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SOCRATES THE GADFLY: A RESPONSE TO MARSHALL AND THE *CAMBRIDGE GREEK LEXICON**

ABSTRACT

This article responds to Laura A. Marshall's argument that Socrates does not compare himself to a gadfly in Plato's Apology *but rather to a spur on the side of a horse directed by Apollo. In revisiting the evidence for the canonical reading, this article argues that 'gadfly' or some other irritant insect is the only plausible translation for* μύωψ *in the* Apology. *Scrutinizing the source of the contemporary notion of the Western philosopher is pressingly important—not only for its own sake, but because the 'spur reading' has made its way into public circles and even the* Cambridge Greek Lexicon.

Keywords: Socrates; Plato; *aporia*; Aesop; comedy; gadfly; Greek lexicography; ancient Greek language; *Cambridge Greek Lexicon*

It is often the task of a philosopher and philologist to challenge entrenched assumptions that have filtered into general discourse. The task is rendered even more important when it seeks to overthrow centuries of orthodoxy regarding a foundational figure of Western philosophy: the notion of Socrates as a gadfly. Marshall has recently taken on such a task, arguing that the canonical translation of μύωψ as 'gadfly' at *Apology* 30e5 is mistaken and should instead be translated as 'spur'—the allegedly standard translation and interpretation going back at least to Ficino's edition of Plato from 1557.[1] Standard, that is, until Stallbaum argued for the current translation in his 1827 edition of the *Apology*, an interpretation which thereafter embedded itself in scholarship and contemporary discourse up to the present day.[2]

Marshall's claim is not just a philological one. It aims to reorient what it means to be a philosopher in the spirit of Socrates, both then and now. Is it the case that to be a Socratic μύωψ is to act as a harsh, biting gadfly who provokes and irritates others without a clear path forward, as Marshall understands the canonical image (page 173)? One that, she further argues, would have reminded Plato's early readers of malicious and vindictive gods sending an insect to torment mortals? Or did Plato rather mean that to be a philosopher is to act as a spur against the Athenian horse under the immediate control of its surest and most moral steersman, Apollo?

Marshall argues that the Socratic μύωψ, although not lacking in irritation, should be read in the latter sense, rendering a pedagogical and moral force missing in the canonical translation. Thus, Marshall concludes (page 173), for two centuries philosophers have

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[1] L.A. Marshall, 'Gadfly or spur? The meaning of μύωψ in Plato's *Apology* of Socrates', *JHS* 137 (2017), 163–74 (henceforth simply 'Marshall'); M. Ficinus (ed.), *Platonis Opera omnia* (Lyon, 1557).

[2] G. Stallbaum, *Platonis dialogos selectos* ... (Gotha, 1827). All citations of Plato refer to Burnet's OCT and all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

embraced a misleading and harmful notion that feeds into a philosophical paradigm of aggressive confrontation rather than one of guided moral training. That is, training for the self, individual and body politic. These important questions are raised when we consider the source of the problem: in comparing himself to a μύωψ, did Socrates mean a gadfly or a spur?

This article aims to demonstrate that all ancient evidence indicates that 'gadfly' or some other irritant insect is the only plausible translation for μύωψ in the *Apology*. The spur reading has, however, recently been given weighty authority by no less than the *Cambridge Greek Lexicon*. Note the third translation in the first entry for μύωψ, which gives priority to the spur reading over the canonical one:

μύωψ[1] ωπος *m*. **1** insect which torments horses and cattle, **gadfly**, **horsefly** A. E.*fr*. Call. AR.

2 spur (attached to a rider's heel) X.; (pl.) Thphr. Plb. Plu.

3 (fig., ref. to a person) **spur** (W.GEN. to action) Plu.; (ref. to Socrates) Pl. [unless *gadfly*].[3]

Such a challenge to the traditional translation deserves a response. Renaissance and Early Modern scholars did, after all, understand the metaphor differently, and it is indeed time to revisit our long-held and elemental assumptions about Socrates and the trajectory those assumptions have made on the history of Western philosophy and modern culture.[4]

I will focus on the larger claims of the spur reading and how the ancient evidence speaks against it, with some concluding remarks about the benevolence and usefulness of Socratic *aporia* prompted by our revisiting of the issue in Plato and outside it. Although 'gadfly' or some other irritant insect is the only plausible translation for μύωψ in the *Apology*, important questions remain. What sort of philosophical gadfly *is* Socrates? And how, if at all, should we take after him in his manner of living?

1. THE CONTEXT: *APOLOGY* 30C3–31C3

This section is a bird's-eye juxtaposition of the spur reading against the gadfly one, beginning with the gadfly. At 30c3–5, Socrates pleads again for the jury not to make another rowdy fuss regarding what he is about to say (17d1, 20e4, 21a5). He says that killing him would cause greater harm to the jurors and his accusers than to himself, and that he is making a defence on behalf of the Athenians instead (30c7–8, d5–7). His argument is simple: they would be killing a gift from the god that is not so easy to replace (30e1–2).

ἐὰν γάρ με ἀποκτείνητε, οὐ ῥᾳδίως ἄλλον τοιοῦτον εὑρήσετε, ἀτεχνῶς—εἰ καὶ γελοιότερον εἰπεῖν—προσκείμενον τῇ πόλει ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ὥσπερ ἵππῳ μεγάλῳ μὲν καὶ γενναίῳ, ὑπὸ μεγέθους δὲ νωθεστέρῳ καὶ δεομένῳ ἐγείρεσθαι ὑπὸ μύωπός τινος, οἷον δή μοι δοκεῖ ὁ θεὸς ἐμὲ τῇ πόλει προστεθηκέναι τοιοῦτόν τινα, ὃς ὑμᾶς ἐγείρων καὶ πείθων καὶ ὀνειδίζων ἕνα ἕκαστον οὐδὲν παύομαι τὴν ἡμέραν ὅλην πανταχοῦ προσκαθίζων. τοιοῦτος οὖν ἄλλος οὐ ῥᾳδίως ὑμῖν γενήσεται, ὦ ἄνδρες, ἀλλ' ἐὰν ἐμοὶ πείθησθε, φείσεσθέ μου· ὑμεῖς δ' ἴσως τάχ' ἂν ἀχθόμενοι, ὥσπερ οἱ νυστάζοντες ἐγειρόμενοι, κρούσαντες ἄν με, πειθόμενοι Ἀνύτῳ,

[3] J. Diggle, B.L. Fraser, P. James, O.B. Simkin, A.A. Thompson and S.J. Westripp, *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (Cambridge, 2021), 2.954.

[4] For one substantial work structured around the spur reading, see H. Park, 'The psychagogical function of the *topos* of anger in Greco-Roman moral philosophy' (Diss., Stellenbosch University, 2023).

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ῥᾳδίως ἂν ἀποκτείναιτε, εἶτα τὸν λοιπὸν βίον καθεύδοντες διατελοῖτε ἄν, εἰ μή τινα ἄλλον ὁ θεὸς ὑμῖν ἐπιπέμψειεν κηδόμενος ὑμῶν.

For if you do kill me you will not easily be able to find another like me. Put frankly—even if it is a rather laughable thing to say—I have been attached to the city by the god as if upon a large and noble horse; one which, on account of its great size, is rather sleepy and in need of being jolted awake (ἐγείρεσθαι) by a sort of gadfly. And indeed it seems I *have* been attached in some such way upon the city by the god to accomplish this—I, who never cease jolting (ἐγείρων) and persuading you, each and every one of you the whole day long and anywhere I happen to settle down next to you. This sort of person will not easily come upon you again, gentlemen, and if you should be persuaded by me, spare me. But perhaps you may just as well be irritated with me—as someone who, having nodded off in a drowsy state, is suddenly jolted awake (ἐγειρόμενοι) and swat out at me. Indeed, if persuaded by Anytus, you would easily kill me, thereafter going back to sleep your whole life long till the very end. If, that is, the god should not set beside you someone else causing you distress in his care for you.

Such is a conventional translation carrying across the force of the comparison of *Apology* 30e1–31a8. Socrates constantly, everywhere and anywhere irritates the populace with his biting philosophical discussions like an irritant gadfly landing wherever he happens to upon a large and noble but sleepy horse; or upon, as it were, the necks of individual sleepy men (the constituent parts of the horse) who could swat out and easily kill him. His deliberate poverty, which is not part of normal human behaviour, is partial proof of his divine mission in this respect (31a8–c3).

The protreptic allusions are also clear. Socrates is mentally 'waking people up' who are νωθεῖς. LSJ s.v. II makes clear the protreptic function of Socrates' irritation—'νωθ-ής: of the understanding, *dull, stupid*.' Socrates seeks to educate with his relentless cross-examinations by forcing people to recognize their ignorance. The same protreptic language from this passage is put to use in the pseudo-Platonic *Clitophon* (408b4–c4), when the titular character remarks on the powers of Socratic speech: προτρεπτικωτάτους τε ἡγοῦμαι καὶ ὠφελιμωτάτους, καὶ ἀτεχνῶς ὥσπερ καθεύδοντας ἐπεγείρειν ἡμᾶς—'And I consider (your *logoi*) most inspiring and helpful and, well, that they simply wake us up from our slumbering.'[5]

On the other hand, the passage is rendered differently by Marshall (page 168):

For if you kill me, you will not easily find another who—even if it is rather ridiculous to say—is applied by the god to the city just as to a large and well-bred horse, who because of his size is rather sluggish and needs to be sped up (ἐγείρεσθαι) by a spur; and in just this way the god seems to me to have applied me to the city, I who never stop rousing (ἐγείρων) and persuading you and reproaching and besieging each of you all day long everywhere. Therefore, another such person will not easily arise for you, men of the jury, but if you are persuaded by me, spare me. But perhaps you would become angry, like those who are roused (ἐγειρόμενοι) from dozing, and would strike me, obeying Anytus, and would easily kill me. Then you would spend the rest of your life sleeping, unless the god should send you another because of his care for you.

On this interpretation, μύωπός τινος is translated as a 'spur' on the side of the Athenian horse, as μύωψ does also mean a spur for horses. The forms of irritation applied by Socrates to the Athenians—πρόσκειμαι ('land upon, be placed upon'), ἐγείρω ('awaken, stir, excite'), προστίθημι ('be placed next to, impose upon'), προσκαθίζω ('sit beside')—

[5] The *Clitophon* may be the earliest reception of *Apology* 30c3–31c3 (though see the following section for assured ancient receptions). For the plausible appropriation of the *Apology*'s ἐγείρω in the *Clitophon* see S.R. Slings, *Plato's* Apology of Socrates*: A Literary and Philosophical Study with a Running Commentary* (Leiden, 1994), 13–16.

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can and often do apply to applications of a spur to a horse as much as to the behaviour and effects of a gadfly on large animals.

On both readings, Socrates acts under the direction of a god—only the god is in a different location, as it were, and functions differently. On the canonical reading, Socrates is sent by the god to sting or bite the Athenians individually that constitute the horse to awaken them from their dogmatic slumbers; on the other reading, Socrates is in some sense the attached spur to the foot of the divine steersman, Apollo. On both accounts, Socrates attempts to prompt citizens to pursue virtue; but (so Marshall, page 173), the spur reading alone delivers a direction to Socratic provocation and renders a 'teaching purpose' rather than mere excitement and irritation, providing a more constructive philosophical effect than the canonical reading.

Marshall also argues that only the first use of ἐγείρω refers to the actions upon the horse—that is, to speed up a slow horse. Socrates refers to himself as a spur only at the start of the passage, whereas the following two uses of the verb (ἐγείρων, ἐγειρόμενοι) refer to Socrates' conversations outside any metaphorical context. Socrates drops the act, as it were, immediately after the articulation of the μύωπός τινος. By the second use of the verb, 'Socrates has moved out of the horse analogy' on the assumption (or mere assertion) that being sleepy and sluggish cannot be synonyms.[6] What this means for the function of οἷον δή—which Marshall translates as 'in just this way'—is overlooked.

This split imagery is a significant divergence from the canonical reading of *Apology* 30c3–31c3, where Socrates is holistically a gadfly throughout the passage, as it was univocally read by ancient readers, as will now be demonstrated.

2. THE LINEAGE OF 'GADFLY': ANCIENT UNDERSTANDINGS

Marshall's Section I (pages 163–6) is a historiographic survey of how 'gadfly' became the canonical translation. Since Ficino in 1557, the standard translation was 'spur'—he had μύωπός τινος as *calcaribus*, '(hit with) a spur'—until Stallbaum, in his 1827 edition of the *Apology*, argued for the now-canonical notion. Marshall's section VI (pages 171–2) charts ancient readings of the *Apology*'s μύωπός τινος as an alleged 'spur' as well. Here I examine the question of the passage's ancient readings and deal with Stallbaum's modern argument later.

According to Marshall (page 172), 'a later Greek audience understood the word μύωψ in the context of Plato, pedagogy and horses to mean "spur" rather than "gadfly"', and 'the ancient scholia on the *Apology* do not touch on the discussion, which indicates that the alternative meaning' of gadfly was not seriously 'considered until … Stallbaum's note in 1827'. This is based on the following from the *Life of Xenocrates* in Diogenes Laertius (4.6). As Marshall interprets the passage (page 171):

> Diogenes records that Xenocrates (the head of Plato's Academy after Speusippus) was so sluggish that he needed a spur: 'He was slow (νωθρός) by nature, with the result that Plato, in comparing him to Aristotle, said "This one needs a spur (μύωπος) and that one needs a bit (χαλινοῦ)" and "what an ass I'm urging on against what a horse (ἵππον)!"'

[6] Marshall, pages 169–70, on *Ap.* 30e5: 'Those who interpret ἐγείρω to mean "rousing from sleep" here are probably influenced by the image of people slapping the person who rouses them from sleep (νυστάζοντες ἐγειρόμενοι), but that is a separate image that occurs outside the horse simile, when Socrates has transitioned to discussing human action, and it includes the clarifying participle νυστάζοντες ("dozing"). The idea of "rousing the horse from sleep" also does not fit with νωθεστέρῳ, the comparative of νωθής, which means "sluggish" or "slothful" rather than "sleepy".'

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The conclusion: 'Even if the quotation is not original to Plato'—nor, Marshall admits, an explicit reference to the *Apology* or Socrates—'it indicates that a later Greek audience understood the word μύωψ in the context of Plato, pedagogy and horses to mean "spur" rather than "gadfly,"' as it 'includes some of the same vocabulary' and makes 'references to equestrian equipment, not insects'.

The extant literature on this passage in Diogenes, however, shows it has no connection with the *Apology*.[7] Rather, it reiterates a common Hellenistic trope about the nature of two different sorts of pupils: one slow but a true companion (Xenocrates), the other quick-witted and always prepared to run off (Aristotle). Diogenes uses it again verbatim at 5.39 with reference to Aristotle's students in the same sense, Callisthenes and Theophrastus respectively. Cicero and Quintilian even report that Isocrates said the same of his students—again verbatim—about the slowness of Ephorus and the quickness of Theophrastus (when the latter was understood to be only a brief student of the orator).[8] It is variously reported, too, that Plato gave Aristotle the nickname 'Horse' (Ἵππος) for pulling away from him, or that he was called 'Colt' (Πῶλος) for being like a young horse that kicks its mother.[9] Diog. Laert. 4.6 is merely another anecdote about the hot-headed and irreverent Aristotle who ultimately left Plato in contrast to the slow-learning but loyal character of Xenocrates—the major theme of Diogenes' *Life of Xenocrates*.

Diog. Laert. 4.6 thus has nothing to do with the *Apology*. But the ancient works that do refer to that work—and to the μύωψ passage in particular—all speak decidedly in favour of the gadfly interpretation. Take first the opening epistle of the *Letters of Socrates*, most probably written between the first century B.C.E. and the second century C.E.[10] Replying to the tyrant Archelaus, Socrates says that he is yet again refusing the invitation and money to join the ruler's court because Archelaus fails to understand the philosopher's mission, which is to stay in Athens for the benefit of his countrymen and the city at large. As Socrates says (*Letters of Socrates* 1.6.45–7.50):[11]

ἔπειτα δὲ οὐ τῶν τοσαύτῃ πόλει συμβουλευσόντων δεῖ μόνον οὐδὲ τῶν ἡγησομένων κατὰ γῆν ἢ κατὰ θάλατταν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἐπιστησόντων τοὺς ἐπὶ τὰ τῇ πόλει συμφέροντα ἰόντας. οὐδὲν γὰρ θαυμαστὸν ὑπὸ μεγέθους τῶν ἐπικειμένων οἷον ἀποκοιμίζεσθαι ἐνίους αὐτῶν, οἷς τοῦ ἐπεγείροντος ὥσπερ μύωπος δεήσει. πρὸς ἃ δὴ καὶ ἐμὲ ἔταξεν ὁ θεός.

Moreover, not only is there need for men who will advise so great a city, nor just for those who will lead it by land or sea, but also for men who will be set upon those with the city's welfare at heart. For it is nothing remarkable that, weighed down by the greatness of the tasks bestowed upon them, some, as it were, are lulled to sleep and need to be jolted awake by a sort of gadfly. It is to this task that the god has assigned me.

Here the author of the *Letter*, clearly referring to our passage, makes Socrates an annoying gadfly on the necks of sleeping and influential men. He is among those who are literally 'being placed atop' them (τῶν ἐπιστησόντων) in an effort to wake them up.

[7] See A.S. Riginos, *Platonica: The Anecdotes Concerning the Life and Writings of Plato* (Leiden, 1971), 131–2, 136–8; also more recent discussions on Diog. Laert. 4.6, 5.39 in the 'subsidium interpretationis' s.v. in T. Dorandi, *Diogenes Laertius:* Lives of Eminent Philosophers (Cambridge, 2013).

[8] Cic. *De or.* 3.9.36, *Ad Att.* 6.1, *Brut.* 56.204; Quint. *Inst.* 2.8.11.

[9] Aelian 4.9, Diog. Laert. 5.2. See Riginos (n. 7), 131–2 and test. 37B in I. Düring, *Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition* (Göteborg, 1957) on these nicknames.

[10] On the *Letters of Socrates* and their counterpart, the *Letters of the Socratics*, see J.-F. Borkowski, *Socratis quae feruntur epistolae: Edition, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1997).

[11] I follow Borkowski (n. 10), 43–4, 80 for the text here. Translation is mine.

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Consider next the *Amores* from a most astute reader of Plato and Classical literature, Lucian (or a capable imitator of his in the late Second Sophistic).[12] At the beginning of the *Amores*, Theomnestus considers himself a master in the ways of love for boys and girls, playfully comparing himself to Socrates, enraptured by eroticism as if tortured by a god—indeed as a tragic figure. In this instance, Theomnestus makes a clear allusion to Socrates' mission as a gadfly yet elegantly wedded to his eroticism (*Amores* 2):

θᾶττον ἄν μοι, ὦ Λυκῖνε, θαλάττης κύματα καὶ πυκνὰς ἀπ᾽ οὐρανοῦ νιφάδας ἀριθμήσειας ἢ τοὺς ἐμοὺς Ἔρωτας … σχεδὸν γὰρ ἐκ τῆς ἀντίπαιδος ἡλικίας εἰς τοὺς ἐφήβους κριθεὶς ἄλλαις ἀπ᾽ ἄλλων ἐπιθυμίαις βουκολοῦμαι· διάδοχοι ἔρωτες ἀλλήλων καὶ πρὶν ἢ λῆξαι τῶν προτέρων, ἄρχονται δεύτεροι, κάρηνα Λερναῖα τῆς παλιμφυοῦς Ὕδρας … οὕτως τις ὑγρὸς τοῖς ὄμμασιν ἐνοικεῖ μύωψ, ὃς ἅπαν κάλλος εἰς αὑτὸν ἁρπάζων ἐπ᾽ οὐδενὶ κόρῳ παύεται· καὶ συνεχὲς ἀπορεῖν ἐπέρχεταί μοι, τίς οὗτος Ἀφροδίτης ὁ χόλος· οὐ γὰρ Ἡλιάδης ἐγώ τις οὐδὲ Λημνιάδων ὕβρεις οὐδὲ Ἱππολύτειον ἀγροικίαν ὠφρυωμένος, ὡς ἐρεθίσαι τῆς θεοῦ τὴν ἄπαυστον ταύτην ὀργήν.

You would find it quicker, my dear Lycinus, to count me the waves of the sea or the flakes of a snowstorm than to count my loves … For, almost from the time when I left off being a boy and was accounted a young man, I have been beguiled by one passion after another. One Love has ever succeeded another, and almost before I've ended earlier ones later Loves begin. They are … appearing in greater multiplicity than on the self-regenerating Hydra … There dwells in my eyes so nimble a gadfly that it pounces on any and every beauty as its prey and is never sated enough to stop. And I am always wondering why Aphrodite bears me this grudge. For I am no child of the Sun, nor am I puffed up with the insolence of the Lemnian women or the boorish contempt of Hippolytus that I should have provoked this unceasing wrath on the part of the goddess.

The allusions here are many and open-ended, but one thing is clear: μύωψ in the context of this Socrates-analogue, Theomnestus, refers to an insect, one that compulsively, indeed mock-tragically pounces on beautiful people. Given, too, that the *Amores* deftly takes after the philosophical themes and literary backdrops of the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and *Lysis*, Xenophon's *Symposium* and Plutarch's *Dialogue on Love* (*Moralia* 7–9), there is good reason to think that we also have a reference to our passage in the *Apology*. Here, then, is further evidence of a living tradition in antiquity that saw μύωψ in relation to Socrates to mean a gadfly and not a spur.

Consider lastly the opening of Ioannes Mauropous' *Letter to Gregory*—Ioannes was born *c*. C.E. 1000—in which the author describes the ideal philosopher, who in this case is compared to an annoying gadfly, buzzing around and pricking his friends (*Letter to Gregory* 17.1–7)[13]:

ἦν μὲν ὡς ἔοικεν ἀγρυπνεῖν ἀναγκαῖον τὸν συνοικοῦντα χαλκεῖ κατὰ τὸν δημόσιον λόγον, ἀλλὰ τὸν ἀνδρὶ φιλολόγῳ καὶ ζητητικῷ προσδιαλεγόμενον οὐκ ἔνεστιν ἴσως οὐδὲ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀπονυστάξαι καὶ ῥᾳθυμῆσαι, τοῖς πυκνοῖς προβλήμασι καὶ ζητήμασιν οἱονεί τισι μύωψι τὰ ὦτα περιβομβούμενον, καὶ πρὸς ἕκαστον τούτων ὡσανεὶ πρὸς νύγματα κέντρων τὴν διάνοιαν ἐγειρόμενον.

It seems that he who lives next to a blacksmith must lie awake at night, as the proverb says. But for him who converses with a learned and inquiring man it is quite impossible to become sleepy

[12] M.D. Macleod, *Lucian:* Soloecista. Lucius *or* The Ass. Amores. Halcyon. Demosthenes. Podagra. Ocypus. Cyniscus. Philopatris. Charidemus. Nero (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 148 places the work in the third century C.E. But J. Jope, 'Interpretation and authenticity of the Lucianic *Erotes*', *Helios* 38 (2011), 103–20 argues for Lucian's authorship. Text and translation are from Macleod.

[13] Text and translation from A. Karpozilos, *The Letters of Ioannes Mauropous, Metropolitan of Euchaita* (Thessalonica, 1990).

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and sluggish, for his ears are buzzed with constant problems and inquiries as if by horse-flies, and his mind is kept awake as if pricked by a sting.

This passage shows that Socrates was read and understood by Ioannes to be a gadfly upon individuals; that the μύωψ of the *Apology* referred to an irritant insect. The notion of the ideal philosopher as one who never ceases to cause sleeplessness and consternation in the quest for truth is shot through this bit and the rest of the letter as well, making the connection to Socrates and the *Apology* even clearer.

The gadfly interpretation persisted from the first or second century C.E. well into the Byzantine period, and if there were an alternative available to these authors we might indeed expect to see it elsewhere—perhaps in the scholia, Stobaeus or the Suda. But we do not; and the evidence adduced above plausibly shows that the grammatical and philosophical interpretation of the passage had long been considered uncontroversial in favour of the gadfly interpretation. The passages also show that 'Socrates as a gadfly' was such an entrenched tradition that it could be fused with meaningful imagery and stories about philosophers and lovers. Ancient authors appropriated the image for many purposes in different contexts—and without need for a horse.

This survey of the appropriation of the *Apology*'s μύωψ in antiquity also refutes the collective argumentative force of Sections II and III of Marshall's paper (pages 166–8). Section II (to which I return below) argues in part that meaningful parallels and citations in Greek tragedy to a μύωψ as a biting gadfly are always accompanied by the word οἶστρος, another term for biting insect. Section III argues that when μύωψ is not accompanied by οἶστρος, it always refers to a spur against a horse, usually in training, such as at Xenophon's *On Horsemanship* 8.2–5 and Theophrastus' *Characters* 21.8. Thus, it is argued, we should expect to see οἶστρος in the *Apology*, and because we do not, 'spur' is the only plausible translation.

But as we have just seen, the long tradition of Platonic interpretation of the *Apology*'s use of μύωψ by Greek-speaking authors and intellectuals took it to mean gadfly with or without a qualifying use of οἶστρος. And there are uses of μύωψ in Xenophon regarding horses and horse-training that refer to a gadfly without the qualifier οἶστρος, namely *On Horsemanship* 4.5 and *On the Cavalry Commander* 1.16. Modern scholarship has already long understood the two insect names to be synonyms: οἶστρος befits higher, usually tragic discourse, and μύωψ fits more colloquial speech, such as farmers (and presumably the rustic Socrates) would use.[14] Thus there is no external ancient evidence for reading μύωψ in the *Apology* as a spur.

3. THE MODERN ARGUMENT: THE QUESTION OF THE LAUGHABLE

A significant portion of Marshall's argument is dedicated to refuting Stallbaum's reasoning—in his 1827 edition of the *Apology*—for translating μύωπός τινος as 'a sort of gadfly'. Stallbaum's view is summarized by Marshall (page 165) with a brief refutation as follows:

Stallbaum's argument for 'gadfly' over 'spur' relies on two ideas: first, a gadfly fits better with Socratic humour and irony, and the phrase εἰ γελοιότερον εἰπεῖν; second, the additional words προσκεῖσθαι, προστεθεικέναι and προσκαθίζειν fit better with the 'gadfly' interpretation than

[14] See M. Davies and J. Kathirithamby (edd.), *Greek Insects* (Oxford, 1986), 159–64; I.C. Beavis, *Insects and Other Invertebrates in Classical Antiquity* (Exeter, 1988), 225–9.

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they do with the 'rider and spur' interpretation. [But] Plato's Socrates often uses comparisons with everyday things such as horse trainers [including in the *Apology*]. Other literary parallels to a god sending a gadfly (in *Prometheus Bound* and Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*) are not humorous but emphasize human suffering at the hands of the gods; so although a 19th-century reader might find it rather ridiculous, it is not clear that the original audience would have thought so.

These remarks receive some elaboration later (page 171):

[Stallbaum's central] argument for 'gadfly' that μύωψ cannot mean spur is … because [the spur] image is not γελοιότερον (rather ridiculous). This must mean that using a spur on a horse is reasonable and normal, while a god sending a gadfly is humorous. This argument erroneously assumes that Socrates and the Athenians share a sense of humour with modern readers, but it also misses the potential humour in the idea of Athens as a large and sluggish horse with a god riding it.

The question is why Socrates would call his comparison γελοιότερον. The gadfly reading was found to be the best fit considering the variations of 'landing upon' and Socratic uses of irony and humour throughout the Platonic corpus.

Stallbaum's argument is correct, for perfectly sound reasons. Tragedy alone is referred to above for literary parallels to interpret the gadfly image (the fate of Io alone in Aeschylus alone) in favour of the spur reading, whereas—in the context of determining which of two images is more laughable—the socio-cultural dynamics of comedy and the fables of Aesop are more relevant. The alternative on offer, Apollo riding the Athenian body with Socrates the spur on its side, is at best an imaginative projection about what the Athenians might have found funny. All empirical evidence, by contrast, demonstrates that 'gadfly' would be more humorous in the context of Socrates' trial and for Athenians more generally. The fact that the gadfly image is laughable may just explain why it was chosen by Socrates to describe himself.

Take Aesop and the fable tradition first to see how this matter bears on Socrates' choice of the comparison. That is, the 'joke literature' about animals carrying an often-violent message concerning the divine that was used in courtroom speeches as common *topoi* and which, according to Aristotle, were easily invented or adapted impromptu 'especially if one has studied philosophy' (*Rh.* 1394a7–8).[15] Indeed, most fables survived due to their utility for Roman orators and politicians—as they probably had done for their Greek counterparts—who preserved them as handbooks for memorization. An example of a courtroom use of a fable in Aristotle (*Rh.* 1393b5–6 = Fable 328): Stesichorus, Aristotle relates, was exasperated at having failed to win over the crowd with his demonstrative arguments. So, he at last resorted to inventing a fable. Stesichorus compared his audience, the people of Himera, to a horse who makes a deal with a man to protect the horse's habitual grazing fields from an invasive stag. But when the terms of the deal were agreed upon, the man simply mounted and enslaved the horse with no thought to the stag. The moral of the story was to dissuade the people of Himera from electing a guardian.

Socrates versified the fables of Aesop after his conviction (*Phaedo* 60b) and Plato uses fables elsewhere in the corpus (*Alc.* I 123a = Fable 196, *Tht.* 174a = Fable 65). Insects such as stinging bees, fleas, annoying flies and ants, beasts of burden and other enormous animals—ferocious like a lion or lumbering like a donkey and an elephant—

[15] The most important analysis of Aesop with respect to Platonic literature is L. Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* (Princeton, 2011). The numbering of the fables here are from É. Chambry, *Aesopi fabulae* (Paris, 1967).

saturate Aesopic fables and often, in their oldest forms, in a mythic context involving Zeus' divine oversight and direction. Whilst μύωψ does not turn up in a *TLG* search of the Aesopic canon, there are good reasons why some modern commentators on our passage of the *Apology* could remark that Socrates (or Plato, rather, as an adroit logographer) may have been influenced by the fable tradition in making the μύωψ comparison. Socrates' comparing himself to a gadfly annoying the Athenian populace on behalf of Apollo would be at home with Aesopic traditions designed to raise something of a laugh in an instructive rhetorical context.[16]

Consider next Old Comedy and how it may have factored into Plato's choice of μύωψ for Socrates. One need only think of the *Wasps*, *Birds* and *Frogs* of Aristophanes to remember the foundational role that anthropomorphic imagery played in the genre, not least in the ideological fashioning of the citizens of Athens. In Archippus' *Fishes* (400/399 B.C.E.), for example, the Athenians make a truce with the fish of the sea. Of the twenty fragments attributed to the play, at least seven (frr. 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 27 K.–A.) make it clear that members of the Athenian public—politicians, soothsayers and all manner of unidentified individuals—were assimilated to distinct types of fish. Even the mythical king of Attica, Cecrops, was said in the *Flatterers* of Eupolis (421) to be a tuna from the waist down (fr. 159 K.–A.), a *paraprosdokeion* against his mythological form as half-man half-snake.

In the extant *Clouds*, Socrates was mockingly associated with irritating insects: fleas (144–53), gnats (154–68), bedbugs (634, 694–9) and cockchafers (761–3). In fr. 393 K.–A. of the first *Clouds*, two unknown Socratics (Socrates and Chaerephon?) were mocked as πηνίω, which the *Suda* says were 'similar to a moth' (ὅμοιον κώνοπι, fr. 393 K.–A.). The κώνωψ is probably a mosquito-like moth—particularly a mayfly.[17] Thus it has been reasonably suggested that the μύωψ of the *Apology* refers, in a self-effacing but 'corrective' and less vulgar (that is, less phallic) sense, to the first *Clouds*' κώνωψ.[18] We should remember that Aristophanes' *Clouds*—the first or the second—significantly foregrounds Socrates' trial, and the comic poets were amongst his earliest and most fearsome accusers, so the imagery of a gadfly would have a particular salience.

Socrates was ridiculed in comedy even after his death for being as dangerous, beastly and ugly as the Cretan Minotaur (Com. Adesp. fr. 940 K.–A.). And Chaerephon was called a bat by Aristophanes (*Birds* 1553) probably because he was pale, indicating either a skin condition or because he stayed awake at night, a common trope held against philosophers especially in Plato's day.[19]

The image of Apollo riding the Athenian horse with Socrates as the spur on its side (or the side of Apollo's foot?) has no ancient precedent. The idea that 'similes are inherently somewhat ridiculous, and simply comparing Socrates to something other than himself is

[16] Kurke (n. 15), 256–7 sees in the image a rhetorical Aesopic convention. See also the fourteen complementary contributions in J. Bell and M. Naas (edd.), *Plato's Animals: Gadflies, Horses, Swans and Other Philosophical Beasts* (Bloomington, IN, 2015).

[17] M.C. Torchio, *Aristophanes: Nepheli protai – Proagon (fr. 392–486)* (Heidelberg, 2021), 43–6.

[18] A. Capra, 'Stratagemmi comici da Aristofane a Platone. Parte I. Il satiro ironico (*Simposio*, *Nuvole* e altro)', *Stratagemmi: Prospettive Teatrali* 2 (2007), 40–3.

[19] A philosopher or parasite in Aristophon's *Pythagoreanist* (fr. 10 K.–A.): 'When it comes to starving or eating nothing | you'd think you were looking at Tithymallus or Philippides. | For drinking water, I'm a frog; for feeding myself on thyme | and greens I'm a caterpillar; at non-bathing, I'm filth, | at staying outdoors in winter, a crow; | at chattering happily away in the noonday heat, a cicada; | for total abstinence from body oil, a dust storm; | at walking outside in the morning without shoes, | a crane; at not sleeping a wink, a bat'. Translation from J. Rusten (ed.), *The Birth of Comedy: Texts, Documents, and Art from Athenian Comic Competitions, 486–280* (Baltimore, 2011), 562.

γελοιότερον' with reference to Alcibiades comparing Socrates to Silenus in the *Symposium* (215a) does not address the fact that Alcibiades' speech is called a satyr play (τὸ σατυρικόν σου δρᾶμα, 222d4), and satyrs were ithyphallic, human-goat hybrids. Hence the only adduced example of the laughable Socrates in Plato in support of the spur reading refers to Socrates as a kind of animal, not an inanimate object. Socrates' comparing himself to an irritant insect in the *Apology* would be in keeping with familiar portrayals of himself and others on the comic stage—and therefore more plausibly laughable than a spur controlled by Apollo. Reading the passage as referring to an insect is the only available historical explanation for why Socrates would call the passage γελοιότερον.

Socrates' referring to himself as a gadfly would also fit with Plato's multifaceted deployment of comedy throughout the dialogues as a matter of genre and philosophical method. As is now understood, Plato inventively appropriated the conventions of fifth- and fourth-century comic theatre by embracing, enhancing and ultimately—as Rashed put it—'improving' upon those conventions, especially portraits of Socrates and philosophers.[20] The *Apology* is no exception. The whole of Socrates' defence is predicated on the comic poets being his 'first and earliest accusers' whom he fears the most (18b1–d2 and 19c1). Meletus may have appealed to the comic poets himself in his speech to bolster the official charge by 'making a comedy' of Socrates' *daimonion*—ὃ δὴ καὶ ἐν τῇ γραφῇ ἐπικωμῳδῶν Μέλητος ἐγράψατο (31d1). The reader of the dialogue should thereby be alive to resonances with comedy in Socrates' defence. Note, then, the lightly abusive *loidoria* in Socrates' riffs on Meletus' name (Μέλητος) as showing a lack of 'care' (μελέτη) towards the city and the young (24b5, c1–4, d4), wedded to his histrionic outburst at 24e9. Moreover, Gomperz long ago saw a rebuttal to Socrates' chattering persona in Ameipsias fr. 9 K.–A. at 23b1–c1 (although 31a8–d2 is a more plausible location).[21] Eupolis fr. 386 K.–A., wherein Socrates is accused of 'having neglected' food (κατημέληκεν), seems rebutted at 36b5–d1 as well, when Socrates defends his famed 'care of the self' (ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ). Seeing various transformations and appropriations of the comic to rebut the comic in the *Apology* is thus a familiar approach.[22]

Socrates' self-deprecation in calling himself a lowly insect is at least an indication that he is aware of how the public feels and thinks about him—using imagery redolent of his stage persona. Yet in calling such imagery to mind, Socrates justifies and explains what underlies those impressions. Tanner has compellingly argued that the insect analogy shows, as many instances of Socratic irony show, that 'self-knowledge (or Socratic wisdom) necessarily include[s] the ability to recognize oneself as laughable'.[23] Or as

[20] See M. Rashed, 'Aristophanes and the Socrates of the *Phaedo*', *OSAPh* 36 (2009), 133. For Plato's appropriation of his own image on the fourth-century comic stage, see W. Strigel, 'The weight of Aristophanes: Plato and the "other" comic poets' (Diss., Trinity College Dublin, 2024), 189–202, in conversation with M. Farmer, 'Playing the philosopher: Plato in fourth-century comedy', *AJPh* 138 (2017), 1–41.

[21] H. Gomperz, 'Die sokratische Frage als geschichtliches Problem', *HZ* 129 (1924), 377–423 = id. in A. Patzer (ed.), *Der historische Sokrates* (Darmstadt, 1987), 184–225, at 203.

[22] For the most recent attempts to see defences against the comic by means of appropriating the comic in the *Apology* see E.J. Buis, 'Rhetorical defence, inter-poetic *agōn* and the reframing of comic invective in Plato's *Apology* of Socrates', in S. Papaioannou and A. Serafim (edd.), *Comic Invective in Ancient Greek and Roman Oratory* (Berlin, 2021), 81–105; J. Harris, 'Flies, wasps, and gadflies: the role of insect similes in Homer, Aristophanes, and Plato', *Mouseion* 15 (2018), 475–500. These studies build on a long tradition of interpreting the role of comedy in the *Apology* and the rest of the corpus: e.g. W. Greene, 'The spirit of comedy in Plato', *HSPh* 31 (1920), 63–123.

[23] S. Tanner, *Plato's Laughter: Socrates as Satyr and Comical Hero* (Albany, NY, 2017), 20.

Halliwell puts it, we are once again confronted 'with an irreducibly "serio-comic" Socrates: a man who takes the pursuit of philosophy with indefatigable seriousness, yet who never seems very far from humorous self-deprecation … a person who can emphatically put crude laughter in its place … and yet who is capable, as the *Phaedo* demonstrates, of laughing quietly with his friends not only in the face of, but actually *about*, death'.[24]

Stallbaum had good reasons—empirical and philosophical—to detect in Socrates' use of the μύωπός τινος a convention 'in keeping with Socratic humour' and Socrates' self-deprecatory irony. The gadfly interpretation fits precisely because calling oneself a gadfly was and remains indelibly humorous. Renaissance and later rejections of the gadfly reading may have occurred simply because it offended their sensibilities—those commentators who were, after all, the most liberal in athetizing whatever dialogues they felt did not accord with their view of the dignity of Plato's thought and writing. But 'all the same,' Socrates says, 'while I will seem to joke around with some of you, rest assured: everything I say to you will be the truth' (20d4–6). The irritant gadfly image was an appropriate one during Socrates' time as it remains today.

4. OTHER SOCRATIC ANIMALS

Let us note the other animal comparisons for Socrates as a philosopher throughout the Platonic corpus and in the works of the 'other' Socratics.

At *Meno* 79e6–80b7, the titular character takes time to jokingly (εἰ δεῖ τι καὶ σκῶψαι) compare Socrates to a stingray or torpedo fish (πλατείᾳ νάρκῃ τῇ θαλαττίᾳ) who leaves his interlocutors, in this case Meno himself, stung and numbed in the attempt to find the nature of *aretê*. In that humorous 'satyr play' of the *Symposium*, too, Alcibiades compares Socrates not only to a divine Silenus (again, a human-goat hybrid), but the discussions with him to the effects of having been bitten by a viper or some other animal (παθόντα οὐκ ἐθέλειν λέγειν οἷον ἦν πλὴν τοῖς δεδηγμένοις, 217e6). Socrates is to Alcibiades some sort of animal who causes a great deal of distress in the souls of his interlocutors—forcing them to recognize their ignorance in a divine capacity.

Looking outside of Plato, Socrates is compared to a crab, a donkey and a Silenus by Xenophon at *Symp.* 5.5–7. Animal comparisons, moreover, were apparently fundamental to Antisthenes' philosophical method (ἐκμαθεῖν ἐξ εἰκόνος).[25] Antisthenes compared the people of Athens to snails and locusts, Plato to a proud horse, possibly even himself to a 'biting' dog (given his well-known profanity and sharpness of tongue, perhaps the origin of Diogenes 'the Dog'), and surreptitious flatterers to crows.[26] Antisthenes even devised a fable in discussing the nature of democracy, where a lion is prepared to pounce on an over-proud hare; and at the conclusion of his *Speech of Odysseus*, the titular speaker compares Ajax 'in his nature' to 'slow and mentally dull asses and oxen (or cattle) that graze in the pasture (τὴν φύσιν ἀπεικάζων τοῖς τε νωθέσιν ὄνοις καὶ βουσὶ τοῖς φορβάσιν) who give over to others the power of bonding and harnessing themselves'.[27]

[24] S. Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge, 2008), 299. Halliwell refers specifically to Socrates of the *Apology* as well here.

[25] For the latter, see Test. 181A–D and 150A(4) in S. Prince, *Antisthenes of Athens: Texts, Translations, and Commentary* (Ann Arbor, 2015).

[26] That is, respectively, Test. 8, 27, 38 and 131B in Prince (n. 25).

[27] Again Test. 68 and 45(14) in Prince (n. 25); the latter translation is slightly modified.

What we find here are all organic comparisons. Socrates is never once in extant Socratic literature—not in any meaningful way—explicitly compared to a lifeless object. The real Socrates was probably fond of animal comparisons, the likes of which his followers took seriously in their own writings. He may even have called himself a gadfly at his real trial.

5. CONCLUSION: GADFLIES AND SOCRATIC *APORIA*

It is a testament to the modern relevance of classical philology that a mistranslation of two words in the *Apology*—μύωπός τινος—could have shaped the last two hundred years of the Western intellectual tradition and the modern notion of the philosopher for the worse. But the fact is that there has been no mistranslation, no distortion.

Socrates, or at least the so-called 'early' Socrates, is an aporetic philosopher. His mission as stated throughout the *Apology* is to make people recognize that they do not know what they think they know and that they should care for themselves above all. These are the very things he says immediately before and after his assimilation to a μύωψ in some of the most iconic words of the Platonic Socrates (30a7–b4, 31a8–b5). His job, as Clitophon put it, is to 'wake us up' from our dogmatic slumbers with a heightened and new awareness of our ignorance and the need to pursue virtue.

At the same time, Socrates' discussions leave us—because of our own autonomous choices and likely his, too—in an *aporia*, literally 'resourceless' and 'pathless' as to the content of that virtue. If this received opinion is correct, Socrates' mission in the *Apology* and elsewhere does not require, nor in any obvious sense fit with, the effects of an Apollonian steersman with Socrates the spur on its side. But his aporetic mission does fit with the effects of a rousing gadfly, irritating and listless as that mission and its results may be.

It is a legitimate and pressing question as to how benevolent or helpful—or how bullish and confrontational—Socratic inquiry is meant to be, as Marshall points out at Section VIII (page 173). Indeed, as Clitophon also put it in his closing peroration: 'To the mortals who have yet to be turned to philosophy, Socrates, I say you are worth everything; but to those who have already been so turned, you are just about a roadblock to the goal of virtue, which is to become *eudaimôn*' (410e5–8). How, in other words, can aporetic philosophy help us accomplish the goals it lays before us? And how productive, in a broader sense, are his provocations and protreptic stings as a kind of philosophical way of life?

These questions cannot be answered here.[28] But the fact remains that Socrates, at *Apology* 30c3–31c3, compares himself to an irritant gadfly or some other insect who seeks to provoke in individuals, like Meno above, a distressing mental *aporia*—so long as it brings about a desire for virtue. He is also sent by Apollo to do so. Thus, when Socrates calls himself 'a sort of gadfly' on the necks of citizens, the *Lexicon* should take note. The questions nonetheless remain the same: what sort of philosophical gadfly is Socrates? And how, if at all, should we take after him in his manner of living?

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[28] Though see P. Woodruff, *Living Toward Virtue: Practical Ethics in the Spirit of Socrates* (Oxford, 2023).

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