

Socrates' Military Service

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Plato's account of Socrates' military service during the long years of the Peloponnesian War remains unfamiliar despite the fact that vivid accounts of it appear in the dialogues as eyewitness reports of fellow soldiers or as the subject of his own recollections.¹ In this essay I examine Plato's depiction of his service, focusing on Socrates' uncommon capacity for "endurance,"² and consider how far Xenophon and Aristophanes address similar themes. I take up these issues to initiate attention to the possibility that the richly psychological character of Socratic philosophy

1. I am concerned with the literary treatments of Socrates. But this feature of his biography is well established. On the historical Socrates' military service see Calder 1961, Woodbury 1971, Planeaux 1999, Nails 2002: 264–65, Hanson 2003: 213–27, Anderson 2005, Graham 2008, Hughes 2010: 127–58, and Monoson 2014.

2. Endurance (καρτερία) is regularly identified as a military virtue throughout Greek literature and its cognates routinely signal the duration and intensity of a military engagement (e.g., Herodotus 1.7.4, 3.11.3, 6.101.28, 12.2). It also appears in circumstances that involve emotional as well as physical demands. For example, in Thucydides Nicias strains to encourage the dejected Athenian troops in Sicily about to face a nearly hopeless battle: "stand firm now if ever" (καρτερήσατε 7.64) and in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* Achilles' son Neoptolemus asks Philoctetes, a disabled warrior long ago abandoned by his unit to live alone on a small island, whether he will now return to the forces with him or "endure" here (καρτερεῖν 1258). When it is applied beyond strictly martial circumstances (metaphorically or not) the stress is on the withstanding of a psychological challenge and controlling its physical manifestations. For example, Pericles entreats grieving parents in his funeral oration to "endure" and go on to have more children (2.44) and in Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates says to a weeping Crito just before taking the hemlock, "Collect yourself!" (καρτερεῖτε 117e). In Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and later thinkers we find endurance applied to resistance to the intensity and persistent allure of pleasures and luxuries (e.g., Plato *Gorgias* 507b, *Republic* 556c, Aristotle *NE* 1150a10, *Politics* 1270b). This is a commonplace meaning in later Greek and Roman writers, especially the Stoics.

may speak to modern notions of “war trauma” and “post-traumatic stress” among veterans.³

According to Plato, Socrates deployed as an Athenian hoplite on three campaigns: the extended siege of Potidaea in northern Greece, the Athenian attack on nearby Delium in Boeotia a few years later, and on the expedition north to defend the Athenian colony Amphipolis. These campaigns included chaotic retreats and humiliating disasters for the Athenians, yet Plato stresses that Socrates at war was “a sight worth seeing” (*Symposium* 220e9⁴). Xenophon only briefly mentions the fact that Socrates served on military campaigns⁵ but portrays him engaging in sustained conversations about training, tactics, and strategy, as well as the virtue of courage and qualities of a good commander that take for granted considerable first-hand experience as a soldier.⁶ Aristophanes’ *Clouds* does not explicitly refer to Socrates in battle or on campaign outside the city but, I will argue, his send-up of the philosopher makes more sense in light of his notoriety for certain combat experiences of the sort described by Plato. In particular, I will propose that Socrates’ conspicuous conduct during retreats at Potidaea and Delium informs the comic portrait of Socratic intellectualism and “tongue warfare” (*Clouds* 419)⁷ that we find in *Clouds* as well as helps explain the scope of the verb “to do like Socrates” that Aristophanes coins in *Birds*.⁸

Socrates and the Siege of Potidaea⁹

The Athenian action against the rebellious tribute-paying ally Potidaea is among the conflicts that initiate the Peloponnesian War. The Athenian forces sailed to reach the site on the isthmus of Chalcidice. Their first engagement was a fierce battle during which one of the four Athenian gener-

3. On the use of ancient sources to discuss notions of war trauma among veterans see Shay 1994, 1995, and 2002, King 2001, Tritle 2004, Crowley 2012 and 2014, Meineck and Konstan 2014, Meineck 2009 and in this volume, Lodewyck and Monoson 2016, Sherman 2005, Doerries at <http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/projects/theater-of-war/overview..>

4. ἄξιον ἦν θεάσασθαι Σωκράτη. Cf. *Republic* 328a, 445c, 619e.

5. *Memorabilia* 1.2.63, 4.4.1

6. E.g., *Memorabilia* 1.6.9–10, 2.1.3–6; 2.6.27; 3.1.1–5.28, 6.10, 10.9–15, 12.4.

7. τῆ γλώττη πολεμίζων, 419. All translations of *Clouds* are from Henderson 1998.

8. σωκρατέω at *Birds* 1282.

9. This account is drawn from Plato’s *Apology* 28e, *Charmides* 153a–c, 156d and *Symposium* 219e–221d, contextualized and augmented by material drawn from Thucydides 1.56–67, 2.58.1–3 and 2.701–4.

als on site, Callias, perishes. The Potidaeans retreated behind their city walls and the Athenians laid siege for three years. From this information we can infer that Socrates was deployed, possibly without leave, for a protracted length of time,¹⁰ and that he participated in both hoplite battle and the backbreaking work of building fortifications for a siege.¹¹

Alcibiades' speech in Plato's *Symposium* highlights Socrates' actions at Potidaea. The setting of that speech is the end of a dinner party at which the guests have each already delivered discourses in praise of Eros. Alcibiades bursts in on the gathering, possibly drunk, and offers a speech in praise not of the god, Eros, but of his would-be lover, Socrates. He is interested to describe Socrates' singularity—especially his resistance to conventional expressions of erotic desire—but goes off on tangents detailing his experience as Socrates' comrade and “mess-mate” mostly to enlarge the account of evidence of Socrates' uncommon capacity for “endurance” of the allure of pleasures. Alcibiades reminds his audience that, years earlier, he deployed to Potidaea with Socrates. At the time, Socrates was a man in his middle thirties and Alcibiades was a young man on what was likely his first campaign. Alcibiades was also, of course, a ward of Pericles and Athens' most famously beautiful young man. Socrates was already a “celebrity”¹² of sorts for his philosophical examinations, unconventional behavior, untraditional view of a good life, and peculiar manners. But to have been the preferred comrade in arms of such a high profile young man he must also have been well-trained, physically strong, and thought by his fellows to be fully capable of performing as a hoplite.

Remembering the expedition to Potidaea, Alcibiades recalls that the Athenian forces suffered very serious deprivations (they were cut off from their supplies and had an acute lack of food) and prolonged periods of severe discomfort. He makes a particularly big deal about ways in which Socrates was conspicuously admirable but nevertheless not lauded by fellow troops. First he mentions Socrates' endurance of the intense cold weather, proclaiming that “wearing nothing but this same old light cloak” and “in bare feet he made better progress on the ice than the other soldiers did in their boots” (220b).¹³ Alcibiades goes on to tell of a time when Socrates got absorbed thinking about a problem while in the encampment

10. See Planeaux 1999 on the way dramatic features of Plato's texts are consistent with the possibility that Socrates served without leave for a protracted period, possibly as long as three full years.

11. On the demands of siege warfare for all soldiers on campaign see Kern 1999: 89–193.

12. Grafton et al. 2010: 895.

13. All translations of Plato are from Cooper 1997.

during the siege and stood outside in the same spot, lost in thought, for a full twenty-four hours straight. After a few hours, his comrades came out to watch him (and mock him), even taking their bedding outside to get a good view of the spectacle. But the most striking behavior Alcibiades reports is clearly his actions in battle, specifically in the midst of a horrible Athenian retreat. From Thucydides we know that there was a fierce hoplite engagement at Potidaea during which the Athenian lines broke and many fled. In Plato's *Symposium*, Alcibiades reports that he was himself seriously wounded and movingly tells the story of how Socrates rescued him from the chaotic battlefield, managing to extricate him *and* his armor. "Socrates single-handedly saved my life," he exclaims and continues, "He just refused to leave me behind" (220e). Yet, Alcibiades goes on to report, while this happened in full view of many others, the commanders deliberately ignored Socrates' act of valor and instead gave a decoration to him, the one rescued, even over his own objections. In so doing, the commanders betrayed that their foremost concern was to curry favor with those who shared Alcibiades' social status, not fairly to recognize battlefield acts of valor. Alcibiades also says that Socrates did not protest. The implication seems to be that the commanders and troops did not mind insulting him and that Socrates was indifferent to the slight.

Alcibiades does not address the particularly grisly aspects of the Potidaean campaign that Plato's readers would have likely known about. For example, from Thucydides we learn that an outbreak of plague struck the Athenian troops during the siege and that the beleaguered Potidaeans became so desperate for food that they resorted to cannibalism. Thucydides writes that it was only after word of this unnerving repulsion circulated among the Athenian troops and they began reflecting on their own barely adequate rations that they finally agreed to terms of capitulation.

Plato sets the *Charmides* the morning after Socrates' return home from the three-year long Potidaean campaign. There is no account of his reunion with his wife and sons or assessment of the state of his household after a long absence. This may not be as striking as it first seems since it is possible that his marriage came later in his life.¹⁴ But still there is no account of his interest in the state of public discourse about the possibility (or not) of peace with the Spartans or the likely course of the war. Instead, the account of his homecoming focuses on Socrates' recollections of his first moment back at the palaestra where the youth gather and his desire to once again take up his philosophical examinations. Without any sign of

14. Brown 2004: 534.

hesitation, Socrates says at the opening of the *Charmides*, “After such a long absence I sought out my accustomed haunts with special pleasure” (153a). He specifically denies feeling ill at ease in any way—even though he reports that only a short time ago on the journey home the Athenians fought battles in which some of his personal friends perished (presumably fellow soldiers with whom he had served for the last three years). The boys are excited to see him and are full of questions about the campaign. In fact, the image of a calm Socrates just home from war contrasts with the unrestrained enthusiasm of the boys, especially Socrates’ young friend Chaerophon.¹⁵ At first, Socrates answers Chaerophon’s questions with very short, minimally informative lines. The tone and content of Socrates’ responses are a bit strange given his self-described good mood and suggest Plato’s honest attention to the setting of a warrior’s return:

CHAEROPHON: How did you survive the battle?

SOCRATES: Exactly as you see me.

CHAEROPHON: The way we heard it here the fighting was very heavy and many of our friends were killed.

SOCRATES: The report is accurate.

CHAEROPHON: Were you actually in the battle?

SOCRATES: I was there. (153b-c)

Chaerophon urges Socrates to sit and give a full account of the battle and Socrates quickly adjusts to more extensive talking. Socrates recalls that he took a seat, went on “to relate the news in answer to whatever questions anyone asked, and they asked plenty of different ones” (153d). Plato depicts him slipping nearly effortlessly back into his usual philosophical investigations and discourses with the promising young men of the city. “When they had had enough of these things,” he continues, “I, in my turn, began to question them with respect to affairs at home, about the present state of philosophy and about the young men, whether there were any who had become distinguished for wisdom or beauty or both” (153d). Answering all the questions about the recent battle, about injured and dead friends, and about conditions on the long deployment likely took up some time. But Plato’s construction of the opening of the *Charmides* highlights the speed and ease with which Socrates returned to his philosophic labors.

15. He is described as *μανικός* at 153b3.

Socrates and the Battle of Delium¹⁶

Delium was the first full-scale and certainly the bloodiest hoplite battle of the entire Peloponnesian War. In this campaign of early autumn of 424, the Athenians aggressively sought a stronghold in the heart of hostile Boeotia, just a day's march from central Athens, by fortifying the sanctuary of Apollo at Delium. Four details beyond the simple fact of the humiliating Athenian defeat stand out in Thucydides' report. First, a sort of "friendly fire" episode contributed to the carnage and notoriety of this battle. In the midst of a hoplite battle in which the Athenians had gained a temporary upper hand, "some of the Athenians fell into confusion in surrounding the enemy and mistook and so killed each other" (4.96.3).¹⁷ Second, Thucydides indicates that the Athenian retreat at Delium was initiated by errors by an Athenian commander and clever moves by a Boeotian commander, not simply by Boeotian superior strength. Athenian forces were far larger but were routed and the troops fled in a wildly chaotic fashion. Specifically, Thucydides tells us that a smart tactical move on the part of the Theban general Pagondas "struck panic into the victorious wing of the Athenians . . . [and that] the whole Athenian army took to flight" (4.96.6), some to the ships and some over land. The third striking detail concerning Delium reported by Thucydides is that Athenian corpses remained on the battleground for seventeen days. Because Athenians had violated the sanctuary of Apollo by making it into a garrison and some had retreated into that space and therefore now still remained in Boeotian territory, the victors refused to allow the Athenians to collect their dead until they abandoned the fortified temple. In effect, they held Athenian bodies hostage. The stalemate ended only after the Boeotians used a new weapon on the Athenians in the offending garrison. This new weapon is the fourth special horror associated with Delium by Thucydides. In particular, the Thebans used a "flame-blowing contraption"¹⁸ that allowed the enemy to set the wooden walls of the garrison on fire from a relatively safe distance, incinerating some, driving out the rest, and striking terror into all. After this, the Boeotians let the Athenians recover their dead, including the decomposing corpses from the earlier engagement. Thucydides reports that, at the end of the day, at Delium "not quite five hundred Boeo-

16. This account is drawn from Plato's *Apology* 28e, *Laches* 181b and *Symposium* 221a-c, contextualized and augmented by Thucydides 4.89–101, 4.108 and 5.14.1.

17. Translations from Thucydides are from Strassler 1996.

18. Mayor 2009: 219, also Crosby 2002: 89. Thucydides explains the technology at 4.100.2–4.

tians fell in the battle, and nearly one thousand Athenians, including Hippocrates the general” (4.101.1-2). Delium had been a “severe blow” (4.108.5).

The Athenians’ tactical errors, humiliations, and suffering, all experienced extremely close to home, made this campaign infamous. Hanson describes Delium as the “only pitched battle of the Peloponnesian War fought in close proximity to Athens.” Passages from Plato’s *Apology*, *Laches*, and *Symposium* place Socrates squarely in the middle of the confused retreat in which, as Hanson stresses, Athenians in error speared and hacked away at members of their own forces of which dozens “must have been impaled by their own brothers, fathers, friends.”¹⁹ Alcibiades’ praise of Socrates in the *Symposium* lauds the memorable way Socrates at Delium was “looking out for friendly and enemy troops” (221b) and recounts one incident in particular. Alcibiades reports being on horseback himself during the battle and of having had a clear view of a striking act of valor by Socrates. He says he witnessed Socrates’ steadfast refusal to leave Laches’ side during the retreat. Laches was a former general and advocate of a truce with Sparta the following year. Alcibiades says that Socrates was “remarkably more collected than Laches,” continuing as follows:

Even from a great distance it was obvious that this was a very brave man, who would put up a terrific fight if anyone approached him. This is what saved both of them. For, as a rule, you try to put as much distance as you can between yourself and such men in battle; you go after the others, those who run away helter-skelter. (221b-c)

Alcibiades dramatically stresses Socrates’ oddity by calling attention to the way this behavior, so seemingly unusual and courageous, actually reminds him of Socrates’ usual conduct around the city. He turns to the playwright Aristophanes, another guest at the banquet that is the dramatic setting of the *Symposium*, and says that Socrates’ behavior during the retreat of Delium reminded him of the way Aristophanes years earlier had depicted Socrates making his way around town with a “swagger” (221b, explicitly citing *Clouds* 362). Socrates strikes Alcibiades as wondrous for his battlefield courage and for the way he remains himself while at war, even while in the midst of battle.

Laches’ own account of the event appears in Plato’s dialogue named for him, *Laches*. In it, Laches, Nicias, Lysimachus, and others talk about

19. Hanson 2003: 200, 213.

whether learning to fight in armor as a hoplite is something they should teach their children. Is it a valuable part of education? One suggests they ask Socrates. For a time they focus on Socrates' fitness as a partner in discourse on such matters. Lysimachus worries whether the philosopher the boys always praise knows anything of such matters. But when he learns that the philosopher the boys admire is *that* Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus who served at Delium, he reconsiders. Laches recalls that Socrates' actions during the lethal and generally disgraceful Athenian retreat were exemplary and that in this respect Socrates enjoys a fine reputation.

He accompanied me in the retreat from Delium and I assure you that if the rest had chosen to be like him, our city would be holding up her head and would not then have had such a terrible fall. (181b)

As the dialogue progresses, Laches calls special attention to Socrates' display of "endurance" and, when the discussion turns to inquiry into military virtues, he insists on defining courage as a sort of "endurance of the soul" (192b).

Socrates and the Expedition to Amphipolis²⁰

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates places himself on the campaign to retake Amphipolis as well as on those to Potidaea and Delium, but nowhere in the dialogues does Plato present any details of his conduct on this expedition.²¹ From Thucydides we know that Amphipolis was an Athenian colony in Thrace that went over to Sparta after being besieged by forces under the command of the Spartan general Brasidas. The Spartans took Amphipolis soon after the debacle at Delium. Unsteady from the defeat at Delium and loss of Amphipolis, as well as alarmed by the success of the Spartans forces under Brasidas in Thrace, the Athenians negotiated a one-year truce. Laches, the general Socrates saved at Delium, proposed its ratification at Athens. When that truce expired in 422 Cleon prevailed upon the Athenians to dispatch forces north under his command to retake Amphipolis. The expedition failed and both Cleon and Brasidas perished there. This is also the campaign in which Thucydides (the historian) served as a

20. This account relies on Plato's *Apology* 28e contextualized and augmented by Thucydides 4.102–22 and 5.6.1–16.1.

21. At *Apology* 28e Socrates lists the three campaigns out of historical order. On why and how this might indicate the importance of Delium in Athenian memory see Calder 1961.

general. He was in command of ships charged with bringing reinforcements to the Athenians on campaign at Amphipolis, but he failed to get his forces there in time to make a difference. Tried and judged incompetent by the Athenians, he was sentenced to a twenty-year exile as punishment (5.26.5). The reference in the *Apology* to Socrates' part in the expedition to Amphipolis could suggest service under the command of either Cleon or Thucydides.

Plato Compares Socrates at War to Odysseus, Achilles, Palamedes and Ajax

Plato's account of Socrates' conduct in war never mentions any praiseworthy acts of killing or indeed any particularly belligerent behavior toward any enemy at all. Nor does Plato linger on any specifically grisly or heart-rending things he might have witnessed, suffered, or done. Instead, his account of Socrates' military service sticks to detailing the philosopher's display of how his physical and psychological endurance served him and his compatriots well in the face of deprivations, insults, and dangers—and especially during shameful retreats. Across the sources, Plato's account consistently stresses Socrates' demonstration of “endurance” and treats it as observable evidence of a hard-won healthy state of soul, and its benefit to others eclipsed in importance only by his conduct at trial, in prison, and in facing death.

Some indication of the importance Plato assigns to Socrates' display of “endurance” to the exclusion of other features of soldiering—especially killing and the mental anguish that often attends inner moral conflict—appears in the context of the censorship of poetry in *Republic* 3. At one point in that discussion, Socrates questions the value of stories of the pitiable behavior of Homeric heroes and argues that the education of the guardians must use only modified versions of their stories. Then he continues:

But if, on the other hand, there are words or deeds of famous men, who are exhibiting endurance (καρτερία) in the face of everything, surely they must be seen or heard. (391a)

In light of the fact that Alcibiades' account of Socrates' singularity in Plato's *Symposium* stresses above all his uncommon “endurance,” it seems that Plato's own story of Socrates at war is designed to pass muster with the monitors of guardian education. In particular, Alcibiades' speech sug-

gests that Socrates' capacity for endurance rivals that of Odysseus. Alcibiades lauds some of Socrates' particular acts by identifying them with "the exploits our strong-hearted hero (καρτερός ἀνὴρ) dared to do" (220c2). Alcibiades' line echoes references to Odysseus as *karteros aner* at *Odyssey* 242 and 271. In doing so, he links Socrates at Potidaea to the suffering of the Achaeans, especially to Odysseus' endurance at Troy recounted for Telemachus in *Odyssey* 4.

This *Republic* passage on censoring epic also delicately invites a comparison of Socrates to Achilles. Immediately following the reference to the suitability of models of endurance for a guardian's education, Socrates moves to consider Homer's account of Achilles' anger and how it might be toned down to make the story include a bit more endurance and thus be a fitting part of the guardian's moral training. Plato also crafts a comparison of Socrates and Achilles in the *Apology*.²² In that speech, Socrates appeals to the example of Achilles when he addresses what he takes to be a commonplace objection to his devotion to philosophy—it is a shameful activity that places one at grave personal risk (i.e., it shamefully leaves him vulnerable to prosecution and either unable or unwilling to defend oneself in court). Socrates imagines being asked, "Aren't you ashamed to have engaged in the sort of occupation that has now put you at risk of death?" (28b). He responds to the imagined query by invoking the praiseworthy example of Achilles, whose decision to avenge the death of Patroclus by killing Hector is made in full awareness of the fact that his own death is fated swiftly to follow that of Hector. Socrates mocks his audience, "Do you really suppose Achilles gave a thought to danger or death" when he set out to kill Hector (28d)? In effect, he arrogantly proposes that he, like Achilles, is resolute in the face of impending death. But Plato's presentation of Socrates' self-importance has not reached the height of expression just yet. Plato also sets up his reader to see a dramatic way in which Socrates emerges from the comparison "not Achilles' equal but as his superior."²³ Socrates obeyed his commanders at Potidaea, Delium, and Amphipolis, bore insults lightly, stood his ground, and never abandoned his "station" (τάξις, 28d) or fellow soldiers. Now, at trial, he will similarly stand with philosophy—an occupation he finds preferable to war—and, in his gadfly way, aid his city. On Plato's account of Socrates, his endurance does not come undone over a long period of time, and in the face of pains and grave dangers as well as exposure to events that could elicit anger and

22. Cf. Metcalf 2009 and Hobbs 2000: 178 on Plato's comparison of Socrates to Achilles. See also *Crito* 44a-b.

23. Hobbs 2000: 186.

grief. Alcibiades' anecdote about Socrates being passed over for a deserved prize for valor after saving him at Potidaea stresses precisely this point. Socrates lightly bears a violation of what's right that could disturb (if not upend) another. In this way, Socrates is the antithesis of Achilles. The latter's explosive wrath is of course the central theme of the *Iliad*, manifest in, among many other things, his shifting attitudes toward his fellow Greeks, bitter arguments with commanders, and the grief-induced acts of depravity (abuse of Hector's corpse).

Plato's *Apology* also invites hearers to compare Socrates to Palamedes and Ajax. Near the close of the speech and well after he has reported the verdict and sentence, Socrates insists that death is an unknown and therefore possibly a blessing. He imagines himself in Hades; it would be wonderful, he says, to spend time with Palamedes and Ajax comparing our experiences of unjust conviction (41b). Both mythic heroes suffered injustices at the hands of fellow warriors while on campaign.

Palamedes was the leader of the contingent from Nauplia in the Greek forces at Troy.²⁴ Three attributes of this mythic figure are relevant. First, Palamedes went to see Odysseus in Ithaca to deliver Agamemnon's orders to join the expedition to Troy. On that occasion Odysseus feigned madness in an effort to avoid going, but Palamedes cleverly exposed his ruse, thus ensuring he would serve.²⁵ Specifically, Palamedes placed Odysseus' son Telemachus in the path of his father's plow, causing Odysseus to act quickly to save the boy and in so doing reveal his deceit. Second, it appears that in some lost tragedies Palamedes was depicted "always showing up Agamemnon as a totally ridiculous general" by exposing his poor skills as a tactician and strategist.²⁶ Third, on campaign at Troy Palamedes publicly disagreed with Odysseus and advised the Greeks to go home. Aggravated and vengeful, Odysseus maneuvered to undermine Palamedes' credibility with the troops by conspiring to have him wrongfully accused of theft and, on the corrupt orders of the commander Agamemnon, unjustly killed. There is a lot in these brief details to suggest that Socrates might have fancied himself very much like Palamedes, the one hero in the set of comparisons that does not appear in Homer.²⁷ Socrates might say that he, too,

24. Palamedes is less well known to us, largely because he does not appear much in our extant sources, including Homer. Both Xenophon and Plato refer to his story as a frequent subject of tragedy. *Memorabilia* 4.2.33, *Republic* 522c., *Gorgias Defense of Palamedes*.

25. Apollodorus *Epitome* 5.3.

26. Plato *Republic* 522c.

27. Xenophon's *Apology* also depicts Socrates drawing a comparison of himself to Palamedes (1.26).

tested the true state of mind of others, delighted in exposing the actual lack of relevant expertise of a confident authority, and perished as a result of an erroneous assessment of his public import motivated by personal animosity and political disagreement. There is even some evidence to suggest that Plato might have modeled his defense of Socrates in the *Apology* on Gorgias' *Defense of Palamedes*.²⁸

Apology also invites us to compare the suffering of Socrates and Ajax, the formidable Homeric warrior and subject of Sophoclean tragedy. Both suffer personal slights while on campaign (Ajax fails to win Achilles' shield at Troy, Socrates' is passed over for a deserved decoration at Potidaea). Both have close associates who try to dissuade them from accepting death (compare the pleadings of Ajax's wife Tecmessa and Socrates' friend Crito), both die by their own hands (Ajax buries a sword in his own chest, Socrates lifts the cup of hemlock to his lips), and both deaths are set in motion by unjust judgments issued by recognized authorities (Ajax's commanders set up an unfair contest for Achilles' armor precipitating his instability, the Athenians indict and convict Socrates). But, in the end, Plato's attention to Socrates' unwavering endurance makes their dissimilarities stand out. Socrates remains steady not only in battle but afterwards, in his case in the city and most dramatically under the stress of trial. Even if we allow that Socrates' defense speech was a feeble attempt to secure an acquittal and that he seemed to hasten his own death, the picture of his act remains that of a reasoned "end-of-life choice"²⁹ designed to produce a stirring spectacle, not of an act brought on by shame and despair. Ajax, on the other hand, becomes increasingly unsteady psychologically as he wrestles with the violations of what's right that he has suffered (regarding the armor) and committed (regarding his homicidal attack on what he believed to be his compatriots—the Goddess substituted sheep) and sinks into suicidal despair. Ajax is a great warrior who endures a lot but whose endurance "comes undone."³⁰ Sophocles marks the turning point. Sword in hand, and contemplating suicide in full view of his wife, Ajax laments, "I used to have tremendous endurance" (650³¹).

28. Coulter 1964, Wallace 2013.

29. I borrow the term from "Compassion and Choices," an advocacy group once known as "The Hemlock Society" in an explicit nod to the example of Socrates.

30. Shay 1994.

31. καὶ γὰρ ὄς τὰ δεινὸν ἔκαρτέρου τότε.

Xenophon Treats Socrates as a Model of Martial Endurance

In the midst of the tumultuous politics that followed the close of the Peloponnesian War Xenophon chose to leave Athens to join a mercenary force of Greeks recruited by a rival for the Persian throne. Xenophon was still young at the time, only in his twenties, and reports that before going he asked Socrates what he thought of the idea. He tells a brief story about how Socrates advised him to consult the Delphic Oracle, chastised him because he asked only about how to ensure success and not whether he should go at all, but then encouraged him to follow through on his decision, which of course he did (rising to take command of the forces when they faced increasingly desperate conditions and to become the inspirational leader of the ten thousand credited with rescuing the army).³² Xenophon's various works tend to military affairs at length but the various accounts of Socrates' exemplarity take little note of the specifics of his military exploits. I have found only one explicit reference to Socrates' military service in Xenophon's works. He says Socrates displayed scrupulous obedience to the laws regarding common affairs when in the city or with the army on campaign (Memo 4.4.1). Xenophon does not name the campaign(s) on which he served nor does he go on to supply a vivid picture of Socrates' part in the "separate realm"³³ of the battlefield. Early in the *Memorabilia* he does seem to recall Socrates at Potidaea when he wonders how anyone could view Socrates as a corrupter of the youth when he was in fact in strict control of his own passions and most able to endure cold, heat, and toil (καρτερικώτατος 1.2.1³⁴). But there are no efforts in Xenophon to recall Socrates standing by Alcibiades at Potidaea or Laches at Delium. Instead, we find passages that use Socrates' conduct as a soldier as one more piece of evidence of the practical value of the moral virtues he cultivated at all times; his self-control and self-sufficiency become manifest in his capacity to withstand with ease the hardships and deprivations usual in war. In particular, he describes ways in which his frugality—behavior that many sneered at—prepared him to endure harsh conditions

32. *Anabasis* 3.1.3–7.

33. I borrow this from Fallows 2014: 75.

34. Henderson (2013: 19n7) observes a connection between the reference to endurance of cold in this passage from *Memorabilia*, Plato's *Symposium* 219e, and the Battle of Potidaea. I stress Xenophon's interest in how that case illustrates his endurance more broadly. See also use of καρτερία in Xenophon *Apology* 25 ("How could I corrupt the young by habituating them to fortitude and frugality?") and *Symposium* 8.8 (Socrates praises Antisthenes for admiring those who show "strength and fortitude").

on deployment outside the city and to be a hardy resident of the city during wartime stresses. For example, in *Memorabilia* he depicts Socrates rhetorically asking, “Which will find soldiering the easier task, the one who cannot exist without expensive food or the one satisfied with what he can get? Which when besieged will surrender first, the one who wants what is very hard to come by or the one who can make shift with whatever is at hand?” (1.6.9³⁵). In his *Apology* Xenophon recalls how Socrates held up under one dramatic siege in particular—the siege of Athens by the Spartans in the last year of the Peloponnesian War. He portrays Socrates reminding his hearers that, “While others were feeling sorry for themselves, I carried on in no greater destitution than when the city’s prosperity was at its height” (1.18).

Aristophanes' *Clouds* and the Battle of Delium

Xenophon and Plato both knew Socrates but wrote their accounts of him after his death. Aristophanes' send-up of Socrates in *Clouds*, in contrast, was produced at an Athenian dramatic festival in the midst of the Peloponnesian War, twenty-three years before Socrates' trial, for an audience that very likely included Socrates. In that comedy, Aristophanes delivers a blistering satire of new sophistic intellectual fashions at Athens that focuses on a character called “Socrates” who is both like and unlike the portraits of him that come down to us in the other authors. Scholars have explained this discrepancy by viewing Aristophanes' character as an amalgam, a “compound figure” meant to typify the genus being skewered so that the poet can exploit the subject's broadest comic potential.³⁶ But why did Aristophanes choose Socrates for that role in *Clouds*?

Commentators usually assume that Aristophanes must have found that over the years Socrates' ragged appearance, ascetic conduct, profession of highly unconventional views, and irritating habit of ques-

35. Translations of Xenophon are from Henderson 2013.

36. With Dover (1968: liii and 1972: 118) and Konstan (2011: 86). This remains the most compelling way to explain the mix of both continuities and discontinuities that exist among the accounts of Socrates' appearance, conduct, and doctrines in *Clouds*, Plato, and Xenophon. In sum, Dover: “although the difference between Socrates and the Sophists was known to Aristophanes . . . he simply did not see it, and if it had been pointed out to him he would not have regarded it as important” (1968: liii). And Konstan: Socrates in *Clouds* represents “the entire intellectual movement that we denote by the terms ‘presocratic’ and ‘sophistic,’ though Greeks at the time would have seen little or no difference between them” (2011: 86–87). See also discussion in Henderson 1992, MacDowell 1995:132–33, and Edmunds 2006.

tioning everyone made him notorious enough to anchor a play about intellectuals designed for a popular audience. And that seems plausible. It is reasonable to surmise that in 424/3 Socrates was “a conspicuous individual and the subject of some striking anecdotes, something more than a name.”³⁷ But this view does not account for the topicality of Socrates that year, a point the poet stresses when he defends his play. *Clouds* failed to gain top honors when first performed at the City Dionysia in 423 and Aristophanes revised the play, adding a parabasis addressing its disappointing reception (518-62, the text we have is the revision). That speech not only berates his audience for its poor judgment but also disparages other comic poets for focusing on figures whose public reputations have already become sullied. He likens his own bold choice of target in *Clouds* to his fearless decision to go after Cleon the previous year in his victorious play *Knights*. That decision was fearless because Aristophanes composed *Knights* soon after an event that catapulted Cleon into a position of popularity and leadership—the unlikely and spectacular Athenian victory at Pylos under his command. He implies that taking on Socrates in 423 was just as great a challenge and deserved similar accolades.³⁸ There is additional reason to suppose that Socrates must have been conspicuous at that time for more than his familiar oddities. A now lost comedy, Ampeipsias’ *Konnus*, produced for the same dramatic competition as *Clouds*, also focused on Socrates.³⁹ As Konstan has noted, “It is fair to assume that *something* about Socrates had caught the Athenians’ attention in or shortly before 423 for him to be the subject of a spoof in two comedies that year.” But Konstan remains puzzled by what that something might have been. He allows that “very possibly there is an allusion to such an event in *Clouds*” yet concludes, “if so, it is opaque to us.”⁴⁰

Could that something have been Socrates’ conduct at the Battle of Delium in 424 just months before the production of *Clouds*? Since it was fought in such close proximity to Athens, the grisly disaster at Delium “must have quickly taken on mythic proportions and been recounted constantly throughout Athens.”⁴¹ Accordingly, if we take seriously Plato’s account of Socrates’ fierce and yet somewhat bizarre stance holding his

37. Dover 1968: lii.

38. In the parabasis of *Wasps* he calls *Clouds* his best play and abuses spectators for having rejecting it (1037–47).

39. Ampeipsias Fr. 9, Diogenes Laertius 2.28. Dover 1968: li.

40. Konstan 2011: 90, my emphasis.

41. Hanson 2003: 200.

ground and protecting Laches during the chaotic retreat at Delium, it is possible to imagine that this quirky intellectual Socrates was a particularly visible citizen-soldier in Athens that year. Dover considers this possibility and suggests that this visibility might have made Socrates vulnerable to personal attacks. Dover notes not only that Socrates “must have been talked about after his remarkable behavior at Potidaea as a man of extraordinary toughness” but also that “his bearing on the retreat from Delion is likely to have spread his reputation further, but not necessarily for his own good; human nature being what it is, our reaction to those who look much braver than we feel in a headlong retreat is not always generous admiration.”⁴²

If this is the case, allusions to the Battle of Delium should appear in *Clouds*. The play opens with Strepsiades observing a strong enemy presence very nearby and its disruptive effect on his household. In particular, in the first scene of *Clouds* we find Strepsiades complaining about not being able to discipline his slaves for fear they will desert to the enemy (6-7). The proximity of a large force may be an allusion to Delium. Other passing details in the play are more straightforwardly tied specifically to Delium. For example, there are references to Cleonymus and Hippocrates, two named individuals Thucydides ties to disgraceful acts at Delium. Strepsiades says that the presence of “Cleonymus the shield thrower” causes the clouds in the sky to morph into the image of a frightened deer (353, Thucydides 4.96). He and Socrates refer to Cleonymus again as an example of cowardice when they develop the silly grammar lesson about the gender of nouns (693). In addition, Worse Argument invokes the example of Hippocrates, the incompetent commanding officer slain at Delium (1000–1002, Thucydides 4.89–101). In addition, the chorus refers to Cleon in a way that assumes a post-Delium mood at Athens. The Cloud Chorus rebukes spectators for being taken in by Cleon. They say they thundered to try to warn the city off his “bad policy-making” and promotion of “senseless” expeditions, and yet the city elected him general anyway instead of convicting him of bribery and theft (575–95). These comments assume Cleon had been lauded but is now out of favor even if still in office as a general. That was indeed the case in the months after the disaster at Delium.⁴³ Cleon was elected one of the ten generals around February 424 but, in the wake of the Athenian defeat at Delium and facing the Spartan general Brasidas’ successful efforts to foment revolt among Athenian allies

42. Dover 1968: li.

43. We might add that, according to the parabasis in *Clouds* discussed above, being out of favor at the moment would make Cleon unsuitable for a really fine comic poet’s attention at that juncture.

in Thrace, including Amphipolis, public opinion at Athens swiftly turned against Cleon's aggressive war policies; he was not reelected to the board of generals and the Athenians took up negotiating the terms of a temporary truce with the Spartans.⁴⁴ In the spring of 423, with *Clouds* and *Kon-nus* on the program of the City Dionysia, the Athenians voted to reject Cleon's advice and ratified the terms of a one-year truce proposed by Laches, the general by whose side Socrates stood firm at Delium.⁴⁵

In addition to indications of the Battle of Delium in general, *Clouds'* compound portrait takes note of Socrates' reputation for fortitude on deployment and in combat, traits linked to his martial prowess in Xenophon and Plato. When the Cloud Chorus warns Strepsiades of the many personal qualities one must possess in order to benefit from instruction at Socrates' Thinkery and excel at "tongue warfare," their list includes "endurance abides in your soul" as well as an ability to be "not too annoyed by the cold or too keen on having breakfast" (412–19). The idea of "endurance in the soul" appears in Laches' summary of Socrates' extraordinary endurance at Delium in Plato's *Laches*. Alcibiades' account of Socrates at Potid-aea highlights his exceptional tolerance of severe cold. And lightly bearing hunger resonates with Xenophon's account of Socrates' capacity to cope with meager rations when under siege and on campaign.⁴⁶

If we allow that the disaster at Delium is an important context for the interpretation of *Clouds*, that Aristophanes was alert to Socrates' reputation as a soldier, and that the philosopher's conduct at Delium is at least part of the "something" that made him topical in 424/3,⁴⁷ the ridicule of intellectuals in *Clouds* is probably not as disengaged from Aristophanes' concern with Athenian "militarism" as is usually supposed.⁴⁸ Aristophanes may be mocking new intellectual fashions and Athenian militarism in tandem, possibly even suggesting that the new intellectual movements are clueless about war despite appearances.

44. Detailed at Thucydides 4.118.

45. Thucydides 4.4.119. The following year, Aristophanes depicts the same Laches as the target of Cleon's revenge in *Wasps*. Cleon did gain another command—the expedition to Amphipolis, where he perished.

46. *Symposium* 220b, *Memorabilia* 1.6.9, Xen. *Apology* 1.18, *Laches* 192b.

47. Ampeipsias' Fr 9 also references to a character's preference for a thin cloak and bare feet and capacity for "endurance" (καρτερικός).

48. Konstan (2011) on old comedy and militarism in classical Athens does not discuss *Clouds*. The Athenians' attachment to war and the corrupt character of public deliberations about war and peace preoccupies Aristophanes in plays produced in the two years immediately before and the two years immediately following *Clouds* (i.e., *Acharnians* and *Knights*, *Wasps* and *Peace*, as well as, of course, in later plays like *Lysistrata*).

This may be visible in the way the caricature of Socratic/sophistic learning damns it by likening it to Socrates' teachings ready one to treat other citizens as if they were enemy combatants over whom one seeks a crushing victory. Socrates says he will "plan an attack" and is expected to "lay siege" (479–84); Worse Argument also provokes Better Argument abandon his view and flee *into* the Thinkery in the manner of a hoplite in full retreat (1103⁴⁹). The caricature also robs Socrates and his ilk of any attachment to the honorable features of a good soldier. For example, the first time we see pupils emerge from Socrates' Thinkery they resemble the most pitiable living casualties of war, Cleon's captives, "the Spartan prisoners from Pylos" residing in Athens (185).⁵⁰ This is a dig at Socrates' familiar Laconic affect (long hair, unwashed) and any association it might have with claims to martial prowess. The difficult ending of the play also makes some sense when viewed in this light. The image of father-beating and the threat of mother-beating we get at the end of the play easily signal the utter moral corruption of Socratic thinking. But the fire is puzzling. Perhaps the image of Strepsiades suddenly and vengefully setting fire to the Thinkery suggests battlefield excesses of the sort that the Athenian suffered at Delium? The fire in the Thinkery might even have resonated with Athenian memories of the frightful burning of the Athenian garrison at the end of the Battle of Delium. One reason to indulge this possibility is the similarity between the characterization of the Thinkery's untraditional cosmological teaching—the sky is a barbeque lid that surrounds us and we are the hot coals—and Thucydides' account of the central role of hot coals in the operation of the Theban flamethrower used against the garrison at Delium.⁵¹ But even without this identification, the fiery ending shows us the culmination of a steady increase in the magnitude of the violence Strepsiades is willing and able to undertake to advance his interests, especially now that his interests amount only to a desire to exact revenge and he has had a muddled experience with Socrates and his school. At the close of the play, Strepsiades taunts a choking Socrates and his pupils in the Thinkery by likening his own brazen violent act to Socratic dialectic. A pupil sees Strepsiades with the torch in the process of setting the roof ablaze and asks, "What are you doing?" to which he responds: "I'm minc-

49. Also Dover 1968: 228.

50. Spartan soldiers were captured by Athenians forces under the command of Cleon in the late summer of 425 and imprisoned at Athens since then. Thucydides 4.38–41.

51. ἄνθρακες at both *Clouds* 97 and Thucydides 4.100.4. A difficulty with this association is that, in the play, they torch the roof by their own hands and not by means of the kind of flamethrower that Thucydides describes in his account of Delium.

ing words with the rafters of your house” (1495).⁵² And the play closes with an image of Socrates enacting a complete reversal of his notable behavior at Delium: he flees pursued by a stone-throwing Strepsiadēs.

Dover wonders if proximity to the Battle of Delium explains why *Clouds* placed last in the dramatic competition at the festival. It may be, he notes, that the Athenians appreciated Socrates’ bravery at Delium and that “the spring of 423 was just the wrong time to attack Socrates.”⁵³ I think the immediate response to *Clouds*’ send-up of Socrates may have been even more visceral. No matter how much they enjoyed lambasting Socrates as an idle chatterer⁵⁴ and poking fun at his pretense to toughness on display in his adoption of long hair and not bathing—his “superficial laconism”⁵⁵ that appears as a verb, “to do like Socrates,” in Aristophanes *Birds* (1280)—the parody in *Clouds* might just have crossed a line in 423 that had less to do with the satire of intellectual fashions and more to do with still fresh memory of the suffering at Delium. This might be what unnerved Aristophanes about the poor reception of his play at the festival. In the parabasis of *Wasps*, Aristophanes identifies himself, the poet, as a “bulwark against evil” (1043) and berates spectators for not recognizing that *Clouds* was “the best comic poetry ever heard,” full of “brand new ideas that you made fruitless by your failure to understand them clearly” (1044–47). His picture of Socrates, composite or note, nevertheless stuck. Plato’s *Apology* states that the unflattering portrait in *Clouds* had a tremendous impact on the way Athenians viewed Socrates for years. In *Apology* Socrates identifies Aristophanes as an early accuser and spends the first portion of that speech addressing “charges” that *Clouds* leveled against him long before Meletus and others filed a formal indictment, initiating a trial (18a–20c).

Concluding Remarks

I have reviewed the attention paid to Socrates’ military service in Aristophanes, Xenophon, and Plato and shown that over the course of the twenty-seven years of the Peloponnesian War and its aftermath, the philosopher endured extended deployments far from the city, hardships and depriva-

52. Trans. Henderson 1998. διαλεπτολογούμαι ταῖς δοκοῖς τῆς οἰκίας. Cf. Meineck 2000 translation: I am “engaged in subtle argument with your house.”

53. Dover 1972: 199.

54. As in *Frogs* 1491.

55. Dover 1968: lii.

tions, harrowing close combat, wrenching sights of suffering, insults from commanders, and public ridicule soon after returning home from a disastrous battle that was a humiliating defeat for the city but at which he personally managed to have behaved honorably—but also powerful experiences of care for fellow soldiers under grim and frightening circumstances. I have argued that this lens reveals neglected layers of significant complexity in these works. Each of these authors mobilizes knowledge of Socrates' military service as a citizen to fashion him into a singular icon of philosophical activity and to identify a practical effect of philosophy to be the cultivation of physical and psychological “endurance.” Does this picture of Socrates at war resonate with contemporary concerns about the psychological effects of combat experience? Does it provide resources for us to address the inner moral conflicts that good soldiers experience?⁵⁶ Can the record of Socrates be brought into modern discussions of war trauma that already fruitfully draw on figures in Greek tragedy, Homeric poetry, and Stoic philosophy? These questions deserve sustained consideration.⁵⁷

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56. I borrow some language from Sherman 2010.

57. *Contra* Shay 1994: 32 and 2002: 154.

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