

The Noble Dog: Homeric Images and Poetic Persuasion in Plato's *Republic*

Despite Socrates' assertion that poetry quarrels with philosophy (*Rep.* 10.607b6) and needs to be banned from the beautiful city, nevertheless Homer and myth remain a constant thread interwoven with his philosophical argument. In this paper I shall argue that Socrates fashions Odysseus as the mythical paradigm of the ideal philosophical hero. His preliminary discussion of the noble dog in Book Two is inspired by a passage in the *Odyssey* where Homer compares Odysseus to a dog, and Socrates' frequent employment of the image throughout the *Republic* serves his rhetorical purpose of persuading Glaucon toward a life of philosophy.

My study fits within the theoretical framework of several scholars who argue that Homer and the epic tradition influence the form and content of the *Republic*. Jacob Howland writes that "Plato's use of Homeric imagery in the *Republic* is no less important than his responsive dialogue with Aristophanes and the tragic dramatists" (30). Moreover, Plato "models the philosopher after the pattern of the epic hero" (31). Howland believes that Socrates is in dialogue with and at work to reshape the *Odyssey* with the aim of narrating "a new, specifically *philosophic* odyssey" (49). Charles Segal argues that while Plato presents "philosophic λόγος as the antagonist of Homer's mythic and poetical discourse," nevertheless, "beneath obvious and fundamental differences Plato is indebted to Homer more deeply than he would avow" (316). David O'Connor agrees that we cannot accept Socrates' abuse of the poets as a simple condemnation of poetry, writing, "if we keep our ears open, the *Republic* echoes with the tones of Homer and Hesiod...[Plato] brings an undertone of mythic commentary to the dialogue's logical analysis and ethical drama" (56). O'Connor proposes that Socrates' philosophic education, brought to light, so to speak, in the allegory of the cave, has the purpose of tempering Glaucon's fierce nature (cf. Howland (79-95) and Strauss (85-87)). Socrates, representing a blind Tiresias, can be seen as

guiding Glaucon to "a new mythic identity, from an ambitious Achilles to a chastened Odysseus" (O'Connor, 71).

Within this framework, my study offers a unique reading of Socrates' rhetorical technique by arguing that his use of the noble dog image reveals a conscious effort on his part to harness the enchanting powers of poetry (Lear 1992) to the thrust of his logical argument. In Book Two, Socrates introduces a problem: how will the guardians—whose nature he has just compared to that of noble pups—be prevented from being harsh toward their citizens, if they must be *both* gentle toward friends *and* harsh toward enemies (375b6-d2)? After expressing his *aporia*, Socrates returns to the image (εικόνοϛ, 375d4) of the dog, and notes that they “are most gentle toward those they are used to and familiar with, but toward those they don’t recognize, the opposite” (375e3-5). This bears close resemblance in language, thought, and literary technique (simile) to an episode in the *Odyssey*. The sight of his household maidens traipsing off to “mingle” with the suitors vexes Odysseus’s *thymos* (*Od.* 20.9). As he ponders killing them on the spot or letting them go, “his heart began to bark inside him,/ as when a dog, standing before her tender pups,/ barks and yearns to fight a man she does not recognize” (κραδίη δέ οἱ ἔνδον ὕλάκτει./ ὥϛ δὲ κύων ἀμαλῆσι περὶ σκυλάκεσσι βεβῶσα/ ἄνδρ’ ἀγνοήσασ’ ὕλάει μέμονέν τε μάχεσθαι, *Od.* 20.13-15). Like Homer, who compares Odysseus to a dog bravely protecting her whelps against a stranger, Socrates compares the guardians to dogs which have that same brave (ἀνδρεῖον, 375a8) spiritedness (θυμοειδήϛ, 375a10) to fight anyone unfamiliar to themselves (ἀγνώταϛ, 375e4; ἀγνοῆσαι, 376b4; ἀγνοία, 376b5). Both authors locate the seat of a man’s anger in his *thymos*, and both appeal to the visual powers of the simile. Later on, Socrates alludes to this Homeric passage to support his argument, the second time as proof that reason is separate from spirit (4.441b). The *leitmotiv* of the dog is forward-looking and reveals Socrates'

goal of persuading Glaucon to take the "philosophic odyssey" by alluring him through the *thelxis* of poetry.

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