

ANCIENT PLATONIC RECEPTION

Platonic Drama and its Ancient Reception. By NIKOS G. CHARALABOPOULOS. Cambridge Classical Studies. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xxi + 331. Hardcover, £60.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-87174-7.

Plato and the Traditions of Ancient Literature: The Silent Stream. By RICHARD HUNTER. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. vii + 279. Hardcover, £60.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-01292-9.

Two books of similar length, by two scholars with close ties to Cambridge, published by the same press, in the same year, and treating related topics from a similar methodological perspective. Both are deeply learned (though Hunter's 16-page bibliography is dwarfed by Charalabopoulos', which weighs in at 48). Both, too, are Janus-faced, looking back at Plato's engagement with the cultural traditions that formed him as well as on to later writers who engaged with him in turn. One of our authors is, however, a seasoned scholar, the other a neophyte. Charalabopoulos' book still bears—for better or worse—the imprint of its origins in a Cambridge PhD dissertation, while Hunter's joins the distinguished bibliography of that university's Regius Professor of Greek.

Platonic Drama and its Ancient Reception is intended to show that “there was throughout antiquity a tradition of interpreting the Platonic dialogue as a piece of dramatic performance literature” (256). The key phrase here is “throughout antiquity.” Charalabopoulos does, as we would expect, discuss the evidence from the Roman period for the dialogues as sympotic entertainment; but he argues that such performance was not an imperial invention but a practice instituted by Plato himself. When he claims that Plato's “authorial identity” was that of an “alternative dramatist” (104), Charalabopoulos means not only that the dialogues are in their essence dramatic (in some sense), but also that they were composed for performance by multiple speakers in theatrical style—or even “a full production in the manner of plays” (20). These two points are logically distinct (though Charalabopoulos does not always separate them). But he believes that the latter, no less than the former, was intrinsic to the philosopher's purpose in creating the dialogues to challenge and supplant the cultural authority of theater.

The book commences with a thorough and well documented survey of current work in “literary” Plato studies, especially the now substantial bibliography on Plato’s relationship to drama. Chapter 2 treats the “dramatic” nature of Plato’s dialogues in general terms, ending with more detailed discussions of the *Republic* and *Laws*. Chapter 3 examines the evidence—such as it is—for the performance of the dialogues in Plato’s own time. Finally, the very long Chapter 4 analyses several intriguing pieces of post-classical evidence linking Plato’s dialogues with dramatic performance. The most substantive of these are the remarks about Plato as “dinner theater” in Plutarch and Athenaeus, together with a mosaic from Herculaneum juxtaposing scenes from Menander with a panel of Platonic characters (handsomely reproduced on the jacket).

One can learn about many things from this extraordinarily learned book—from dinner parties at Plato’s house (224) to the intricacies of Byzantine musical notation (226-38). Not all of what one learns is, however, strictly pertinent to the author’s thesis. Chapter 4, for example, includes a great deal of technical detail regarding various statues of Socrates, whose relevance is tenuous at best. The detailed summary of the evidence on such points, fully documented in lengthy footnotes, will be valuable for scholars, especially those new to the field; but it is unclear what some of these surveys contribute to the book’s central argument.

That argument itself suffers from a certain imprecision regarding the “dramatic” or “performative” nature of Plato’s dialogues, by which Charalabopoulos sets such store. It is clear enough that Plato engages with drama at every turn, both discursively and through his choice of form. It is likely, too, that he intended at least some of the dialogues for performance (though not all necessarily in the same way or for the same kind of audience). As Charalabopoulos is well aware, however, virtually all classical texts were originally “performed” in some sense. He therefore needs to clarify what, in his view, makes these specific texts “performative” in a way that distinguishes them from (say) the performances of a Homeric rhapsode, or even of Thucydides or Herodotus (whose speeches likewise involve the “role-playing” that Charalabopoulos treats as a touchstone of theater). He needs to say more, in particular, about the distinction between “theatrical” performance by multiple actors and histrionic recitation by a single narrator (which seems appropriate, for obvious reasons, to the narrated dialogues).

Charalabopoulos seems to have left no stone unturned in his quest for traces of the ancient fascination with “dramatic” aspects of Plato’s dialogues. Chapter 4, in particular, is a mine of obscure information from the byways of Platonic reception. Yet despite this assiduous collection and analysis of the evidence, at the end

of the day what he does prove is not new (no doubt at least some of the dialogues were recited or otherwise performed upon occasion) and what he wants to prove is not convincing (“a full production in the manner of plays”). That said, Chapter 3 ends with an appealing suggestion. Here Charalabopoulos relates the performance of the dialogues to the founding of the Academy, which “as a community of like-minded individuals ... offered an alternative to civic institutions” (141). As such, he suggests, the Academy provided for the performance of Platonic dialogues, displacing the traditional institutional framework of theatrical festivals. This attractive idea remains, however, little more than speculation. When Charalabopoulos describes Thrasyllus’ procedure as “wishful guesswork” (184), the phrase, alas, applies all too accurately to his own.

Since Charalabopoulos’ work is marked by scrupulous intellectual honesty, this results in a palpable tension. His most characteristic rhetorical maneuver is a kind of intellectual seesaw, where he acknowledges that the evidence he has just outlined does not prove his point, but goes on to insist that, since it doesn’t *dis*prove it either, his desired conclusion *could* be true (e.g. pp. 194-6, 222, 228, 230, 248-9). He has done himself a disservice, however, by binding his evidence to the Procrustean bed of his overarching thesis, instead of seeing where it may lead in its own terms. As he himself remarks (256), his work has interesting potential for the history of Platonic reception. There is much to be said about the perception of Plato’s works as “dramatic,” and about the history of Platonic performance (which is by no means dead), without resorting to dubious claims about Plato’s own time. The book is, then, rather less than the sum of its parts. Yet many of those parts remain intriguing.

Richard Hunter’s new book, *Plato and the Traditions of Ancient Literature: The Silent Stream*, begins, appropriately, with Lucian’s rewriting of one of the most famous literary beginnings of all time: the opening of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which, as Hunter argues, became a marker of Hellenic cultural identity in the Roman period. As this opening signals, the “traditions” referred to in Hunter’s title are primarily those of the Second Sophistic. His enigmatic subtitle alludes to Longinus’ characterization of Plato’s style as a “noiseless flow” (7 n. 28). For the most part, however, the book focuses on texts where the flow is quite noisy—not to say a deafening roar—that is, where there can be no mistake about these writers’ conscious engagement with Plato’s texts. Hunter guides us expertly on a series of more or less interrelated journeys along that abundant river.

Plato stands at the heart of the Second Sophistic's intense preoccupation with classical literature, not only for reasons of style and theme but also, as Hunter shows, because of his concern with textuality, voice and narrative. But the overwhelming cultural prestige assigned to the philosopher by authors of this period also obliged them to come to terms with such awkward matters as his rejection of Homer and elevation of pederasty—not to mention his embarrassing departures from the very pure, lucid style for which he was admired. Hunter is concerned with the complex negotiations that this entailed, and the resulting role played by Plato's texts in the formation of the distinctive literary culture of the 2nd century CE. Yet he also casts an eye back towards Plato's own use of tradition, arguing that for the ancient critics, the philosopher's attention to earlier literature means that "engagement with Plato always entailed also Plato's own relationship with other texts" (9).

After a far-ranging introductory chapter Hunter turns, in his lengthy Chapter 2, to Plato's problematic relationship with poetry, and above all Homer. He is most interested in the way that relationship was construed by later authors, especially their need to defang the philosopher's critique of the divine Homer (for example through allegory). Yet there are also perceptive comments about Plato in his own right, especially in the discussion of certain Platonic images. He situates the *Republic's* Ship of State, for example, in the context of Theognis, Aristophanes, and Thucydides, showing how "deeply veined" it is "with the heritage of classical literature" (79).

The four remaining chapters each maintain a tighter focus. Chapter 3 begins with Plato's *Apology*, then traces that dialogue's reception from Isocrates to Apuleius. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 reverse this critical perspective, to study the multifarious use of Plato by specific authors of the Roman period. Chapter 4 is devoted to Dionysius of Halicarnassus' engagement with *Phaedrus* and the challenges that dialogue posed to orators. In Chapter 5 Hunter elucidates the bountiful Platonic menu from which Plutarch drew in his *Amatorius*. Finally, Chapter 6 parses ways in which the novelists—specifically Apuleius and Petronius—reacted to Plato's erotic dialogues from the perspective of narrative. There the book ends, rather abruptly.

A broad spectrum of Second Sophistic genres and authors thus fall within Hunter's purview. Where Plato himself is concerned, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* naturally play a starring role, thanks to the abiding significance of *eros* for both philosophers and novelists. *Phaedrus* is important for additional reasons (including its iconic opening). As for the *Symposium*—the subject of a short in-

troductory book by Hunter published in 2004—a highlight among its several appearances here is the discussion of Petronius’ vulgar riff on Alcibiades’ notorious failure to seduce Socrates (246-55). An impressive number of other dialogues are also grist to Hunter’s mill. His treatment of the *Apology* is particularly valuable. Chapter 3 shows deftly how this work was simultaneously “genre-defining” and “genre-defying” (118), an observation that comes sharply into focus when the speech is viewed through its multiple receptions.

The early history of literary criticism was not only driven by the need to respond to Plato’s critique of Homer but foreshadowed in Plato’s own writings. In Chapter 1 Hunter argues that Plato’s *Ion* launched the literary scholarship of Homer, including certain modern concerns such as authorial intention (89-108). Subsequent chapters show repeatedly how later authors used Plato “as a chief witness against Plato” (183)—a tactic also employed, for example, by Nietzsche, who “turns a specifically Platonic dagger against Plato himself” when he characterizes the dialogues as a “mixture of all available styles and forms” (224-5). In short, Plato himself invented the tools that were later used to attack/defend/interpret him—tools of which we are in many cases the heirs. For as Hunter makes clear, we are still swimming in the stream of his title. He rightly warns against easy dismissal of early interpretive practices, which bear close relationship to some of our own (51), and urges a generous spirit in approaching our ancient forebears (67). As scholars, we live in glass houses from which we cannot afford to cast stones at the seeming naiveté of our predecessors.

By way of preface to his project, Hunter worries that Plato is “too often left to ‘the philosophers,’” fearing that “our” distinction between “literature” and “philosophy” is at risk of becoming sclerotic (10). This seems at first blush rather odd, given the current state of Plato scholarship. “Literary” Plato is thriving (not least at Cambridge University Press). Countless scholars, including many of “the philosophers,” have grasped the importance of approaching Plato as a writer—one with a complex and fraught relationship to “literature”—for understanding him as a thinker (a trend well documented by Charalabopoulos). But this is not, in fact, what Hunter has in mind. He wants, rather, to reclaim Plato for the kind of unabashedly “literary” study that does not aspire to elucidate Plato’s thought as such. There is plenty of room for such scholarship, considering the multiple strands—or streams—of Platonic influence that have wound through every aspect of European intellectual traditions. As Hunter freely acknowledges, there are “many Platos” (10). Yet the slightly defensive presentation of his case buys

into and reinforces the problematic dichotomy of which he complains—just at a time when the sclerosis in question seems to be softening.

In contrast with Charalabopoulos' book, where I noticed a handful of typographical errors, along with some linguistic oddities and solecisms, Hunter's is impeccably written, produced, and edited. I caught only one small error (Fernández-Galiano, cited in n. 209 on p. 106, is missing a date and absent from the bibliography). His lucid scholarly style is smoother than Charalabopoulos' rather awkward prose, but equally old-fashioned (both use AD instead of CE, and "men" for "human beings"), and a magisterial "of course" is sprinkled rather too freely through the text. Hunter's book also differs from Charalabopoulos' in its lack of a strong unifying thesis (the absence of a concluding chapter seems symptomatic). As a whole, it offers less a cohesive, focused argument than a series of explorations, dipping into a stream that Hunter would be the first to admit is inexhaustible. There is more than enough here, however, to demonstrate the towering importance of Plato's oeuvre, which stands as a massive rock or island in the gathering flow of early literary criticism, one that diverted and transformed its course forever.

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