocrates, and

Pericles as false witnesses and casts them in a dubious light; these men were honorable Athenians from the same heritage as Socrates himself. Pericles the great orator (Plato's own cousin) is even mentioned favorably later. Elsewhere, Archelaus of Macedonia is disclaimed as a tyrant with no claim to the throne. In Thucydides, Archelaus is lauded as a great ruler who reformed and revitalized his country. These paradoxical allusions set a precedent that Socrates exploits further in his quotes from Euripides: "Who knows if life be death, and death be life?" His questions are just as unsettling to the rhetoricians, as he leads them into proof that the punnisher is pained even in doing right while the punished one is cleansed of his crime. Blurring the once-distinct line between pleasure and pain and reversing definitions of good and wicked, Socrates provokes obvious resentment and sarcasm in Callicles and Gorgias. In doing so, he is demonstrating exactly how the rhetoricians of Greece are perceived. Socrates seems to speak on the side of temperance, equality, and free speech, but his very actions oppose his words. He is an aristocrat speaking to other eupatrids and he argues fervently at such length that all others humor him or keep silent. The only man besides Socrates who is allowed to speak at some length—if only once—is Callicles, whose entire discourse is an attack on Socrates. The fact that he is permitted to speak for longer than the other rhetoricians demonstrates the validity of his theme: he denounces Socrates as a trickster and suggests he rise above philosophy to study rhetoric. Callicles, Socrates' most eager and bitter opponent, remains until the end of the dialogue after the other rhetoricians have bowed out because he provides the necessary perspective on Socrates. However, it is the philosopher himself who is given the principal responsibility of disproving his own words.

Plato not only gives Socrates the majority of the unified integral discourse, he also makes him the mouthpiece for the sole myth told in the *Gorgias*. Socrates foreshadows his own mythopoeisis when he swears "by the dog that is god in Egypt." This deity, Anubis the Jackal-God, is tied to the Underworld in Egypt and is not worshipped by the Greeks. This establishes a connection between falseness and the land of the Dead that is continued later in the actual telling of the myth. As

Socrates introduces his story, he immediately casts doubt on his veracity: "...a very fine story, which you, I suppose, will consider fiction, but I consider fact..." He then cites Homer to support him, arming himself with the conservative tradition of education as Gorgias did earlier. Socrates intends to prove with this myth that justice reigns after death, that powerful tyrants, free from all of their riches, are punished for their wicked lives. The legend tells of Minos and Rhadamanthus, who judge the dead. The key is that these two kings were brothers, and that Minos, the more infamous of the pair, now sits as the appellate judge of the Underworld. After spending his time on earth as a cruel tyrant responsible for the slaughter of innocent youths to feed the Minotaur, Minos holds a position of power (and a golden scepter) in Hades. In alluding to King Minos, Socrates is negating the moral of his myth. This becomes even more evident when Plato has Socrates quote from the *Odyssey* in describing Minos. The Homeric citation is from Odysseus' account of his journey into Hades which is, after all, fiction told by a master deceiver. Here, Socrates reveals that his account is just that; he is playing with the truth. Had he wished to definitively prove his statements, he would have quoted from an irrefutable source to support himself. Instead, Socrates reveals that his uncharacteristic vehemence and self-contradiction have been an act to point out the flaws of rhetoric.

In the *Gorgias*, the reader is presented with a Socratic persona unlike that of the other dialogues. The philosopher argues with uncharacteristic conceit, contradicts himself, and manipulates words, muddying definitions in order to prove his point. He caricatures the rhetorician. With little narrative frame and very few Homeric allusions, the dialogue is itself constructed as a debate in rhetoric. Socrates, acting the part of orator, leads the other men through a series of self-defeating questions and emerges the clear victor, establishing himself as the best statesman. Then, in unified integral discourse and the only mythopoesis of the dialogue, he undermines his own conclusion in his endeavors to prove it. But the careful analysis of language forms and other structural concerns shows the layers of meaning and distortions of truth at work in the *Gorgias*.