

Textual allusion as rhetorical argumentation: Gorgias, Plato and Isocrates

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1. Introduction:

A central characteristic of rhetorical argumentation is the way in which it anticipates the responses of the audience in the structure of the argument, inviting a co-development through expressed and implicit commonalities. Strategies of invitation include ways to capture the audience's prior beliefs and understandings, to expand the cognitive environment of the argumentation in relevant ways.

One such strategy is allusion (Tindale, 2004, Ch.3) and a key variety of this is textual allusion, where an arguer uses intertextual references and imitations to evoke ideas in the minds of an audience and draw them toward a conclusion. Allusions convey an indirect reference in passing without making explicit mention. So for an arguer to employ this strategy she must be confident that the reference alluded to is sufficiently present in the cognitive environment (that is, the beliefs, knowledge and background information) of her audience in order for the association to be grasped and the further conclusion drawn.

We see some vivid cases of this confidence in the textual allusions of early Greek practitioners of argument, Plato and Isocrates, as they try to win their audiences' support for particular ways of conceiving the concept 'philosopher'. Each reminds the audience of alternative ideas while at the same time gaining weight in the eyes of the audience by allusion to earlier texts with which they are familiar. In Plato's case, he structures the *Apology* of Socrates so as it refers to the *Defense of Palamedes* by Gorgias (483-376 BC), a text with which his audience would be familiar. Isocrates in turn tries to establish his ideas in his own defense, the *Antidosis*, by allusion to and direct imitation of Plato's *Apology*.

This paper discusses the details of this strategy and how it works in the cases surveyed, emphasizing its core rhetorical power as it draws on the audience's prior understandings and recasts them in a new frame. On strictly logical terms, textual allusion and imitation of this nature would seem to have no argumentative force. But when audience considerations are highlighted in a rhetorical treatment of argumentation, the power of the strategy becomes evident.

2. Arguments and Figures:

Arguments and figures are similar in several relevant ways. Both, of course, are audience-directed pieces of discourse that draw on the contextual situations involved. They are also discourses that *move* in the sense of transferring ideas or claims from one point in the discourse to the end. Arguments traditionally do this from premises to

conclusion, and figures encourage a similar movement, especially when put to persuasive ends. Reboul (1989, p.181) shows how an argument “possesses the same status of imprecision, intersubjectivity and polemic” as a figure, and Jeanne Fahnestock (1999) in her work on rhetorical figures in science, takes us even further in laying bare the cognitive heart of figuration. Beyond this, she identifies within key figures crucial features of rhetorical argument like collaboration and experience (the writer/speaker collaborates with the audience; the audience experiences the discourse). Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, p.168) are also important contributors to this discussion. They propose that a figure can be argumentative depending on whether it meets certain conditions:

It must be recognized to have a codified structure; its inner activity promotes the movement from premises to a conclusion; and it has one of the goals of argumentation (adherence, persuasion, re-enforcement, etc.). Moreover, as already implied in the foregoing, when we are looking at argument from a rhetorical (rather than logical or dialectical) perspective, we are asking certain fundamental questions like ‘How is this discourse *experienced*?’ and ‘How does it invite collaboration?’ Such questions help us see the force of figures like allusion when used in argumentative contexts.

3. Plato and Gorgias:

Plato’s *Apology* is taken nowadays to be a primer for philosophy: an introduction to a certain way of conveying philosophical practice and a defense of that practice. But it is first and foremost a trial speech, a defense of the person ‘Socrates’, and in that respect we might expect it to conform with established patterns of such speeches.

Gorgias’ *Defense of Palamedes* comes down to us as an exercise in the argument from probability. The supposed setting is the dispute between Odysseus and Palamedes. The latter had exposed Odysseus’ feigning of madness to get out of serving in the expedition to Troy. By way of revenge, Odysseus painted Palamedes as a traitor, framing him through a forged letter to him from Priam. This letter led to Palamedes’ trial and execution.

Treating this as the base text of our examination, we can focus on certain key passages or moves in the defense. The details of the *Palamedes* are obviously quite different from those of the *Apology*, and the opening parts of the speech are taken up with addressing the charges and arguing against the probability that they are correct. For example, there must have been some initial communication between Palamedes and the enemy, but not understanding each other’s language, how could they communicate? This difficulty decreases the probability that Palamedes is guilty, and so on. Beyond these arguments from probability there are frequent appeals to the defendant’s credibility or reputation, which he wishes to maintain. Palamedes then attacks his accuser, challenging him to produce tangible evidence including the presenting of witnesses. He points out that Odysseus’ indictment amounts to a contradiction: that Palamedes is both wise and mad. This, it is suggested, should undermine the jury’s confidence in the accuser. Palamedes then engages in a *praeteritio*: declining to bring up what in the process he actually does bring up. He then appeals to his own *ethos*, referring first to his blameless life, and then to his actual status as a benefactor of the Greek nation. He ends by directly

addressing the jury, speaking of the risks that they face to their reputations should they act unjustly.

Already from this outline, I hope we can see something of the structure and argument of the *Apology*, but it may help to also provide an outline of that text, by way of a reminder. Socrates enters the unfamiliar environment of the law court stressing his inability to defend himself well with words. He addresses the charges and rumors that have been brought against him, speaking first to the long-standing negative reputation that he seems to have acquired, and then to the specific current charges of believing in false gods and corrupting the youth. He argues that he would not have corrupted the youth in part because he would then have put himself in the company of those who might harm him. And he invites his accusers to bring forward witnesses to this corruption (even the relatives of the “corrupted” youth). He argues that Meletus (his chief accuser) is contradicting himself when he charges Socrates with believing in false gods because he also claims that Socrates does not believe in gods (“You cannot be believed, Meletus, even, I think, by yourself”—26e). He then defends his own occupation and life in general, arguing that he has always done his duty and stood by what was just. He has shown this through his deeds, opposing the wrongful dictates of both the democracy and the tyranny. He speaks to his role (divinely appointed) of benefactor to the city. He then engages in a *praeteritio* by describing the family that he will not bring before them in an appeal to pity (thereby bringing them before them in their minds). Having been convicted by the jury, he proposes a penalty suitable to a benefactor such as himself. And after having been condemned to death, he addresses the jury, pointing to the negative reputation the city will now acquire for an unjust judgment. There are expected to be parallels between any defenses of men faced with capital charges. But we might take some of the key moments from each speech and compare them, looking to see whether the second instance (Plato’s) directly echoes the first (Gorgias’).¹

Allusions between the Two Texts:

(1). *Palamedes*: Avoidance of harm to self [19]

Apology: Avoidance of harm to self (25e)

(2). *Palamedes*: Preservation of credibility/reputation [21]

Apology: Preservation of credibility/reputation (34e-35a)

(3). *Palamedes*: Invitation to bring forward witnesses [22]

Apology: Invitation to bring forward witnesses (34a)

(4). *Palamedes*: Contradiction of accuser:

“You have accused me in the indictment...of two most contradictory things, wisdom and madness, things which cannot coexist in the same man” [25]

Apology: Contradiction of accuser:

“I think he contradicts himself in the affidavit, as if he said: “Socrates is guilty of not believing in gods but believing in gods”” (27a)

(5). *Palamedes: Praeteritio* (I have no desire to bring up your misdeeds) [27]

Apology: Praeteritio (I will not bring my children before you) (34b-c)

(6). *Palamedes: Appeal to ethos I:*

“..all through from beginning to end my past life has been blameless, free from any accusation” [29]

Apology: Appeal to ethos I:

“Throughout my life...I have never come to an agreement with anyone to act unjustly” (33a)

(7). *Palamedes: Appeal to ethos II:*

“I am not only blameless but also a major benefactor of you and of the Greek nation” [30]

Apology: Appeal to ethos II:

“I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit” (36c)

(8). *Palamedes: Addresses jury members about themselves* [33]

Apology: Addresses jury members about themselves (39c)

(9). *Palamedes: Jury’s concern with deeds:*

“And you in your turn do not direct your attention to words in preference to deeds” [34]

Apology: Jury’s concern with deeds:

“I shall give you great proof of this, not words but what you esteem, deeds” (32a)

(10). *Palamedes: Prophecy to jury:*

“If you kill me unjustly, it will become obvious to many; for I am not unknown, and your wickedness will become known and perspicuous to the whole of Greece [36]

Apology: Prophecy to jury:

“It is for the sake of a short time, gentlemen of the jury, that you will acquire the reputation and the guilt in the eyes of those who want to denigrate the city, of having killed Socrates, a wise man” (38c)

4. Audience impact:

We might stop here and think about the intent behind this strategy and its impact on Plato’s likely audience. First, how should we think of this in argumentative terms? It is obviously not argumentative in the premise/conclusion structure we might expect. But the cumulatively effect of the allusion has argumentative force. *It* moves the audience towards a conclusion, an adherence. What is this?

Unsurprisingly, commentators disagree on what Plato’s intentions might be. Guido Calogero (1957), for example, saw the strategy belonging to the historical Socrates, who was enamoured of Gorgias ethical practice and so wove allusions to it into his speech, along with some of his *topoi* of argument. Plato was simply reporting Socrates’ actual strategies. But the allusions to the *Palamedes* are too evenly dispersed

throughout the structure of the *Apology* to suggest the responsibility does not lie with the author himself. In marked contrast to Calogero, James Coulter (1979) sees the allusions in the *Apology* as representing an implicit critique of Gorgianic rhetoric. The reader was expected to detect the contrast between a Gorgianic employment of the argument from probability and persuasive rhetorical devices and a Socratic insistence on truth and refusal to use just any means to persuade (Coulter, 1979: 57-58). But in making his case, Coulter overlooks the very way the allusions themselves undermine his position. While the *Apology* is not replete with arguments from probability in the way the *Palamedes* is, Plato *does* have Socrates adopt this *topos* of argument. He counters the charge of corruption (25e) by arguing that it is not probable that a man would put himself in danger of corrupting those close to him. And while Coulter takes at face value Socrates' claim that he will not appeal to the jury's emotions, our parallel #5 above shows Socrates doing exactly that: he employs a persuasive *praeteritio* by conjuring up the spectacle of his children in the very act of claiming he will not do so (34b-c).

A far more straightforward explanation of Plato's intentions is the simple desire to parallel the known case of Palamedes with the case of Socrates that he is presenting. More particularly, that earlier text seems quite effective in making clear the injustice of the case against the (mythical) Palamedes. Insofar as it is partly Plato's intent to emphasize the injustice of Socrates' treatment at the hands of the Athenian jury, his argument from allusion, paralleling the cases of Palamedes and Socrates, is an effective strategy for transferring the attitude toward Palamedes likely held by Plato's audience onto the case of Socrates. Working in conjunction with other features of the *Apology*, including the direct argumentation provided by the principal character, the allusion adds a depth to the rhetoric of the piece, strengthening its argumentative force.

5. Plato and Isocrates:

A more interesting case still is that involving Plato's *Apology* and Isocrates' *Antidosis*. In 356, a citizen of Athens was summoned to undertake the public service of financing a trireme (such summons were an institutional form of taxation on the wealthy). The citizen argued that the rhetorician Isocrates should bear the cost instead because he was wealthier. Isocrates lost the case and had to provide this public service. His "revenge" was to construct a fictional trial speech, an apology, in which he defended himself and his life, creating out of discourse an image (*eikōn*) of his thoughts and life as a whole. In the course of this trial speech, Isocrates makes a number of allusions to Plato's *Apology*. The following will give a sense of the parallels involved.

Allusions between the Two Texts:

- (1). *Antidosis*: Isocrates is accused of being able to "make weaker speeches stronger" [15]
Apology: Socrates is accused of making the "worse into the stronger argument" (19b).
- (2). *Antidosis*: Isocrates expects to have difficulty due to his old age and inexperience in such contests [26]

Apology: Socrates asks to be excused due to his old age and inexperience with respect to the manner of speaking in lawcourts (17d)

(3). *Antidosis*: Isocrates: “I lived my past life without anyone accusing me of violence or injustice during either the oligarchy or the democracy [27]

Apology: Socrates refused to act unjustly under the oligarchy and the democracy (32b-e)

(4). *Antidosis*: Isocrates is charged with corrupting the young by teaching them to speak well [30]

Apology: Socrates is charged with corrupting the young (24b-c)

(5). *Antidosis*: If Isocrates has harmed others, surely they would take the opportunity to accuse him [33; 92; 240]

Apology: Socrates invites the young men he has corrupted (or their relatives) to accuse him (33d-34a)

(6). *Antidosis*: It is claimed Isocrates is the cleverest of all men [35]

Apology: It is claimed that no man is wiser than Socrates (21a)

(7). *Antidosis*: Isocrates suggests he should receive thanks for his contributions rather than punishment [60-61]; greater thanks than those fed in the Prytaneum [95]

Apology: Socrates proposes a reward over a punishment; specifically, free meals in the Prytaneum (36e-37a)

(8). *Antidosis*: *Praeteritio*: Notes that others beg and bring their children before the court, “but I do not think anything of this kind is appropriate to a man of my age” [321]

Apology: *Praeteritio*: “I will not beg you to acquit me by bringing them here...it does not seem right to me to do these things, especially at my age” (34d-e)

These eight comparisons should suffice to show the extent of the allusion Isocrates is making to Plato’s *Apology*. Other parallels, some less direct, are apparent.ⁱⁱ The question now, as it was in relation to Plato, is what Isocrates intends by doing this? Why is this rhetorical strategy chosen by him? Commentators have had mixed views on this. Jaeger (1944) suggests that Isocrates was attracted by the possibilities of autobiography and the genre of the *apologia*, and saw his situation as similar to that of Socrates (p.133). This, at least, seems clear, and Isocrates impresses on us how he wishes to reflect his life in words. But why should he choose *Socrates*, or even, *Plato’s* text of Socrates to draw on? Nightingale (1995), regards Isocrates to be inviting his audience to attend to the differences as well as the similarities between himself and Plato’s philosopher; it is part of “Isocrates’ attack on *Plato’s* portrayal of the philosopher” (29). This indeed also seems the case.

In the *Antidosis*, Isocrates defends not only his life but also his thought. That is, he is concerned to defend his conception of philosophy and what he teaches as philosophy. In this respect, his greatest opponent is Plato. And in the allusions to the *Apology* we see Isocrates vying with Plato to claim Socrates as intellectual ancestor.

Isocrates and Plato are contemporaries, and write at a time when categories like ‘philosopher’ and ‘sophist’ are still fluid. And who should “own” such labels is still being decided. In the battle between Plato and Isocrates, Isocrates employs Plato’s own work against him.

We see this dispute in the latter stages of the *Antidosis*. Isocrates relegates anything that does not benefit a person’s ability to speak or act to the status of what children learn in school, and not philosophy [266]. In contrast to Plato, Isocrates does not believe that human nature can attain knowledge so as to know what to say and do. Instead, people should spend their time learning how to reach the best opinions as quickly as possible [271]. Denying that there has ever been the possibility of producing self-control and justice in those who are not disposed to virtue, Isocrates instead argues that people are improved by learning to speak well and developing a passion to persuade their audience [274-275]. Given this basic disagreement over the nature and goals of ‘philosophy’, it is no surprise that Isocrates would use every means at his disposal to persuade his audience of the sense he advocates, including associating himself with a ‘philosopher’ of Socrates’ pedigree.

6. Conclusion:

Again, we can consider how the argumentative use of allusion was intended to meet Isocrates’ purposes. Like the *Palamedes/Apology* case, this one also involves what is essentially analogical reasoning. But we have something far more subtle than just an argument from analogy at work here. The powerful effect of allusion on the audience seems to offer more than just a comparison of philosophical models. It is through the use of allusion that Isocrates is able to evoke similarities between himself and Socrates, to draw the association in the minds of his audience. In this way, it serves as a potentially effective strategy of rhetorical argumentation. When we ask our question, ‘How is the argumentation *experienced* by its audience?’ we can imagine an awakening in the audience, a consciousness as the connection is made and the relationship seen with the mind’s eye. In placing such onus on the ability of the audience to make the connection, allusion has an effectiveness missing from more “removed” discourses. Isocrates is not saying ‘here’s my model of the philosopher; there’s Plato’s model’. He is attaching his position to a life, a powerful life that has been forcefully depicted and defended in Plato’s text. And Isocrates draws that force into his own case. Furthermore, this first question points to the important collaborative involvement contained in the second question (‘how does the argument invite collaboration?’) The allusion argument invites the audience to complete the reasoning, to become complicit in the development of the argument towards its conclusion. The audience adds the missing elements; adds the connection, and as such Isocrates’ conclusion is their conclusion as much as it is his. They have drawn it for themselves, and if this is done unconsciously, the allusion has been even more effective. But given the currency of Plato’s text among educated audiences of the day, it’s unlikely the allusions would have been missed. Isocrates’ strategy would have been open and clear, and people left to decide for themselves, who between Plato and Isocrates is the fitting heir to Socrates.

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ⁱ There has been some dispute among scholars over whether the *Palamedes* (and *Helen*) are authentic, or the imitations of Gorgias' style written by admirers (see Consigny (2001, pp.4-5), but the current consensus is for authenticity.

ⁱⁱ For example, 21, 85, 145, 154, 179.