

Athenaeus (11.113) records a delightfully anachronistic anecdote in which Plato sasses “golden” Gorgias, who has just arrived in Athens after dedicating a golden statue of himself at Delphi. The Sicilian sophist responds by calling Plato the “new Archilochus” and an expert abuser (*hôs kalôs oide...iambizein*). The late date and chronological impossibility of this story have impeded commentators from analyzing it within its dramatic (i.e. classical) setting. But the recent work of Worman and Kurke emboldens me to suggest that we can now identify two strands of iambic poetics at work in Plato’s characterization of Socrates, one Hipponactean and the other Archilochean.

In a stimulating article Kurke has argued that the figure of Aesop, although fully attested in a surviving text only in much later *Vitae*, serves as a crucial model for Plato’s Socrates. Both are ugly, low-register characters who alternately moralize to and rhetorically entrap their interlocutors. But if Kurke is correct that this Aesopic persona was already popular in the fifth-century as an author of humble prose stories, then we can wonder what poetic models lurk in the more distant background of this Aesopic Socrates. Hipponax offers a tantalizing possibility on several fronts. In terms of physical appearance, Hipponax begins (so far as we can tell) the tradition of ugly protagonists and may be a model for both Aesop and Socrates. In terms social habits, Hipponax presents himself as wandering the streets in need of food, money, shoes and a cloak (fr. 32-39 West), details which resonate with the Platonic Socrates. Most importantly, however, Hipponax abases himself in his poetry and in so doing presents a carnivalesque critique of elite society, as discussed by Miralles and Portulas. The self-deprecating Socrates, especially on Kurke’s reading, similarly aims at a seriocomic capsizing of the world, a Bakhtinian precursor to the modern novel.

The more Archilochean mode stands out when we reconsider Aristotle’s comment that Archilochus spoke through the figure of Charon the carpenter (Rhet. 1418b28). Importantly, he mentions this indirect technique as a means of delivering unpleasant (i.e. potentially invective) material via a third party. Archilochus’ mimetic trick closely parallels Plato’s ventriloquial presentation of Socrates. Worman’s thesis that Platonic dialogues participate in an “iambic discourse,” rooted in her analysis of oral behavior and not built upon Athenaeus’ anecdote about Gorgias, provides an interpretive context for Aristotle’s observation. For Worman, Socrates engaged in an iambic relationship with his rivals (e.g. pompous sophists), and Plato may well have had an iambic relationship with rivals for primacy within the Socratic legacy (e.g. with Antisthenes). Thus, Plato can be seen as an iambic prose author whose narrative strategy is rooted (ultimately, if not immediately) in a technique made famous by Archilochus’ poetry.

Like Aesopic fable, iambic poetry scrapes the bottom of the literary sea, and both genres use their benthic status to spur among their audiences a reconsideration of accepted structures and workings of the world. Such points apply equally well to Plato’s Socratic dialogues. So, while Kurke has rightly stressed the role of Aesop as a key input into the construction of Plato’s Socrates, iambic inspirations exert a parallel influence on the level of narrative structure, debased self-presentation, barbed ripostes, and even specific details, such as Socrates’ well-known shoelessness.