

Further Reflections on *The Hemlock Cup* of Bettany Hughes

Dear All,

Allow me to send you some further reflections on Hughes' book, which I want to share with you as the date of my protest at Balliol against the on-going degradation of Classics and Classical Philosophy is approaching.

In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates and Phaedrus go along the river Ilissos to find a good place for Phaedrus' reading to Socrates Lysias' erotic discourse. When they find it, the enchanted Socrates exclaims 'my dear Phaedrus, you have been the stranger's perfect guide'. Phaedrus notes that anyone would take Socrates for a stranger in the country, for he is 'never leaving town to cross the frontier nor even so much as setting foot outside the city walls.' (230c-d, tr. R. Hackforth) Yet, just a few lines earlier Phaedrus asked Socrates 'is it not somewhere here that they say Boreas seized Oireithuia?' When Socrates replied that it was so, Phaedrus asked 'Was this the actual spot?' Socrates answered: 'No, it was about a quarter of a mile lower down, where you cross to the sanctuary of Agra.' (229b-c, tr. Hackforth) Socrates appears to have been well acquainted with that locality outside the city walls, and Phaedrus queried him as such.

Is this apparent discrepancy to be attributed to Plato's carelessness? Not so, if Hughes is right when she says: "Of course Socrates knew this spot like the back of his hand; familiar territory, he would have passed it regularly on the 25-30-minute route in – from his old *deme* of Alopeke to Athens' rammed city centre." (Hughes, p. 102) If she is right, and if the ancient dating of the *Phaedrus* is correct, according to which the *Phaedrus* was Plato's first dialogue, written during Socrates' life-time, then Plato's readers would have known that Socrates was well acquainted with that locality. Knowing this, they would be prepared to properly appreciate and marvel at Socrates' enchantment, at his viewing himself a stranger amidst its beauty: 'Upon my word, a delightful resting-place, with this tall, spreading plane, and a lovely shade from the high branches of the agnus: now that it's in full flower, it will make the place ever so fragrant. And what a lovely stream under the plane-tree, and how cool to the feet! Judging by the statuettes and images I should say it's consecrated to Achelous and some of the Nymphs. And then too, isn't the freshness of the air most welcome and pleasant: and the shrill summery music of the cicada-choir! And as crowning delight the grass, thick enough on a gentle slope to rest your head on most comfortably. In fact, my dear Phaedrus, you have been the stranger's perfect guide.' (230b2-c5, tr. Hackforth)

Hughes remarks: "Socrates drinks in the delights of the banks of the Ilissos, this habitual place, as if it is new to him. The clear-sighted are noted for looking on the world every day as if with new eyes." (p. 102).

I only hope I can trust her when she says that Socrates would have passed the place regularly on the route from his *deme* of Alopeke to Athens' city centre. Her negligence concerning the sources to which she refers is worrying.

Hughes writes: "Homer described Sparta as 'the land of beautiful women' and lauded 'Lacedaemon's lovely **hills**'. The territory here at the heart of the Peloponnese is **flat and fertile**." (p. 97). The reference: "Homer, *Odyssey*, 13. 412; *Iliad*, 3. 443" (Ch. 13, n. 20). I checked the reference: In *Odyssey*, 13. 412 Athena informs Odysseus that she sent his son 'to the **broad vale** of Lacedaemon' (as E. V. Rieu translates *es euruchoron Lakedaimona*), in *Iliad* 3. 443 Homer's Paris reminisces about his abduction of Helen 'from **lovely** Lacedaemon' (as E. V. Rieu translates *Lakedaimonos ex erateinês*); 'Lacedaemon's lovely **hills**' is a figment of a translator's imagination.

Speaking of the demeaning treatment of women by the Greeks, Hughes writes: "It is little surprise that Sophocles has one of his characters sniff, 'The best ornament of a woman is silence'. We only know this because years later Aristotle avidly quotes the line." (p. 118) In the accompanying note she says: "Aristotle, *Politics*, I.1260a (quoting Sophocles, *Ajax*, 293)." In *Politics*, I.1260a Aristotle does not name Sophocles, he quotes 'the poet', and he quotes him as speaking of 'a woman' in the singular (*gunaiki*), whereas the codices, in which Sophocles' *Ajax* is preserved, speak of 'women' in the plural (*gunaixi*). What is this 'this' to which Bettany Hughes points when she says 'We only know **this** because years later Aristotle avidly quotes the line'?

Further down on the same page she writes: "Censure barbed the Athenian argot: '... It is not proper for girls to **weave** through the crowd'." Her reference: "Euripides, *Orestes*, 108" (Ch. 17, n. 11). She must be thinking that the verb 'weave' translates the Greek word for weaving, which is mistaken. The verb *herpein* in the given line means 'to move', 'to walk'. Homer uses this verb in the *Odyssey* when he speaks of the 'walking' (*herpôn*) Odysseus (17. 158), and Euripides' Heracles is happy when he sees the Athenian hero Theseus approaching (*Thêseus hod' herpei*, HF 1154).

The reference to Euripides' *Orestes* 108 as a testimony that the censure of women 'barbed the Athenian argot' becomes even more perplexing if we view the line in its proper context. Electra opens the tragedy with a prologue in which she narrates the murder of Clytemnestra, her mother, which was committed by her brother with her help. Helen, Clytemnestra's sister, then enters the scene and asks Electra to take to Clytemnestra's tomb a lock of her hair as an offering. She cannot do so herself, for she is afraid of the fathers whose sons died in the siege of Troy. Electra suggests that Helen should send there her daughter Hermione. Helen replies: 'It is not nice for virgins **to go** (*herpein*) into the crowd' (*Orestes* 108).

Let me end with the reference that I find most baffling. On page 189 Hughes writes: "Chaerephon, a friend of Socrates, came to Delphi to enquire who was the wisest of all mankind. In some versions of the story, it was Socrates himself who made the journey." She does not give a reference to corroborate this assertion, but in the next chapter, that is in Ch. 28, she says in note 7: "Aristotle is reported as having said that Socrates, not Chaerephon, went to Delphi. But this is a relatively unstable source. Diogenes Laertius, 2. 23."

In 2. 22 and 23 Diogenes Laertius speaks about the places that Socrates visited – Amphipolis, Delium, and Potidaea on military campaigns. At the end of 2.23 he says: "Ion of Chios relates that in his youth (*neon onta*) Socrates visited (*apodêmêsai*) Samos in the company of Archelaus; and Aristotle that he went (*elthein*) to Delphi; he went also to the Isthmus, according to Favorinus in the first book of his *Memorabilia*." (Tr. R. D. Hicks) In the Greek original *neon onta*, that is Socrates 'in his youth', is the subject of both infinitives, that is *apodêmêsai* ('visited' Samos, of which Ion of Chios speaks) and *elthein* ('went' to Delphi, of which Aristotle speaks).

We can well imagine that Socrates went to Delphi, eager as he must have been to see with his own eyes the sanctuary in which 'Know thyself' was inscribed, the maxim that guided his life as a philosopher (cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 229e). If Socrates went to Delphi to see with his own eyes the inscription, we may suppose that he did not miss the opportunity to learn from the priests, who interpreted the Oracle, as much as he could. (In the *Phaedrus* Socrates justifies his unwillingness to leave the city walls with the words: 'I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.' 230d3-4, tr. Hackforth.)

If Aristotle referred to Socrates' visit to Delphi - which Plato omitted mentioning - we may presume that he thereby wanted to demystify the Delphic prophecy concerning Socrates; the priests in Delphi knew the man to whom Chaerephon referred when asking the Pythian prophetess whether anyone was wiser than Socrates, and they interpreted her exclamations according to their prior knowledge of him: 'there is no man wiser' (Pl. *Apology* 21a).

However this may be, according to Diogenes Laertius Aristotle did not say 'that Socrates, not Chaerephon, went to Delphi'.

With best wishes,

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