Socrates, Homer, and Plato's Ion.

In this paper I will examine certain aspects of Plato's use of Homeric quotes and allusions in the early Socratic dialogues. I believe that they add up to something considerably more than literary embellishment.

There appears to be a twofold function in the Homeric references. First they speak positively for Socrates, and secondly they speak against Meletus and the charges in the indictment. Behind this phenomenon is, I believe, an impulse from deep within the psyche of Plato—it is more than mere art.

To account for it satisfactorily within the constraints of a single short paper is not possible. I can offer only the barest sketch of the case which I believe may be made out.

I

Much is made of Socrates' association with Critias, and of the amnesty declared in 403 BC when the Thirty tyrants fell. The amnesty, we are told, made it difficult for a prosecution to be brought against Socrates by those who held him responsible, to some extent at least, for the extremes of the Thirty—those of Critias the leader in particular, but also others of the Thirty who had associated with the philosopher in their youth. There can be no doubt that the Thirty left behind a legacy of bitterness, but is that alone sufficient to account for the indictment brought against Socrates in 399 BC?

If this prosecution did arise without any provocation other than the resentment which had been simmering since the fall of the oligarchy, how did it take three years to eventuate? That seems an inordinately long time to 'maintain the rage'. If it was left for three years, why do it at all?
It seems to me that the prosecution awaited its Meletus, and that Meletus was stirred up by something very specific.

Certainly Plato depicts him in the *Apology* as being vehemently antagonistic to Socrates (e.g. 26B-E), more so than we might expect if his primary motivation arose simply out of a sharing of the anti-Socrates sentiment which had been current among some of the citizens of Athens. I will have cause to return to Meletus later, after a survey of the various references to Homer in those dialogues which are concerned with the trial and death of Socrates.

1. *Apology* I begin with the well known passage from *Apology* 41A: Socrates is speaking of the attractiveness to him of an afterlife that would give him opportunity to carry on enquiries with such people as Homer and Hesiod, and others like Minos and Rhadamanthus, real judges, who give only ‘just’ judgements.

All the names mentioned are figures who appear either in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or in the Homeric hymns or the associated literature and cycle of myths. Socrates’ position of confidence in the face of death seems to be this. *Either these things are true or nothing is: either death is a dreamless eternal sleep or he expects to find everything as Homer depicts it.* More than this, in 41B he says:

> The greatest pleasure would be to pass my time in examining and investigating the people there, as I do those here, to find out who among them is wise and who thinks he is when he is not.

Socrates displays great confidence in the validity of his earthly life and activities, so much so that he expects to be able to go right on doing what he has always done—the continuity of the living and the dead is uninterrupted, by the reckoning which Plato attributes to him, and Homer is pointedly the inspiration in life and in death. I take this to make the point that Socrates’ religious orthodoxy is being stressed, as is the divine validity of his chosen way of life. In this passage, and later in the *Gorgias*, Socrates could almost be a Homeric ‘fundamentalist’; and since he was no such thing, it is worth asking the question: ‘Why does Plato make him appear so?’
2. Apology  Earlier, in Apology 28C-D, he had referred to the heroes of Troy and in particular to Achilles and his contempt of death if to avoid it meant that his honour was compromised:

Perhaps someone might say: are you not ashamed Socrates of having followed such a pursuit, that you are now in danger of being put to death as a result? But I would make him a just reply: You do not speak well, if you think that a man in whom there is even a little merit ought to consider danger of life or death, and not rather regard this only, when he does things, whether the things he does are right or wrong and the acts of a good or bad man (there is a direct reference here to Iliad xviii 96-104).

Does Homer here mock Meletus on Socrates' behalf? The heroic essence of Homer is instinct in the behaviour of Achilles, who both courts and defies death because he can do nothing else when honour is at stake. Socrates is one with him in this, except that it is integrity rather than honour that he is concerned with. Contrast the miserable 'heroics' of Meletus who risks nothing in pursuing, and hounding an old man to death.

Even if the relied-on prejudice failed and he did not secure the required one fifth of the votes, Anytus his co-accuser in the indictment would pay the resulting fine. Would Meletus then stand as a representative of the poets in prosecuting Socrates? His unfitness for the assumed role is made manifest in the words of the great Poet himself.

3. Apology  Then there is the reference to the Odyssey in Apology 34D (Od. xix.163). 'Tell me of your descent, wherever you are from, for you are not from the oak of ancient tale, or from rock.'

References to these words appear twice in the Odyssey, but the most memorable context is where Penelope addresses Odysseus, who has arrived home in the guise of a beggar and is as yet unknown to her. The Homeric spirit is again instinct in the situation; hospitality, courtesy, compassion, piety, the very essence of civilized order. The lady of a great house holds polite conversation on equal terms with a beggar, who is nevertheless entitled to respect as a human being, and who has been provided with a chair so that he can converse in equal comfort and dignity.
How poorly once again does Meletus' behaviour stand in contrast. Homer is judge in his treatment of the old man arraigned before the court—probably still wearing the ragged old cloak for which he was known around Athens.

4. **Crito** In the *Crito* 44B Socrates tells Crito of his dream—that he has received a clear message as to the time of his death. 'On the third day you will come to fertile Phthia.' (These words are spoken by Achilles when about to withdraw from the army on a point of honour, *Il.* ix. 363.) Note that Socrates in the dream is addressed by name in words of Homer by a 'woman, lovely and fair', καλὴ καὶ ἑυελθής. Meletus specifically mocked Socrates' *daimonion* in the indictment (*Apology* 31D) and here is something more than an impersonal inner voice or influence.

Socrates accepted the news of the imminent arrival of the State Ship, but on the basis of the dream he questioned the assumption, grounded in that news, that he would be executed the following day.

Now it must be true that there was something unusual about the journey of the State Ship to Delos that year. To begin with, it was away an extraordinarily long time. Unusual circumstances must also have attended its return, so that it spent a longer than usual time off the Attic coast between Sounion and Piraeus, the official end of its voyage—a voyage that had to be completed before Socrates could be executed (*Crito* 44A). Details of a matter of such wide public knowledge would have to be accurately depicted in the dialogue, regardless of whether the dream was historical or not.

I take Plato's point in stressing the extraordinary absence of the ship, and the further delay when its return voyage was almost complete, to be that control of Socrates' destiny had been in the hands of the gods, both at his trial and subsequently. This account in the *Crito* is then, in a way, an endorsement of the divine guidance that Socrates speaks of in the *Apology* 40A, 41B regarding the conduct of his defence.

5. **Phaedo** In the *Phaedo* there is another reference to the voyage of the State Ship and its significance for Socrates, and it also has a clear connection with Homer (*Phaedo* 58B, 60D-61B).
In *Phaedo* 60D-61B Socrates is asked rather pointedly about his making music and composing poems while awaiting execution. Especially is he asked about the hymn to Apollo which he had composed and he replies with an account of his motives. Earlier in his life he had assumed that the dreams which had regularly bidden him to 'make music' referred to his philosophical activities, because 'philosophy was the greatest kind of music'.

...but now, after the trial, and while the festival of the god delayed my execution, in case the repeated dream really meant to tell me to make this which is ordinarily called music I ought to do so and not disobey. *So first I composed a hymn to the god whose festival it was.*

I suggest that no Athenian, probably no Greek from anywhere in the world, could read those words or hear them read without the great Homeric hymn to the Delian Apollo coming to mind: and with it some unavoidable associations. It was to Delos that the ship had gone (the ship and its mission are specifically mentioned in 58B). In the hymn is Apollo's own statement of his attributes, and among them is 'declaring the will of Zeus', as in the Delphic oracle, which had declared that there was no man in the world wiser than Socrates.

There was a strong tradition, unchallenged in Plato's time, that Homer was the author of the Hymn to Apollo, and was himself identified within the poem as the 'blind man who lives on rocky Chios'.

The poet then closes with this declaration: 'As for me I will carry your renown as far as I roam over the earth to the well placed cities of men for indeed this thing is true'.

Now it does not seem too hard to believe that associations which we can see, the ancients could also see, and I think that in all of this Plato has once again used Homer, or at least strong Homeric connections and influences, to vindicate Socrates. There seems to be an almost obsessional determination to have Homer speak directly and indirectly, in approval of Socrates. Is it too much to claim that Plato is appropriating for Socrates all this that the Hymn to the Delian Apollo brings to mind, including the prophecy of eternal fame at the end of the hymn?
6. **Gorgias** The matter of piety was a specific issue in the Indictment. As I pointed out in 1, above, Socrates' religious orthodoxy is affirmed in the *Apology*, but there is more on this in later dialogues.

   a. **Gorgias** 523A-526 is full of explicit affirmations that Socrates believes what Homer says, and in the gods generally.

   523A3 (Socrates speaks) ‘Give ear then to a right fine story, which you will regard as a fable, I fancy, but I as an actual account.’

   524B1 (In reference to the final judgement of humankind according to perfect justice) ‘This, Callicles, is what I have heard and I believe to be true.’

   525 D ‘Homer also testifies to this, for he has represented kings and rulers among those who are punished everlastingly in the nether world.’

   526D (Refering to Minos) ‘Odysseus in Homer tells how he saw him “holding a golden sceptre, speaking dooms to the dead” (Od. xi. 569). Now for my part, I am convinced by these accounts.’

   Twice in this short section of the *Gorgias*, Socrates has affirmed literal belief in what Homer has written.

   It seems to me that the references to Homer are rather more pointed in these dialogues than mere literary or dramatic art will comfortably account for. If they are not rebukes to Meletus on one hand, and denials of the charges on the other, they would certainly function as such. They are together consistent with the view that I am advancing that Homer is speaking in direct response to Meletus as a poet (or to all of the poets, on whose behalf Meletus nominally launched the indictment) and to the charges themselves.

   b. Reinforcing the *Gorgias* regarding Socrates' piety is the reference in the *Phaedo* 118 to the 'cock to Aesclepius'. Socrates' reminder to Crito may refer to the 'healing' of his own imminent death, as the traditional interpretation has it, or it may refer to Plato's recovery from the illness hinted at in the beginning of the dialogue. But either way it is presented as the instinctive response of a man 'in extremis', who will not, even with his last breath, overlook an obligation to the gods.
If there is something in all of this, and these responses from Homer to Meletus’ indictment have a point, what could that special point be? I suggest that the impulse to use Homer in this way comes from deep within the psyche of Plato, and the compelling reason for it is connected in some way to the involvement of Homer in bringing on the case against Socrates. I suggest that in Plato’s dialogue Ion we will find an answer to our question.

Consider the following hypothesis. Plato wrote the Ion in a burst of enthusiasm to exercise his talent for the furtherance of philosophy. The unforeseen consequence was the indictment launched by Meletus the poet which resulted in Socrates’ death.

Admittedly no dialogue is mentioned in the indictment but that does not prove anything one way or another. We are considering what might have stirred up Meletus to take the initiative in prosecuting Socrates. Reference to a dialogue offensive to the poets would not have helped the case succeed. It had to rely on vague charges and general prejudice.

Let me also suggest another scenario than the traditional one as regards the chronology of the dialogues. The idea of perpetuating Socrates’ voice occurred to Plato before the events of 399 BC. Young Plato, budding dramatist, aware of his talents, blessed with leisure, devoted to Socrates and to philosophy, conceives of a plan, possibly a one off at first.

Socrates is old, and can be expected to die before long (a point specifically made in the Apology). I suggest however that there was no particular threat to his life apparent, in spite of what we read in the Meno and the Gorgias. Those references are to the general prejudice against him rather than to simmering plots. Socrates had survived into old age, avoiding death from the normal hazards of life and at least three military campaigns. He had defied the entire Assembly when in the chair, at the trial of the Generals/Admirals after the naval battle of 406 BC, and when that Assembly was in a dangerous mood. Even more dangerous was his defiance of the Thirty over the affair of Leon of Salamis. He was perhaps the only man in Athens who got away with that.
It did not seem, then, that anything would happen now, except that soon Socrates' voice would be silent. Are we to believe that that obvious fact had not occurred to Plato? Had he never considered what it would mean for Athens when the voice of Socrates was silenced by death? Considering the genius that did emerge, is it natural to think that he was inert as far as his literary talents were concerned and wrote nothing up until the death of Socrates?

Socrates and Homer—what a brilliant idea it must have seemed at the time; Socrates the 'true' educator of Athens confronting the traditional educator, and with casual ease finding him wanting. But what an affront to someone like Meletus. Worse still is the finding that poets such as him do not even know what they are talking about, with the implication that they are a menace to sound education.

II

I suggested earlier that something very specific stirred up Meletus and I hope to show that that 'something' was of a nature that made the quoting of Homer in the Socratic dialogues considerably more than a literary option for Plato—that an element of psychological compulsion is present in it. I suggest that that specific 'something' was the publication/reading of the dialogue Ion, and it follows of course that I will hold that this dialogue was written before the death of Socrates.

For the case to have any hope of succeeding it will be necessary to demonstrate, firstly, that the Ion could have been written before the death of Socrates; and secondly, that it contains material which prima facie could account for the malice which Meletus displays towards Socrates. Those are the minimum requirements.

I have not got space here to argue the case in full, so some short-cuts will be inevitable, and I will rely on secondary literature to establish the grounds for believing the first proposition immediately above. I will quote a range of scholars to establish one point beyond reasonable doubt, viz that the Ion does have peculiarities that separate it into a class of its own.
The dialogue *Ion* is Plato's shortest, about one quarter the length of the bulk of the middle-sized dialogues which average fifty-two pages of the Oxford Text.

In the dialogue, Socrates encounters Ion, a rhapsode from Ephesus who has just come from Epidaurus where he has practised his art as a professional reciter of Homer and carried off first prize at the festival of Aesclepius. Ion both recites and expounds Homer. Socrates challenges him to account for his claim that to know what Homer has to say about a matter is to be an expert in that matter, even down to such practical things as chariot racing, the practice of medicine and the generalship of armies.

Socrates challenges the notion that the rhapsode can have particular knowledge of human affairs simply because he read something on the matter in Homer. Ion's skill is freely acknowledged—he can indeed 'move' an audience with his words. But the force at work is an irrational one, says Socrates: inspiration by the Muse. So the question arises 'Do poets actually know what they are talking about?' and the answer is 'No'. Investigation into the chronology of Plato's dialogues has been going on for 130 years, beginning with the work of Lewis Campbell (1867) which laid the foundation for the chronological order which largely holds today. His work was carried on by Ritter, Lutoslawski, von Arnim and others. It must be observed, however, that in spite of some very real, and widely accepted, results regarding groups of dialogues, there will almost certainly never be the kind of certainty about chronological order or dating, especially those of the early dialogues, that would cause further investigations into the matter simply to dry up.

Leonard Brandwood's¹ article on Stylometry and Chronology, in the recently published *Cambridge Companion to Plato*, displays a series of data tables summarizing the statistics which each one of these investigators assembled from study of the dialogues, and on which they each based their conclusions. There were studies based

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¹ In Richard Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge, 1992) 90-120.
on vocabulary generally, relative frequency of technical terminology, aspects of grammatical usage, various stylistic usages and verbal formulae.

A rather interesting feature of these statistical tables is the regular absence of the Ion, for the first fifty years or so, either because it was judged spurious, or because it was considered too slight a dialogue to warrant attention. In studies published in 1912, to make the findings of earlier studies 'conclusive', von Arnim finally included the Ion, and in his published results it shared first place in chronological order along with the Protagoras.

The 1912 studies examined 'affirmative reply formulae'. Broad agreement about the very early chronological status of the Ion has been established right up to the latest computer analysis of G. R. Ledger published in 1989.2 There is then general consensus that the Ion is one of the earliest of Plato's dialogues.

More specifically the opinions of a range of scholars on the dialogue's character are interesting:

A. E. Taylor3 calls it 'this slight dialogue';

Guthrie4 'a light hearted little piece'; (It was written, I believe, when Plato was himself 'lighthearted' in a way that he never was again after the death of Socrates.)

Lamb5 'a graceful little piece ... friendly and restrained';

2 Ibid. 112-114.
5 W.R.M. Lamb's Introduction to the Ion in vol. 8 of the Loeb edition of Plato, 403.
Yet it must be admitted that the *Ion* has a *disconcertingly casual air*, as though it were no more than a *preliminary skirmish*. . . . It reads like a *somewhat arrogant work of Plato's youth*, . . . His argument has a *touch of crudity*, and few readers will think that he does justice either to poetry or to philosophy.

Perhaps the most extraordinary remark is made by Lane Cooper in his introduction to the *Ion*: 'In this little dialogue Plato is amusing himself'.

I think that there is something about the *Ion* that all of these writers are reaching after, but it eludes them.

A footnote in Guthrie makes reference to Wilamowitz to the effect that he had dated it to before 399 BC and judged it to be 'the work of a Tyro'—a beginner, a novice.

And when, we might ask, was Plato a novice? Surely when he was still following Socrates around Athens, not ten or twelve years after the death of Socrates when he returned to Athens to found the Academy.

Paul Friedländer has something to say to the case I want to make out. He admits that an absolute chronology of Plato's works is not possible although he does allow 'definite statements of great probability'.

But as to the chronology, it may be said that while many commentators find it satisfying to think that Plato did not begin to write in the new form of dialogue until after the death of Socrates, nobody can prove that this was actually the case.

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7 In Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (ed.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (New York, 1961) 215.

Certainly there was a tradition in the ancient world which Diogenes Laertius\textsuperscript{9} mentions, that dialogues featuring Socrates were produced in his lifetime.

Friedlander also says something about his own work that is crucial to the case I wish to make out here:

If the order we have adopted with regard to the early dialogues is acceptable at least in general, the works that obviously reflect the impact of Socrates' death are by no means the first ones. Now it is hard to imagine, that Plato, after the year 399, would have begun to write such dialogues as the Ion, the Laches, and the Charmides, and not approach until later—in the Euthyphro, the Apology, the Crito, and the Gorgias—the subject of Socrates' death. It makes much more sense to assume that Plato's first writings date from before the end of the 5th century. For this case, the year 399 would mark the great break not in the development of the form of Plato's writing, but in the feeling of life behind his works.

Now that last line 'the feeling of life behind his work' expresses that elusive 'something' about the Ion that I think is the key.

Guthrie's term 'light-hearted' comes closest to describing the key feature of this dialogue. It is as though it were the product of an 'unburdened mind'—that would be the best way that I could express it. Few, if any of the possible ramifications of such a challenge and confrontation as he depicts between Socrates and the rhapsode Ion, however politely carried out, have occurred to him. There is an innocence, a naivety, running right through the dialogue, which fits an image of youthful preciosity. The writer has no inkling that he was, as it were, 'playing with fire'.

I find this very troublesome if I am obliged to regard the dialogue as written close in time to the Phaedo, the Crito, and the Apology and Euthyphro, with their serious intent, their sombre notes, and rather strained cheerfulness. The Ion leaves me with a sense of a different Socrates in the background—and perhaps that is accounted for in a Socrates who was still living in the mind of the

\textsuperscript{9} Diogenes Laertius III.35.
writer; that is, he was actually alive. It is ‘the feeling of life behind …’ that marks it out.

I will suggest that if we regard this dialogue, the *Ion*, as indeed Plato’s first, or at least among the very first group, and written while Socrates was still living, some things may become a little clearer.

We are familiar with the passage in *Apology* 23C where Socrates refers to the youth of Athens imitating his method of examination, to the great annoyance of their elders. It is easy to forget that Plato was himself one of them.

‘They often imitate me themselves’, Socrates says. Is it too hard to imagine one of them with literary talent taking up the pen and ‘imitating’ Socrates? Surely given the way that Plato developed as an artist, it is highly likely that he was already writing by the time he was twenty-eight. What was he writing then?

Writing about Socrates was long overdue. Aristophanes had parodied Socrates cruelly in the *Clouds* twenty years before, and it was always a likelihood that some friend of Socrates might respond. That Plato had considered it is a little more than just likely, I judge, by his oblique reference to the play at the beginning of the *Apology* (18B-C).

Then there is the ancient tradition mentioned in Diogenes that perhaps is even more telling—that Plato tried rashly to take the stand in defence of Socrates but was rebuffed by the judges (II. 41). He even quotes his words, which are also, perhaps, revealing: ‘though I am the youngest, men of Athens, of all who ever rose to address you…’. Why this impulsiveness, this desperation? Was he trying to ‘take the blame’ as it were, by exposing what he knew, intuitively or otherwise, to be the real cause of the indictment? If he was, he did not succeed, and by the time of the writing of the *Apology*, he saw no reason to bring it up. Xenophon mentions that ‘friends spoke on Socrates’ behalf’, but Plato does not. Why should he omit that?
Finally, what might account for Meletus' strong personal animosity towards Socrates?

It is perhaps not without significance that there are some parallels between the way Ion of Ephesus is presented in his dialogue and the way Meletus is depicted in the Apology. In the Clouds, Aristophanes had presented Socrates as a charlatan and a fool. Reaction to such public defamation depends a great deal on temperament. Socrates could take it, as it were, but how may a different type of person have reacted to the parody of the rhapsode in the Ion?

If the Ion were not such a 'goodnatured' piece, or 'lighthearted' as one of the commentators had it, we would feel more the sting of mockery inherent in Ion's replies to Socrates, which give the measure of his enormous conceit and vanity. Pompous extravagance characterizes his boasts again and again (e.g. at 530D, 533C).

Ion's replies to Socrates are just so extreme as to be completely unreal, and quite amusing. For example:

I consider that I speak about Homer better than anybody (living); nor did anyone that the world has ever seen have so many and such fine comments to offer on Homer as I have. (Ion 530C)

Was there a model for that kind of extravagant nonsense in Athens? Perhaps someone did speak like that, someone whom Meletus recognised (his father the poet?). Perhaps though, it is just amusing mockery of a certain style of utterance, typical of some rhapsodes.

Now in the Apology, when Meletus responds to Socrates, do we hear in the vehemence of his answers an echo of the voice of Ion? Remember that Meletus can only answer questions in the trial, and only questions that Socrates would have been likely to ask, so that the scope is limited; but consider his responses in 25E, 26C, 27A.

Socrates catches out Meletus in hopeless contradictions. He has accused Socrates of introducing new deities, on one hand, and
not believing in any deities at all on the other (27A). Like Ion of Ephesus, he is depicted as hopelessly muddled in his thinking, but perhaps more tellingly, Plato has Socrates labour Meletus' insincerity in pretending to care for Athens (Apol.25C). Meletus is just acting a part, like Ion of Ephesus. Ion says:

I have to take the utmost care, since if I start them crying, I may burst out laughing at the thought of the rewards I will receive, and if they laugh, I will cry at the thought of the money I am losing. (535E)

If you were on the receiving end of that sort of thing, if you thought that you recognised yourself or someone close to you in that, and if you were over-sensitive, 'thin skinned', then you would have quite sufficient grounds for a strong reaction.

Did Homer then, have some involvement in the events that led up to the condemnation of Socrates? Did he, as it were, have something to answer for? Whether the reply to that question is 'yes' or 'no', Plato, it seems, did make him 'answer' something, as the passages referred to above indicate.

But it is just possible that there was wider recognition of the unstated involvement of the Poet. Diogenes Laertius (II. 43) provides us with evidence that some such thing came to be recognized in Athens when, if the story can be trusted, they took action to 'rehabilitate' Socrates in the face of adverse world opinion.

There is, admittedly, some kind of a muddle in the text, which makes it appear that a digression to other cases is made in the middle of the account of Socrates. However, it is more likely that Diogenes is talking about Socrates' case the whole time, and of the comprehensive way they sought to right the wrong that had been done to him. So he says that among other things, they 'fined Homer 50 drachmas as a madman', some recognition, I take it, that the Poet and irrational inspiration (the subject matter of the Ion) had been involved. I wonder who paid the fine?

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