Crito's Homeric Embassy

The philosophical and poetical traditions that promote self-control or portray the consequences of ungoverned emotion merge in Crito's mission to Socrates's prison cell, where Plato uses the embassy to Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* 9 as a literary template in order to elevate the nature of a hero by contrasting the impulsive, impetuous, mercurial temper of Achilles with the steady, thoughtful, deliberative, calmly rational composure of Socrates. Plato shows, in a volley fired at the epic poet, how the philosopher was more truly heroic than the warrior, for where the warrior aimed selfishly at securing his own honor, the philosopher aimed at political virtue. Both embassies failed: The Achaean embassy failed to persuade Achilles to stick to his post at Troy; Crito's failed to induce Socrates to abandon his in Athens.

Plato's *Crito* shows not only that Socrates has learned the *Iliad's* lessons and has thus avoided inflicting pains myriad upon his people but also that he has achieved the chief ethical aim of philosophy—a mind calm in the midst of turmoil.

Others have written of the *Crito* as a *graphê paranomôn* (Steadman); or an endorsement of the rule of law (Weiss) and the legitimacy of legal obedience (Rosano, Young); or a persuasion of Crito and *not* an endorsement of the personified "Laws" (Moore); or a misgiving about the consistency of Socrates' positions in the *Crito* and the *Apology* (Kraut); or an analysis of the fragility of allegiance to one's true beliefs (Hatzistavrou). My thesis, to be argued in under twenty minutes, is that Plato intends the *Crito* to recall the similarly unsuccessful embassy in the *Iliad* and be a foil to it, a purpose he signals in Socrates' dream of the mysterious woman who revised Achilles' first-person rejection of the embassy in *Iliad* 9 by informing Socrates, "on the

third day *you* will arrive at fertile Phthia." Plato's allusion at first evokes curiosity, but the more one ponders it, the deeper and richer it becomes.

Where the Greek generals go to Achilles as a team, Crito goes to Socrates unaccompanied. Where the Greek embassy finds Achilles singing of old heroes—no doubt brooding over his treatment by Agamemnon—Crito finds Socrates sleeping soundly. Crito combines the three members of the Homeric embassy; where Odysseus presents the formal request from Agamemnon, Crito gives his prepared six-part argument for why Socrates should escape; where Phoenix adduces the persuasiveness of an enduring affection, Crito laments the loss of a lifelong friend; where Ajax represents a desire to love and be loved, Crito reminds Socrates of friends and family who need him. But where Achilles, in his unstable state, responds passionately, Socrates sticks resolutely to his philosophical post: he will decide only on the basis of argument as he reminds Crito to adhere to their fundamental principle of
not ever doing wrong.

Plato's decision to have Crito go alone is consistent with the insistence of Socrates throughout the dialogues that what counts is the agreement of his single interlocutor. Phoenix's tale of Meleager has its counterpart in Socrates' conversation with the Laws. The tale of Meleager teaches that Achilles should set aside his anger and return to battle before it is too late; Socrates' imagined colloquy models the argumentation by which one should make a reasoned choice.

When readers reflect on the *Crito* and its quotation from Book 9, they will contrast the situations of Socrates and Achilles (Greenberg). Achilles, enraged at Agamemnon, announces his return to a sheltered, dull life—a rejection of his choice of a life of undying glory, of his enlistment for the war against Troy, and his commitment to his comrades-in-arms. Socrates

dreamt that he would go to a foreign land, but readers know it will not be the Phthia of Crito's Thessalian friends; readers know that Socrates will remain in Athens, loyal to Athens' laws and to the philosophical principle of not requiting wrong with wrong. Socrates will prove every inch the philosophical hero. We recall the *Phaedo* (117b–c), when Socrates will take the cup of hemlock from the prison attendant gently (ἵλεως),with no change in complexion—like the dying, placid, gently smiling Greeks on the metopes of the Parthenon—and drink it readily (εὐχερῶς) and calmly (εὐκόλως).

Bibliography

Greenberg, Nathan. "Socrates' Choice in the *Crito," HSCP* 70 (1965) 45-82.

Hatzistavrou, Antony. "Crito's Failure to Deliberate Socratically," *CQ* 63(2013) 580–94.

Moore, Christopher. "Socratic Persuasion in the *Crito*," *BJHP* 19(2011) 1021–46.

Rosano, Michael J. "Citizenship in Plato's Crito," *RPolitics* 62(2000) 451–77.

Steadman, Geoffrey D. "The Unity of Plato's *Crito*," *CJ* 101(2006) 361–82).

Weiss, Roslyn. *Socrates Dissatisfied* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

Young, Gary. "Socrates and Obedience," *Phronesis* 19(1974) 1–29.