

A Case of Platonic Irony at *Laches* 191b
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Studying the dramatic irony of the Platonic dialogues, Diskin Clay (2002) has shown that many lively debates are darkened by the shadow of Socrates' death. The poignancy we recognize when Socrates tells us that the philosopher may be killed upon his return to the cave in *Republic* 7, or when we watch Socrates head off to answer Meletus' charges at the end of the *Theaetetus*, also allows for a certain comfort: that despite the anonymity of the dialogues, we share an intimate moment with Plato in the grief over the loss of Socrates. In this paper, I would like to suggest another example of Platonic irony that has gone unnoticed, involving the title character of the dialogue on *andreia*, *Laches*. I will argue that an allusion to Homer presents the same choice that Laches had to make at the battle of Mantinea [418 BCE]—to wisely retreat or impulsively hold ground—in the context of the Trojan War. This paper will show that just as with the trial and execution of Socrates, Thucydides' narrative of Mantinea and the Homeric allusion to Aeneas' divine horses ironize the position of Laches in the dialogue named after him by forcing us to reconsider the relationship between history, poetry, and the philosophical dialogue.

In response to Laches' initial definition of courage, that the courageous man will “remain at his post, defend himself against his enemy, and not run away,” Socrates indicates that a man can be courageous if he fights with the enemy while in retreat (190e-191a). As proof, Socrates points to Aeneas' horses that “know when to pursue and flee,” alluding to *Iliad* 5.222-3. The problem with the allusion, however, is that the context is contrary to what Socrates means to argue. As Aeneas and Pandarus debate whether they should attack Diomedes or retreat, Aeneas convinces Pandarus to attack, with disastrous results: Diomedes kills Pandarus and would have killed Aeneas had Aphrodite not whisked him away. What does it mean that Socrates, in trying to convince Laches that one can be courageous in retreat, refers to Homeric characters *who do not retreat*?

This question can be answered in light of Thucydides' description of the battle of Mantinea, Laches' moment in history. Agis and the Spartans initially attacked the Athenians, but eventually retreated because the Athenians held better ground. Instead, Agis diverted their water supply, hoping to “incite the Argives and their allies to rush down the hill to combat” (5.65.5). Laches and the other Athenian general, wary of a trap, considered retreat, but were pressured by their troops to attack. They marched into an ambush and were decimated; among the casualties was Laches himself. Thucydides' narrative contrasts the calculated retreat of the Spartans with the impetuous attack of the Athenians, a contrast Plato intends to bring to the exchange between Socrates and Laches.

Plato pits Socrates and Laches against one another to discuss what would later become the circumstances of Laches' downfall and so again here we share an intimate moment with Plato, because neither Laches nor Socrates can appreciate the full implications of the Homeric allusion. The interplay between Socrates and Laches as well as Pandarus and Aeneas is meant to invite us to consider how Thucydides' Laches would have benefited from Socrates' advice, forcing us to consider the point of this specific dialogue, that there is an intimate relationship between courage and wisdom, and reconsider the philosophical dialogue in general: that it is only through the philosophical dialogue that history can be rewritten and therefore not repeated.