

Editare interpretare commentare. Approcci multiformi al testo letterario
Editing Commenting Interpreting. Multifarious Approaches to Literary Text
IX Edition- Rome, September 30th 2022 (II session)



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Plato's Divine Comedy

The Comic, Epic and Historical Catabasis of the *Protagoras*

The *Protagoras*: essential data

Composition date: '90s or '80s of the 4th century (links to *Laches*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*)

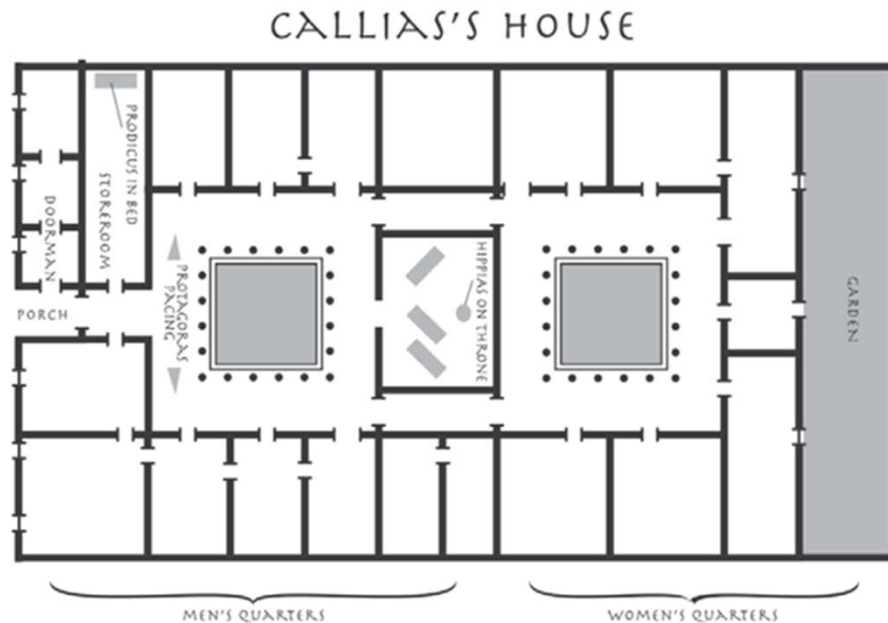
Tetralogy: 6 (*Euthydemus*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*)

Dramatic date: right before the Peloponnesian War (problematic since antiquity)

Interlocutors: Socrates & his friend → Socrates, Hippocrates of Athens, the doorman, Protagoras, Callias, Prodicus, Alcibiades, Critias, Hippias

Main topic: the sophistic education

A closer look: *Prt.* 314 c – 316 a



- Socrates and Hippocrates enter the house of Callias despite the doorman's opposition (314 c-e)
- Protagoras is walking with his disciples and admirers (314 e – 315 b)
- Hippias is lecturing his admirers (315 c)
- Prodicus, still in bed, is assisted by his admirers (315 d – 316 a)
- With the arrival of Alcibiades and Critias the discussion can begin (316 a)

Paper outline

1.

A philosophical comedy

2.

A new Odyssean catabasis

3.

A historical fiction

1.

A Philosophical Comedy



Comic aspects in the *Protagoras*

Change of setting

House of Callias

- Eupolis' *Kolakes* (*Flatterers*)
- See Aristophanes, *Birds* 284 ff.

The eunuch doorman

- See Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 395 ff. (esp. 406-408)
- See Aristophanes, *Clouds* 131 ff.

Use of characters

- Individualized *choros*: Ameipsias' *Konnos*
- *E. g.* the bed of Prodicus: Cratinus' *Panoptai*
- Comic characters: *e. g.* Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* (Agathon), Strattis' *Pausanias*

Agonal structure

Aristophanes'
Clouds:
analogy &
opposition



Screenshots from *Nuvole*, directed by Antonio Calenda for INDA, Siracusa 2021
(filmed version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrxRF7G1S00>, last visit on 2nd April 2022)

The *parodos* (315b)



τοῦτον τὸν χορὸν μάλιστα ἔγωγε ἰδὼν ἥσθην, ὥς καλῶς
ηὐλαβοῦντο μηδέποτε ἐμποδῶν ἐν τῷ πρόσθεν εἶναι Πρωταγόρου,
ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴ αὐτὸς ἀναστρέφοι καὶ οἱ μετ' ἐκείνου, εὖ πως καὶ ἐν
κόσμῳ περιεσχίζοντο οὗτοι οἱ ἐπήκοοι ἔνθεν καὶ ἔνθεν, καὶ ἐν κύκλῳ
περιμόντες ἀεὶ εἰς τὸ ὀπισθεν καθίσταντο κάλλιστα.



The dance of this chorus simply delighted me when I saw how beautifully they took care never to get in Protagoras' way. When he turned around with his flanking groups, the audience to the rear would split into two in a very orderly way and then circle around to either side and form up again behind him. It was quite lovely.

See Alexis, fr. 151 K-A = 147 K

The background of the slide is a detailed reproduction of Plato's Academy, a famous fresco by Raphael. It depicts a group of ancient Greek philosophers in a grand, vaulted hall. Plato is shown at the center, pointing upwards, while Aristotle stands next to him, gesturing towards the earth. Other figures like Pythagoras, Euclid, and Socrates are also visible, engaged in various intellectual activities. The architecture features high arches, statues in niches, and a checkered floor. A large, semi-transparent green circle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text '2.' and 'A New Odyssean Catabasis'.

2.

A New Odyssean Catabasis

Explicit quotation (315 b-c) - 1

Τὸν δὲ μετ' εἰσενόησα, ἔφη Ὅμηρος, Ἰππίαν τὸν Ἥλεϊον, καθήμενον ἐν τῷ
κατ' ἀντικρὺ προστώῳ ἐν θρόνῳ.

And then I perceived (as Homer says) Hippias of Elis, on a high seat in the
other side of the colonnade.

τὸν δὲ μέτ' εἰσενόησα βίην Ἡρακληεῖην,
εἶδωλον.

After him I became aware of powerful Hēraklēs, his phantom

Odyssey XI 601-602; see also XI 572

Explicit quotation (315 b-c) - 2

Καὶ μὲν δὴ καὶ Τάνταλόν γε εἰσεῖδον—ἐπεδήμει γὰρ ἄρα καὶ Πρόδικος ὁ Κεῖος.

And not only that, but I saw Tantalus too, for Prodicus of Ceos was also in town.

καὶ μὴν Τάνταλον εἰσεῖδον χαλέπ' ἄλγε' ἔχοντα

I also saw Tantalos suffering painful torment

Odyssey XI 582

Other references and analogies

Explicit Homeric citation in the frame of the *Protagoras*

- *Prt.* 309 a-b (Alcibiades) → *Iliad* XXIV 348; *Odyssey* X 279 (Hermes)

First-person narrative

Chtonic inferences of the passage through the door / the doorman

Protagoras ὥσπερ Ὀρφεύς (315 b)

- See Euripides, *Alcestis* 357–362 (Admetus speaking); Plato, *Symposium* 179 d (Phaedrus speaking)

Structural correspondences Socrates/Odysseus, Socrates/Hermes, Protagoras/Circe, Protagoras/Tiresias

- *E. g.* Odysseus ἀκήλητος (*Odyssey* X 329) vs Protagoras κηλῶν τῇ φωνῇ

Between Comedy and Epic

Τίς γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ λέγων «Καὶ μὲν Τάνταλον εἰσεῖδον» καὶ «Τὸν δὲ μέτ' εἰσενόησα»; οὐκοῦν ἐκείνους μὲν διὰ τῶν Ὅμηρου κωμῶδει, Ὅμηρον δ' αὖ δι' ἐκείνων;

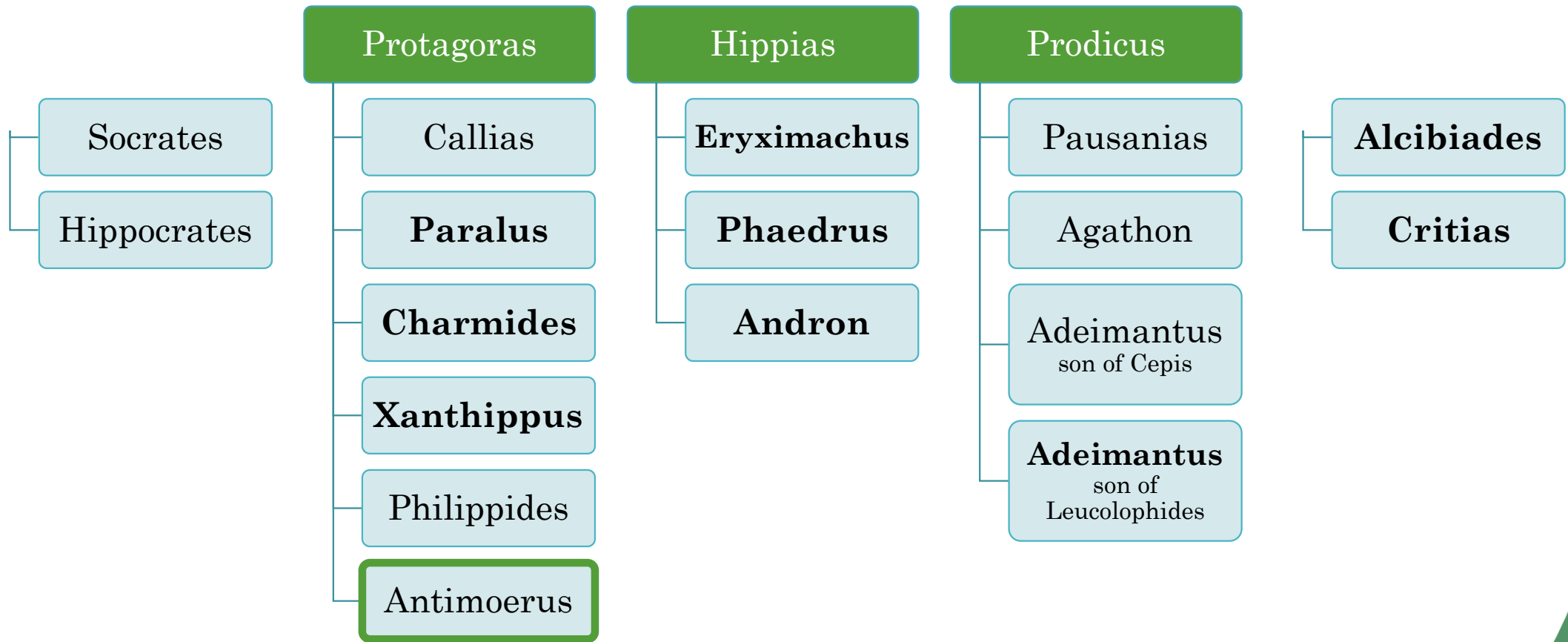
For who is it who says «And I saw Tantalus» and «After him I recognized»? Does he not satirize them through Homer's words and again Homer through them?

Aelius Aristides, *To Capito (The Third Platonic Discourse)*, 329 Jebb

3.

A Historical Fiction





All the characters of *Charmides* and *Symposium*,
but Aristophanes

τῶνδε δὲ οὐπω ἄξιον τοῦτο
κατηγορεῖν· ἔτι γὰρ ἐν αὐτοῖς
εἰσιν ἐλπίδες· νέοι γάρ.

But it is not fair to accuse these two yet;
there is still hope for them, for they are young.

CONCLUSIONS



Comic imagery

Setting, situations,
characters' gestures,
use of epic quotations

a philosophical
ἀγών
about virtue and
education

Socrates' catabasis

Emphasis on door and
passage, echoes of
mythical and Homeric
catabaseis

a voyage in an
Otherworld
full of dead people
and useless hope

Portrait of a generation

Careful choice of
characters, emphasis
on the house of
Pericles and on
genealogical themes

a personal and
philosophical
interpretation of
the crisis of
Pericles' Athens

E, come ben si sa, viventi o persone della recente vita politica popolano la commedia (mentre la tragedia si esprime attraverso i giganteschi pupi del mito): e popolano i dialoghi di Platone.

Nel che consiste, come nella *Commedia* dantesca, una delle più grandi innovazioni dell'imponente corpus drammaturgico costituito dai dialoghi di Platone.

Luciano Canfora, *La crisi dell'utopia*, p. 13 (my translation)

And, as is well known, living people or people from political life inhabit comedy (whereas tragedy expresses itself through the giant puppets of myth): and they inhabit Plato's dialogues. This consists, as in Dante's *Commedia*, of one of the greatest innovations of the impressive dramaturgical corpus constituted by Plato's dialogues.



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Thank you for your attention!

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