

Gorgias on Trial
(Daniel W. Graham and) **James Siebach**
Abstract

Because of its combative tone and sharp opposition to sophistic theories, the *Gorgias* is often recognized as a polemical treatise. But who is Plato combating, and why does he let Socrates dispense with the courteous deference he shows to sophists in other dialogues? Why, in particular, does he go after Gorgias? More than most other Platonic works, the *Gorgias* seems to invite an investigation into its historical context. Yet the one major recent work that seems to take its historical context most seriously has almost nothing to say about the particular targets of Plato's criticisms or the historical considerations that prompted those criticisms.

In this paper it will be argued that the dialogue reacts to specific contemporary attacks on Socrates and the Socratic movement. The *Gorgias* is roughly contemporaneous with works of two critics of the Socratic movement, Polycrates the Sophist and Isocrates. The former's *Kategoria Sokratous* purports to be Anytus' speech against Socrates at the latter's trial, accusing Socrates of promoting subversive political views. Some of the political figures held up by Polycrates as models of public-mindedness are assailed in the *Gorgias* as incompetent and pernicious leaders. In Plato's dialogue we also find a second apology for Socrates in relation to charges of political ineptitude. Isocrates' *Contra Sophistas*, with its attack on contemporary philosophers, seems to be echoed in the language of Plato's *Gorgias*. His *Helen* may also provide the background of one of Plato's arguments. Both Polycrates and Isocrates have connections with the historical Gorgias, which helps to explain the setting and the slant of the dialogue.

The assumption that Plato is responding to contemporary criticisms provides a helpful hypothesis for understanding the content of the *Gorgias*. In particular, the political dimension of the work, unique among early dialogues, can be understood as a reaction to the anti-Socratic works in question. Polycrates stresses the political character of Socrates' trial, a point not present in Plato's *Apology*, nor likely to have been present in the actual trial, since the Edict of Amnesty (sponsored by Anytus himself) forbade prosecutions for political actions undertaken under the oligarchy. Polycrates charges Socrates with political irresponsibility, and brings up an issue of guilt by association with two fallen political figures, Critias and Alcibiades. Isocrates' compositions, for their part, charge the Socratics with political irrelevance. In the *Gorgias* Plato seems eager to demonstrate that Socrates' method can produce good citizens.

On the positive side, Plato develops an alternative model of political involvement which he contrasts particularly with the sophistic approach. According to Gorgias, rhetoric, the backbone of sophistic education, has no moral content but is concerned merely with persuasion of the audience, providing a means to an end determined independently of reason. Plato contrasts this approach with that of the arts (*technai*), that presuppose some pre-existing objective good to which they are oriented. Political education will be valuable only to the degree it conforms to an art. In a surprising revelation, Socrates (elsewhere so modest about his own intellectual contributions) claims to be one of few individuals who practices the *politikê technê*, the art which had been professed exclusively by the sophists. More fundamentally, Plato asserts that the political art is inseparable from personal ethics.

On the hypothesis that the *Gorgias* is an occasion piece, we may see Plato responding to theoretical challenges to the Socratic movement posed around 390 BC. For once he allows Socrates to take off his mask and to connect his ostensibly negative method of refutation with a

positive program of political activity. True political progress will result from grounding public action in ethical principles. The *Gorgias* constitutes a defense of Socratic educational methods in the face of a historical attack by the followers of Gorgias.