PLATO'S AGATHON'S SOPHOCLES: LOVE AND NECESSITY IN THE *SYMPOSIUM*

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As W. RHYS ROBERTS ONCE OBSERVED, Plato is "among the first and greatest quoters."[1] In the dialogues now generally accepted as genuine, we find a total of over 175 quotations from the works of the poets, and well over 200 more references.[2] Among the quotations, we often find apparent misquotations. Many of these misquotations appear to be the result neither of scribal error nor of variant texts now lost nor of faulty memory, but rather the result of deliberate intent on the part of Plato. It is generally misguided to base an interpretation of a text upon what the reader takes to have been the author's "intention" in writing it, and this is unquestionably the case with Plato—there remains disagreement as to the very purpose of the dialogues themselves. Nevertheless, it is occasionally possible not only to recognize that a given misquotation is deliberate, but also to speak of what Plato's purpose may have been in misquoting the poet. Plato sometimes seems to have intended merely to parody a familiar verse,[3] while at other times he appears to have been attempting to provide a sort of argument from authority in support of the position being put forth in a particular passage of a dialogue.[4] Similar to Plato's use of misquotation is his practice of employing accurately quoted verses in such a way as to alter somewhat, or add to, the face-value meaning of what is being said in the dialogue. One such use of quotation is found at *Symposium* 196c8–d1.[5] This particular instance of Plato's use of quotation is perhaps of some interest for its suggestion of the extent to which Plato (and his contem-

[1]W. Rhys Roberts, *Greek Rhetoric and Literary Criticism* (New York 1928, reprinted 1963) 12.

[2]I count at least 178 quotations, 159 allusions to specific works, and another 77 references to individual poets (usually by name).

[3]As, for example: *Resp.* 424b–c = *Od.* 1.352 and *Resp.* 545d–e = *Il.* 16.113 (see George Edwin Howes, "Homeric Quotations in Plato and Aristotle," *HSCP* 6 [1895] 153–237, at 205 and 200; also Seth Benardete, "Some Misquotations of Homer in Plato," *Phronesis* 8 [1963] 173–178, at 176).

[4]As, for example: *Crat.* 392e = *Il.* 22.507 (see Benardete, *op. cit.* 174–175); *Meno* 95d–e = Theognis 33–36 (see my short note, "Xenophon and Plato," *CQ* NS 32 [1982] 468–469).

[5]*Symp.* 196c has long been recognized as an allusion to Sophocles—Nauck, for example, identified it as such, and Jebb agreed that he was "probably justified" in doing so (*The Fragments of Sophocles* [Cambridge 1917] 1.192 n.)—but, as far as I am aware, the relation of

poraries?) may have felt at liberty to quote from the poets in a decidedly cavalier fashion. But its greatest value rests, I believe, in its demonstration of the skill of Plato the artist, as opposed to Plato the ("mere") philosopher.

The passage in question reads as follows (Agathon is speaking):[6]

καὶ μὴν εἴς γε ἀνδρείαν Ἔρωτι "οὐδ' Ἄρης ἀνθίσταται."

[Then as to valor, as the poet sings, "But him [Love] not even Ares can withstand."]

Plato's Agathon is here quoting from Sophocles' *Thyestes* (frag. 256 *TrGF*):

πρὸς τὴν ἀνάγκην οὐδ' Ἄρης ἀνθίσταται.

[not even Ares can withstand necessity.]

This is a superb example of Plato's employment of quotation in such a way as to add "layers of meaning" to his dialogues. It is likely that the members of Plato's audience were sufficiently familiar with the *Thyestes* to recognize this as a quotation, and it would thus seem unlikely that Agathon's substitution of "Love" for Sophocles' "Necessity" would pass entirely unnoticed.[7] Plato's audience would probably have wondered about this substitution, and why he had Agathon quote this particular verse. To discover Plato's reason, we have to consider the larger context of the passage in question, recalling that he has Agathon similarly substitute Necessity for Love toward the beginning of his speech (at 195c1–3):

And as for those old stories of the gods we have read in Hesiod and Parmenides, we may be sure that any such proceedings were the work not of Love but of Necessity—if, indeed, such tales are credible at all.

Recalling this earlier substitution of Necessity for Love, we see that Plato, by tying together Love, instead of the expected Necessity, with the quotation from Sophocles in the later passage, allows his Agathon to remain

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196c to 195c and 197b, with regard to the reversal of the roles played by Love and Necessity, has not previously been pointed out.

I count 196c as a quotation in order to distinguish it from allusions that refer to particular works or verses without actually quoting them (as, for example: *Symp.* 174c = *Il.* 2.408; *Symp.* 179e = *Il.* 9.410–416; *Symp.* 180a = *Il.* 11.785–786).

[6]Greek OCT; trans. Michael Joyce.

[7]This particular verse from the *Thyestes* would probably have stuck in the minds of the audience, for upon reading or hearing it one is reminded of the well-known verse of Simonides (*PMG* fr. 542; quoted at *Protagoras* 345d): ἀνάγκαι / δ' οὐδὲ θεοὶ μάχονται—"The gods themselves strive not against necessity." Assuming that Sophokles' words were in fact familiar to the audience, such a drastic change as the substitution of "Love" for "Necessity" would certainly have been noticed.

consistent in the development of his "argument." And thus do we also begin to suspect that this reversal of roles may be somehow fundamental to Agathon's entire speech. Indeed, it turns out to be so.

When Agathon claims that none of our pleasures and lusts (ἡδονῶν καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν) is more powerful than love (196c), we are forced to wonder whether this might not be the case precisely because Love in some way possesses the character of Necessity.[8] Agathon certainly suggests that it does. While he states that Necessity was king before Love was born, and that Love has since then "showered every kind of blessing upon gods and men" (197b), in his substitution of Love for Necessity (at 196d) he implies that the former has somehow managed to dethrone the latter. This is, of course, quite appropriate, given the announced topic for the evening's discussion, and Agathon, himself a tragedian,[9] is singularly qualified to present such a variation on the basic and traditional tragic theme of the nature and workings of Necessity. And Plato, by means of his provocative employment of the verse of Sophocles, indicates Agathon's variation on this theme in the clearest manner possible. But this only becomes clear to the reader who is approaching Plato as not only a philosopher, but also a skilful literary artist writing for a poetically learned audience.

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[8]It is of interest to note in this context that ἐπιθυμία ("desire") is described as "far stronger" than necessity at *Cratylus* 403c.

[9]And a competent one, according to Aristotle; see, for example, *Poet.* 1451b, 1456a.