

Citation style

Tarrant, Harold: Rezension über: Bettina Bohle, Olympiodors Kommentar zu Platons "Gorgias", Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, in: Exemplaria Classica, 25 (2021), S. 457-460, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33776/ec.v25i0.5580>, heruntergeladen über Website

exemplaria
C L A S S I C A
Journal of Classical Philology

copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

BETTINA BOHLE, *Olympiodors Kommentar zu Platons Gorgias*, Studien zu Literatur und Erkenntnis 11, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 274 pp., €52,00, ISBN 978-3-8253-6809-8.

It has been a great pleasure to watch the scholarly interest in Olympiodorus of Alexandria grow in the 21st century. L.G. Westerink's outstanding service to the text of his Platonic works and of the related *Prolegomena to Plato's Philosophy* has helped to make this possible, and we now have serviceable modern translations of all of them. Of the three Platonic commentaries Westerink only provided a translation to accompany his edition of the *Phaedo*-commentary, whereas there is now an Italian translation of them all by Filippi (Academia, 2017), a two volume translation in the Ancient Commentators on Aristotle series by Griffin of *On Plato First Alcibiades* (Bloomsbury 2015-17), and on the *Gorgias*-commentary by Jackson, Lycos and Tarrant (Brill, 1998). In addition to this there have been a number of articles and chapters devoted to Olympiodorus' Platonic works, some including consideration of the Aristotelian commentaries that seem generally to have been less thoroughly studied. We have recently welcomed the publication of papers from the first modern conference on Olympiodorus held in Utrecht in 2017 (edited by Joose, Brill, 2021), but Bohle has here produced the first volume to be devoted entirely to a discursive treatment of any of the commentaries without the inclusion of a text or translation.

This volume is therefore something of a landmark, and is quite ambitious in attempting to go well beyond merely scholarly endeavour and in trying to see considerable virtue in Olympiodorus' interpretation of the *Gorgias*, something that Dodds' much respected edition of the *Gorgias* (Oxford 1959) had emphatically denied. I have always believed that Olympiodorus can assist us in interpreting Plato, probably putting much more emphasis on the way he can add to our understanding of details than on his overall contribution, and at times perhaps expecting rather more improvement in our understanding of Socrates, or of Plato's 'Socrates' than in the broader understanding of the themes of Platonic philosophy. From the outset it is plain that this will not be enough for Bohle, who argues for Olympiodorus' importance not just for our understanding of the *Gorgias* as a unity, underpinned by several themes that underlie the whole, but also for showing how themes less openly advertised in the *Gorgias* are present in the substructure of the whole project.

The structure of the work with which she sets out to establish her views seems to me to be entirely appropriate, since the greatest advances from the study of ancient Plato-commentaries stem from the close reading of the later

exegesis together with the text which it is intended to illuminate. Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, for instance, is best studied by persons who are interested both in Proclus' own philosophy and in the meaning of the *Parmenides* itself. It should not be used simply for the construction of a grand Proclan metaphysical system, but for the way in which an individual with his systematic beliefs was able to engage with Plato's *Parmenides* and to regard it as the supreme theological teaching of a philosopher whose works were divinely inspired, and therefore constantly in possession of some truth, however concealed that truth may be. The difference with Olympiodorus is not simply that he is somewhat less convinced of Plato's infallibility, but that he has left us no work directly expounding a metaphysical system of his own. That is not to say that he had no system, for systematic elements can be teased out of just about all of the 51 lectures of the commentary, but that they are usually presented as didactic tools needed for Platonic exegesis. Keeping both the commentator and the original text in mind one maximises the chance to enhance our appreciation of both.

Accordingly, after the introduction, chapter two gives a four-part overview of the content of the *Gorgias* (the proem [to 448c] and the discussions with three interlocutors) and then a five-part overview of the commentary (Olympiodorus' introduction to the text, arguments with three interlocutors, and the myth). Chapter three is devoted to the Platonic text itself and particularly to issues regarding the unity of its parts. The main division of chapter four is between the methodological assumptions employed in modern interpretations of the dialogue, and the very different assumptions about the literary aspects of the dialogue, including the assumption that a Platonic text must resemble a living organism.

The very long chapter five works through issues in Olympiodorus' commentary, beginning with the *skopos* or overall target of the work, i.e. « die Erforschung der ethischen Prinzipien des politischen Glücks » (139). It aims more generally at self-knowledge on a particular level. Use is made of the later and more sophisticated *Alcibiades*-commentary here, possibly with a little less caution than I should, given the amount of quite explicit material that the *Gorgias*-commentary itself offers. We go on to the dialogue's place in the curriculum, the six-cause system employed here, hardly a novel feature, but one that explains for Olympiodorus why different interlocutors are employed, since the three phases of the argument discuss the productive, formal and final causes of *politikê eudaimonia* respectively, with the myth allegedly offering the paradigmatic cause. Finally a great deal of space is allocated to relating the three interlocutors to the tripartition of the soul, a tripartition that Olympiodorus happily accepted but if frequently not thought to apply to pre-*Republic* dialogues like the *Gorgias*. The three successive interlocutors are connected, primarily on the basis of 27.2 (p. 146.11-17 Westerink), with the rational, spirited and appetitive soul

respectively. Bohle writes « Für Olympiodor repräsentiert jeder der drei Gesprächspartner des Sokrates einen der drei platonischen Seelenteile und seine jeweilige Verstehensweise und Probleme in Bezug auf die politische Seelenordnung. »

I thought there was some simplification regarding the correspondence here. To begin with one needs to bear in mind that the author of the *Prolegomena* rejects any simple division of the *Gorgias* into three parts according to interlocutor. Olympiodorus (proem 6) certainly advocates a three-fold division, but not *because* there are three interlocutors. Rather, he avoids excessive simplicity mainly by relating the *arguments* with the three interlocutors to three different causes of *politikê eudaimonia*, and even ultimately by treating the myth as a fourth part of the dialogue that reveals the paradigmatic cause (46.7). That is presumably because, in the last resort, the myth is dealing with the divinely established order of the universe that is the paradigm that requires imitation (proem 5, p. 5.5-8). After taking the three phases of the argument as dealing with different causes, to strive too hard to relate them to the tripartition of soul would be excessive. In any case that tripartition is deeply embedded in all social and political life, so that we are all associated with all of the parts.

If one examines the end of 27.2, where Bohle finds her most explicit authority, Gorgias, Polus and Callicles are not linked directly with three *parts* of the soul, for no word for 'part' or 'tripartite' occurs. They are linked with three sources of error in human life: a distorted way of looking at things (διάστροφος δόξα), temper, and desire. Gorgias is said to be employed as interlocutor in Socrates' refutation of distorted *character* (διάστροφον ἦθος), while Polus is used to refute the spirited *character* (ἦθος being understood), and Callicles to refute the appetitive *character*. Of course Polus' impetuosity and Callicles' desires are a problem, but the arguments are not purely directed towards their personal refutation, but to the refutation of any individuals inclined to suffer from similar deficiencies of character. Like education itself, our manners of behaviour (τὰ ἦθη, proem 5, p. 5.8) are tools in the production of *politikê eudaimonia*, able to be worked on and reformed. So Gorgias is associated less with the rational part of the soul directly, but rather with characteristically human distortions of judgment (cf. 482, p. 251.21) or with wavering indecision (proem 8, p. 7.4-6). So it turns out that Olympiodorus is a little too subtle to find simple scholastic correspondences in the design of the dialogue. Nevertheless, he does emphatically offer a unified vision of a work to which a range of Platonic doctrines combine in the service of one overriding end, so that Bohle's dominant thesis can stand untouched.

Any reader will find odd things to criticise in almost any such book, and I do not dwell on minor errors, like πῶς βιωτέον (137) when βιωτέον was required. Yet it was difficult for me to overlook the fact that Jackson, Lycos and Tarrant (1998) was referred to in four very different ways in

notes 13, 37, 39 and 43: two of them being simply erroneous. That is not to claim that the criticism of the more subdued enthusiasm of our 1998 work in pp. 18–25 is unfounded, though there seems to me to be a tension between Bohle's emphasis on the long and venerable tradition of interpretation that had preceded Olympiodorus, and the credit afforded to him for insights that in many cases must go much further back. We have mere traces of earlier exegesis, but we know that any dialogue had long been required to exhibit an overarching unity and the integrity of a living animal. By far the greatest of my problems with the book is its failure to include any indices at all. Surely there are others who wish to know whether Bohle discusses a passage of Hermias or Elias, or Olympiodorus' explanation of this or that detail of the text of the *Gorgias*. Countless times I wanted an easy way to check on whether matters of detail had been discussed, but I am not given here the tools to make the best use of what has been written. This should be a volume whose presence on my bookshelf I cherish, but without indices it will unfortunately be referred to rather seldom.

HAROLD TARRANT
University of Newcastle
harold.tarrant@newcastle.edu.au