

## For the Benefit of Mortals: Diogenes' Philosophical Epitaphs for Plato

In his only extant work, *The Collection of Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, a prose biography of philosophers, Diogenes Laertius (c. late second to early third century AD) includes 978 lines of poetry—246 of which comprise fifty-two of Diogenes' own epigrams. Nearly all of Diogenes' epigrams are funerary in occasion and range in tone from epigrams lauding the accomplishments and noble deaths of Solon (DL 1.63) and Socrates (2.46) to those which relentlessly mock the deaths of Bion of Borysthenes (4.55-57) and Menippus the Cynic (6.100) as hypocritical.

In his life of Plato, Diogenes includes the text of Plato's will, followed by three epitaphs said to be inscribed on his tomb (3.43-44), and two laudatory epigrams of Diogenes' own composition—one being an epitaph, the other on how he died (3.45). Interestingly, both epigrams quote the words of one of Diogenes' allegedly inscribed epitaphs (in bold).

ἔστι καὶ ἡμέτερον οὕτως ἔχον:  
καὶ πῶς, εἰ μὴ **Φοῖβος** ἀν' Ἑλλάδα **φῦσε Πλάτωνα**,  
ψυχὰς **ἀνθρώπων** γράμμασιν ἠκέσατο;  
καὶ γὰρ ὁ **τοῦδε** γεγῶς **Ἀσκληπιός** ἐστὶν ἰητὴρ  
σώματος ὡς ψυχῆς ἀθάνατοιο Πλάτων. (DL 3.45)

There is my own (epigram) which goes this way:

And except that Phoebus Apollo begat Plato, how would he have healed the souls of men throughout Greece by letters? Truly even as Asclepius is a doctor for the body, so is Plato for the immortal soul.

καὶ ἄλλο, ὡς ἐτελεύτα:  
**Φοῖβος** ἔφουσε **βροτοῖς** **Ἀσκληπιὸν** ἠδὲ **Πλάτωνα**,  
τὸν μὲν, ἵνα ψυχὴν, τὸν δ', ἵνα σῶμα σάοι·  
δαισάμενος δὲ γάμον πόλιν ἤλυθεν, ἦν ποθ' ἐαυτῷ  
ἔκτισε καὶ δαπέδῳ Ζηνὸς ἐνιδρύσατο. (DL 3.45)

And another on how he died:

Phoebus Apollo begat Asclepius and Plato for the benefit of mortals, so the former could save the body, the latter the soul. And while dining at a wedding, he went to the city, which he once built himself and set on the plain of Zeus.

Even more interestingly, the epitaph is not one of the three which Diogenes quotes, despite evidence of their widespread circulation (*FGE* 1981: 305-307), Notopoulos (1942: 272-293), Taran (1984: 63-82). It is a fourth epitaph otherwise not mentioned by Diogenes but quoted independently by the Neoplatonist Olympiodorus of Thebes (2.166-7 Westermann) and a later *Anonymous Praefatio* to a life of Plato (Griffin 2014: 171). This source epitaph is from a biographical tradition that Plato's father was Apollo—an assertion that would be unusual for Diogenes who is notably wary of mystical and superstitious details in lives.

Following Cameron, Gutzwiller sees the prose-poetry Aristotelian *Peplos* as the “best literary parallel” for Diogenes' epigrams (Cameron 1993:388-93, Gutzwiller 2018:562). The Aristotelian *Peplos* included catalogues of mythical heroes, ship lists for Trojan War heroes, lists of major festivals beginning with the Panathenaea and Eleusinia, and epitaphs for each of the heroes. Unlike Cameron who sees the *Peplos* epigrams as a product of Hellenistic book culture, Gutzwiller argues that the *Peplos* epigrams would have circulated orally in sympotic culture in the Classical Period before being gathered—their adherence to the conventions of inscribed epitaphs lending them credibility to listeners (Gutzwiller 2010: 226-7). While Diogenes' inclusion of poetry within his collection of biographical data recalls the *Peplos*, Diogenes' poems eschew the conventions of epitaphs in favor of the “more sophisticated tradition of Greek epigrams that were composed by the early third century BC for inclusion in single-authored poetry books” (2018:563-4).

In this paper, I will argue that Diogenes Laertius' epigrams include this deliberate reference to the fourth epitaph 1) as a reference to the orally transmitted epitaphs in the biographical tradition, as exemplified by the Aristotelian *Peplos*. As Gutzwiller notes, Diogenes

makes a similar reference in his citation of an anonymous epitaph on Orpheus. Diogenes also uses this epitaph 2) in order to showcase his mastery of variation and to 3) address the mystical biographical tradition on philosophers as Holy Men.

### Bibliography

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