

GREK 4090/6090: Plato's *Gorgias*
Charles Platter
MWF 10:10-11:00

TEXT: Plato, *Gorgias*, E.R. Dodds, ed. (Oxford); *Republic* Book 1 (optional)

GRADING:

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| 40% | Two exams |
| 25 | One 10-page paper (20-pages for grad students) |
| 10 | Oral presentation of research project |
| 25 | Class participation (translation, discussion, written responses to prompts) |

DAILY WORK:

I will make assignments from week to week. Grad students will be responsible for the entire assignment. Undergraduates will read about two-thirds of that in Greek, the other third in English. I will also give discussion prompts occasionally, to be presented orally and turned in.

COURSE SUMMARY:

Plato's *Gorgias* defends the Socratic way of life against its strongest and most able critics. Although the interlocutor of Socrates is initially the great sophist Gorgias, the dialogue consist of conversations with three individuals: Gorgias, Polus (a younger associate of Gorgias), and Callicles (an otherwise unknown Athenian).

The action of the dialogue falls into four parts:

1. What is rhetoric? This question is not after an answer like "Great" or "Noble," or even "The most powerful of all the arts". Instead, Socrates compares the situation to that of a painter, who makes use of the art of painting to produce canvases, murals, etc. So too for rhetoric, if the analogy holds: if the rhetorician makes use of the rhetorical art (techne) what will be the product of his labor?
2. If rhetoric is not a techne, on the other hand, Socrates suggests that it is a species of flattery and that the rhetorician has a great knack for using words to get what he wants. His goal is not truth but pleasure (compared, e.g. to a doctor whose goal is the health of a patient, or a builder whose goal is sturdy, functioning buildings). In the end Socrates and Polus come to the conclusion that only an art whose focus is the truth and that is based on knowledge can cure the ignorance of the soul and help us to live happier lives. The rhetorician can do nothing for anyone, then.
3. The centerpiece of the dialogue is Socrates' battle with the great immoralist Callicles, who calls upon Socrates to abandon philosophy before it gets him into trouble and presents a forceful defense of the thesis that a life lived in conformity with natural justice is the best life for a man is to follow his

desires and to rule over all who are inferior to him. To do otherwise, he says, is slavery. This topic is explored in a number of ways but all of them basically juxtapose the life of radical hedonism, dedicated *solely* to the pursuit of pleasure with the philosophical life based on moderation and justice. For Socrates, the life Callicles describes is the worst kind of slavery, for the hedonist is the slave of every impulse he encounters, however demeaning. This debate resounds powerfully with other Socratic works, particularly the *Apology*, which it anticipates by alluding to the conviction of Socrates, and to Book 1 of the *Republic*, where Socrates engages another, less determined immoralist, the sophist Thrasymachus.

4. The dialogue concludes with a short myth of the afterlife told by Socrates, and linked with his reflections on the afterlife in the *Apology*, in Book 10 of the *Republic*, and at the end of *Phaedo*. In it Socrates reaffirms his conviction that it is better to suffer wrong rather than to commit an act of injustice yourself and appeals to Callicles to join him in the pursuit of the τρεπτος βριτος του βου, wherever it leads them.

All academic work must meet the standards contained in "A Culture of Honesty." Students are responsible for informing themselves about those standards before performing any academic work.

The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.