

PLATO'S MISQUOTATION OF THE POETS

The relatively infrequent instances of Plato's misquotation of the poets continue to provoke discussion and speculation. It is often suggested that his misquotations were unintentional, as a result either of faulty memory or simply of a negligence coincident with his immersion in his own train of thought.¹ It is sometimes suggested that Plato was quoting from a variant text—without exception, one that is now lost. Particular instances of such misquotation tend to become contentious, however, with the suggestion that Plato *intentionally* altered the verse(s) in question.² While a strong case might be made in some cases for unintentional misquotation—especially where the 'misquotation' appears to have been dictated by grammatical concerns and is of negligible significance—the two alternatives often remain provocative: (1) that Plato did indeed intentionally misquote the verse in question, and (2) that Plato was quoting a variant text. The latter possibility itself presents two further possibilities: (i) that Plato was aware only of the variant he quoted, and (ii) that Plato intentionally chose from among variants with which he was acquainted. The 'intentional' element of the latter enables us to regard (ii), for the moment, as roughly equivalent to intentional misquotation. The former possibility, that Plato was aware only of the variant text from which he quoted, always remains, but it becomes significantly less probable as an explanation when a case can be made for intentional misquotation (as either [1] or [2ii]). While it is often difficult to adjudicate between competing arguments for (1) and (2), I would like to suggest that when the arguments seem equally persuasive or compelling, we generally adopt a variation on the principle of charity—call it the 'principle of authorial respect'—and credit Plato with intentional misquotation. In what follows I shall examine a particular case of possible intentional misquotation and demonstrate how our adoption of the principle of authorial respect might facilitate a more reasonable interpretation of the Platonic work in question. I choose a passage from *Laws* for the further purpose of demonstrating how even here, in what is generally regarded as among the most 'undramatic' of all the dialogues, Plato remains a consummate literary artist.

At *Laws* 776B–8A, we find Plato's 'Athenian' discussing the institution of slavery with Clinias, a Cretan, and Megillus, a Lacedaemonian. About halfway through this discussion (at 777A1–2), the Athenian quotes *Od.* 17.322–3:

ἥμισυ γάρ τε νόου . . . ἀπαμείρεται εὐρύσπα Ζεὺς
ἀνδρῶν, οὓς ἂν δὴ κατὰ δούλιον ἡμαρ ἔλῃσι.

For of half their sense wide browed Zeus deprives
men, on the day they are seized by slavery.

¹ Both La Barbe, *L'Homère de Platon* (Liège, 1949), and George Edwin Howes, 'Homeric quotations in Plato and Aristotle', *HSCP* 6 (1895), make frequent use of these hypotheses. (Although in fairness it must be noted that Howes mentions then promptly dismisses the possibility that such a lapse of memory can account for Plato's substitution of *νόου* in the passage discussed below.) C. L. Brownson, in *Plato's Studies and Criticisms of the Poets* (Boston, 1920), attempts as far as possible to avoid recourse to these hypotheses, yet they remain for him a 'when all else fails' fallback position.

² Seth Benardete convincingly attacks some of La Barbe's arguments, arguing instead for intentional misquotation, in 'Some misquotations of Homer in Plato', *Phronesis* 8 (1963) (see especially his ingenious explanation of Plato's substitution of *πόλιν* for *πόλιν* in the quotation of *Il.* 22.507 at *Cra.* 392E1). For more instances of likely intentional misquotation, cf. J. Mitscherling, 'Xenophon and Plato', *CQ* 32 (1982), 468–9 and 'Plato's Agathon's Sophocles: love and necessity in the *Symposium*', *Phoenix* 39 (1985), 375–7.

Our Homeric text reads:

ἥμισυ γάρ τ' ἀρετῆς ἀποαίνονται εὐρύσπα Ζεὺς
 ἀνέρος, εὐτ' ἂν μιν κατὰ δούλιον ἥμαρ ἔλθῃσιν.

For Zeus of the wide brows takes away one half of the virtue
 from a man, once the day of slavery closes upon him.³

The major differences between the two texts lie in Plato's use (1) of ἀπαμείρεται . . . ἀνδρῶν in place of ἀποαίνονται . . . ἀνέρος, and (2) of νόου in place of ἀρετῆς. Howes offers the following discussion (his references demand that I quote his entire passage):

At first sight it would seem as if the only explanation of the great difference between the quotation and the apparent original, would be to suppose a serious lapse of memory on the part of Plato. Fortunately for our investigation, and fortunately for a better idea of a possible explanation of such differences generally, we have the testimony of both Athenaeus [6, 24] and Eustathius, to show that Plato is here giving us an old variant, of which there is no trace in the manuscripts or scholia of Homer. Athenaeus, to be sure, is quoting from Plato, and really substantiates the correctness of the text of Plato alone; but he seems to have accepted Plato's text as a correct Homeric quotation. Besides, we read in Eustathius (1766, 55),—ἥμισυ γάρ τ' ἀρετῆς ἀπαμείρεται εὐρύσπα Ζεὺς ἀνδρῶν, οὗς ἂν δὴ καὶ ἐξῆς, ὅπερ σημαίνει ὅτι παρά τισιν ἄλλοις εὐρηται κατ' ἑτεροίαν γραφήν, ἥμισυ γάρ τε νόου ἀπαμείρεται. With this testimony before him even La Roche, who in his text of Homer feels obliged to follow the Homeric manuscripts, is forced to admit, 'id vero negari non potest, Platonem et Athenaeum in Homero suo scriptum reperisse γάρ τε νόου ἀπαμείρεται . . . ἀνδρῶν οὗς ἂν δὴ.' [Howes notes: 'In his *Annotatio Critica* on this passage.']⁴

Howes rightly points out that the testimony of Athenaeus means little with regard to Plato's 'faithfulness to the text' here. Yet even Howes, like La Roche, places unjustified faith in the testimony of Eustathius. As we see in the passage quoted by Howes, Eustathius reads ἀπαμείρεται not only with the Platonic νόου but also with the Homeric ἀρετῆς. As no manuscripts or scholia of Homer indicate that ἀπαμείρεται was a variant, it might be suggested that Eustathius has simply made an error in transcription. However, since Eustathius is commenting here on ἀπαμείρεται (not on νόου or ἀρετῆς), this is hardly likely. We might suppose, then, that there existed a variant reading in a text now lost. Yet it is not impossible that Eustathius has committed the same sort of error that Plato may have made in substituting νόου for ἀρετῆς: the context of his discussion may have led him to misread or inaccurately to recall the verse. Moreover, we have no way of knowing which ἑτεροίαν γραφήν Eustathius is here referring to, and whether he might not have in mind precisely the text of Plato (and/or Athenaeus).⁵ Whatever the explanation for Eustathius' reading of ἀπαμείρεται, he gives us no assistance in determining whether νόου was a pre-Platonic variant. In sum, neither the testimony of Athenaeus nor that of Eustathius constitutes proof that any source except Plato read νόου at *Od.* 17.322.

Nevertheless, some may still want to argue that the substitution of νόου for ἀρετῆς does reflect a variant reading of a text now lost. England remarks⁶ that 'τε νόου . . . ἀνδρῶν sounds more like Homer than τ' ἀρετῆς . . . ἀνέρος, and gets some confirmation

³ This translation, and those of the *Odyssey* following, by R. Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York, 1965).

⁴ Howes (n. 1), 194–5.

⁵ I gratefully acknowledge the observation of one of this journal's referees that this possibility is 'significantly more likely'. I am indebted to the same reader for several very helpful suggestions for the revision of this paper.

⁶ Edwin England, *The Laws of Plato* 1 (Manchester, 1921; repr. New York, 1976), 18.

from the ἀνθρώπων νόον ἔγνω in α 3.' The verse England is referring to is found in the opening passage of the *Odyssey* (1.1–5):

Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways [πολύτροπον],⁷ who was driven
far journeys, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel.
Many were they [πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων] whose cities he saw, whose minds he
learned of [νόον ἔγνω],
many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea,
struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions.

That τε νόου . . . ἀνδρῶν in fact 'sounds more like Homer' than τ' ἀρετῆς . . . ἀνέρος will probably not win universal agreement from our Homer scholars. Moreover, at *Od.* 1.3 νόον is used in a different sense from that which we find in the Platonic variant of *Od.* 17.322: in this verse in Book 1 the word is employed to connote different ways of characterizing the thinking of peoples of different cities, whereas in Book 17 it is employed to speak of mental capability in general.⁸ England, then, is suggesting that Plato's version of *Od.* 17.322–3 does in fact represent a variant text, for it 'sounds more like Homer' (which is debatable) and Homer also uses νόον in a similar sense in the third verse of his poem, sixteen books earlier (which is not true). This is not a strong argument.

We can offer a far stronger argument, toward a different conclusion, when we examine these verses in their respective Homeric and Platonic contexts. When we do so, we find good reason to suspect that Plato is not offering us a pre-Platonic variant but is in fact altering the Homeric text to suit his own purpose. The context in Homer reads as follows (17.318–23):

But now he [Argos] is in bad times. His master, far from his country,
has perished, and the women are careless, and do not look after him;
and serving men, when their masters are no longer about, to make them
work, are no longer willing to do their rightful duties.
For Zeus of the wide brows takes away one half of the virtue
from a man, once the day of slavery closes upon him.

It seems doubtful that Homer, or anyone for that matter, would consider such intentional neglect on the part of a servant to be the result of a lack of sense (or 'mind', or 'reason'). But it undeniably does evidence a lack of virtue, which appears to be Homer's point in this passage. Thus 'sense' (νόου) is simply not as appropriate here as 'virtue' (ἀρετῆς). In the context of the argument in *Laws*, however, the situation is reversed: 'virtue' is less appropriate than 'sense'. *Laws* 776D4–7A2 reads as follows:⁹

[Athenian:] . . . The point I happened to bring up in my discussion of the subject, and which naturally made you ask what I meant, was this: we know we'd all agree that a man should own the best and most docile slaves he can get—after all, many a paragon of a slave has done much more for a man than his own brother or son, and they have often been the salvation of their masters' persons and property and entire homes. We know quite well, don't we, that some people do tell such stories about slaves?

⁷ It might be argued that England's point gains further support from the observation that the word πολύτροπον, here translated 'man of many ways', plays a role in the discussion in the *Lesser Hippias*, which might suggest that Plato had this verse in mind when writing other dialogues as well. But this would be stretching the point.

⁸ The word is similarly employed to denote mental capability in general at 10.240: καὶ δέμας, αὐτὰρ νοῦς ἦν ἔμπεδος ὡς τὸ πάρος περ.

⁹ Translation by Trevor J. Saunders, in Cooper and Hutchinson (edd.), *Plato. Complete Works* (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1997).

Megillus: Certainly.

Athenian: And don't others take the opposite line, and say that a slave's soul is rotten through and through, and that if we have any sense we won't trust such a pack at all? The most profound of our poets actually says (speaking of Zeus) that

If you make a man a slave, that very day
Far-sounding Zeus takes half his wits away.

In this passage of *Laws* it is stated that 'no man of sense' (τὸν νοῦν κεκτημένον) ought to put trust in a pack of slaves. By quoting Homer as saying that slaves have only half their sense (ἥμισυ . . . νόου), Plato's 'Athenian' thus appears to be offering a clear piece of indisputable thinking: why should a person with 'full sense' rest his trust in one with only 'half sense'? And to offer this 'variant reading' in such an elegant 'Homeric' form is the mark of a master wordsmith, and one who knows the Homeric texts well indeed.

To argue in a case like this that Plato was quoting from faulty memory is naïve for a further reason: it is highly unlikely that he had need to rely on his memory, for it cannot reasonably be maintained that his library did not list the *Odyssey* among its holdings.¹⁰ And again, we must suppose that ample opportunity existed for his text of *Laws* to be emended should such an error in quotation have been made, through whatever kind of oversight or negligence we might imagine.¹¹ The same holds true for all of his apparent misquotations not only of Homer but of other authors as well. It may indeed be that in such cases of apparent misquotation Plato was sometimes quoting from a variant reading of a text now lost. Yet without further proof — proof that Eustathius, Athenaeus, and other later authors are generally not in a position to offer — where the context of Plato's text suggests the possibility of intentional misquotation, the principle of authorial respect should urge us to opt for that possibility in our interpretation of the passage in question. And if we assume further that his audience was in a position to recognize the intentional misquotation—an assumption that is by no means unreasonable if we grant the educated, literate character of this audience¹²—we might be led to consider more carefully the particular line of argument that Plato is presenting in the passage in question.

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¹⁰ Our information regarding Plato's personal library remains regrettably lacking, as does our knowledge concerning the possibility that the Academy, or any of the ancient philosophical schools, may have enjoyed the legal right to possess any property whatsoever, including an institutional library. See G. C. Field's helpful note to the third chapter of *Plato and His Contemporaries* (London, 1967³): 'Some controversial details', esp. 46–7 (on 'The juristic position of the philosophical schools') and 47–8 (on 'The Library of the Academy').

¹¹ But questions in this regard are raised by the observation of Diogenes Laertius (3.37, trans. R. D. Hicks): 'Some say that Philippos of Opus copied out the *Laws*, which were left upon waxen tablets . . .'. If Plato did in fact leave the *Laws* on wax at his death, we must immediately ask whether he did so with an eye to possible revision, including the checking of passages that he may have quoted from memory in the heat of writing. Further, might he perhaps have left such 'editorial details' to assistants he may have engaged in the transcription on to papyrus? Still further, might Philippos (or whoever) have felt it inappropriate to make any revision, even one concerning an obvious misquotation, without the opportunity to consult with the author? As any answers here must be dangerously speculative, I suggest that we here adopt the principle of authorial respect.

¹² And we should certainly grant this at least with regard to the members of the Academy, who would have had ample opportunity to study and discuss Plato's numerous quotations of 'the teacher of Hellas'.