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‘Pretty much the whole of education’¹: virtue and performance in the *Laws*

Marcus Folch, *The City and the stage: Performance, Genre and Gender in Plato’s Laws*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. 2015. pp. 12 +386. ISBN 978-0-19-026617-2.

Susan Sauvé Meyer, *Plato: Laws 1 &2, translated with an introduction and commentary*. Clarendon Plato series, Oxford, Oxford University Press. 2015. pp. xiv+361. ISBN 978-0-19-960408-1.

The first two books of the *Laws* are certainly among the most important in the dialogue. They reveal the aims of the dialogue as a discussion of laws and set up a conversational framework in which Athenian traditions, represented by the main speaker, are brought into a constructive confrontation with the Dorian ideas and customs of his Cretan and Spartan companions. At the same time they serve to establish the psychological and ethical presuppositions which underpin the more politically oriented discussions elsewhere in the dialogue. But these books are also puzzling. One reason for this is that a lot of space is devoted to the discussion of drinking parties. Another is that the key ideas evolve gradually in a conversational way. Unlike the leading speakers in other Platonic dialogues the Athenian does not subject his companions to searching examination. In consequence it is sometimes unclear precisely which claims are being rejected and which asserted.

For these reasons Susan Sauvé Meyer’s volume is particularly welcome. Its general format resembles that of other contributions to the Clarendon Plato series. A brief introduction is followed by an outline analysis of the two books, a translation, 262 pages of very detailed commentary, and a substantial bibliography. The translation is intended to be ‘optimal for the Greekless philosophical reader’. So far as I can judge it achieves this objective admirably. It lacks the panache of Saunders’ version but has greater precision. To my mind it also more readable and reliable than Pangle’s.² An added advantage is that the commentary discusses difficulties of translation in considerable detail. So in most cases where a competent scholar might disagree with Meyer’s version the alternatives are identified and discussed.

The commentary avowedly ‘reflects presuppositions characteristic of scholarship on Plato in the English-speaking world over the last half century’. One might wonder whether *Laws I* and *II* form a suitable text for this kind of treatment. But in fact Meyer is very successful in teasing out the structure of the arguments, identifying alternative interpretations and showing the underlying coherence of the dialogue. In particular she shows how, on some key issues, the Athenian seems to begin from positions suggested by the Cretan and Spartan but moves gradually to something rather different without clearly marking the shifts in his position or explicitly rejecting the views of his companions. Meyer’s outline analysis is particularly helpful in displaying the general shape and direction of the argument.

Meyer’s analytic approach means that she does not give much prominence to some issues which have bulked large in recent scholarship. She says little about questions of literary

¹ *Laws* 672e, translation adapted from Meyer.

² It may now have a rival in the new translation by Tom Griffith, in Malcolm Schofield (ed.), *The Laws of Plato*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Cambridge CUP, 2016.

form, about the characterisation of the interlocutors or about the social, cultural and historical background to the dialogue. But she is careful to distinguish passages where she believes the Athenian responds to the Cretan and the Spartan by adopting their assumptions from ones where he is speaking with his own voice.

In *The City and the Stage* Marcus Folch also discusses large parts of *Laws* I and II in considerable detail, but the scope of his book and the methods of interpretation he employs are very different from those of Meyer. He focuses on the arts of poetry, music and dance in the *Laws* as a whole, and his treatment of these topics is heavily influenced by speech-act and performance theory. The underlying thought here is that the arts which Plato classes as *mousikē*—music, dance and theatre—are intimately bound up with the institutions and practices of society as a whole. They play a key role in determining and expressing political and gender roles within a society and in constructing the identities of its members. Thus Folch's book is not simply a discussion of the performing arts, in the narrow traditional sense, but impinges on many other aspects of Plato's thought as it is displayed in the *Laws*. In particular Folch sees his treatment of the dialogue as differing from its predecessors in four respects (6-9):

1. It sees the philosophical dialogue as 'a literary genre with distinctively literary ambitions' while also treating it as a commentary on fourth century political practice.
2. It shows that Plato's account of *mousikē* embodies 'a deep substrate of philosophical argument—a normative conception of the city, citizen, soul and of their place within a larger metaphysical reality.'
3. It is explicitly concerned with 'the status—political social and performative—of figures and voices which have often been marginalised in in the study of ancient philosophy and aesthetics: slaves, non-citizens and women'.
4. It argues that the concerns of contemporary performance theorists—'the efficacy of performed speech, the socially constructive force of ritual, the performative properties of gender and status—are central to ancient philosophy'.

The fourth point is, in I think most fundamental and distinctive. Folch is not the only scholar who has sought to apply performance theory to the *Laws*,³ but he does this in notably systematic way. Following the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, he raises the question whether there is a 'middle term which can enable us to understand the interrelation of politics and culture' (49). Plato, he suggests, finds the middle term in the soul. Thus the psychology of the *Laws* is essential to understanding its account of performance culture.

Folch is surely right to emphasise the importance of psychology in the *Laws* and its connection with music and dance. Although books I and II are largely occupied with discussion of drinking parties and musical education, their most important role is to establish a certain view of moral psychology. This view is, of course, essential to

³ For example, similar concerns are shared by many of the contributors to Pepone, A.-E., *Performance and Culture in Plato's Laws*, Oxford, 2013 and by L Prauscello, *Performing Citizenship in Plato's Laws*, Cambridge, 2014

understanding why Plato pays so much attention to the performing arts, but it also underpins the entire legislative programme, a programme that is designed to inculcate complete virtue in the souls of the citizens. Folch deals at length with these points in his opening chapters.

In his opening pages Folch points to what he claims is a marked contrast between the *Laws* and Plato's earlier writings. As he sees it, Plato, throughout much of his career, was highly critical of Athenian performance culture and exposed 'the fallacies, inconsistencies, and dubious ethical claims' implicit in the ancient poetical tradition. Moreover in the *Republic* he proposes the abolition of all forms of mimetic art. Although he concentrates his fire on poetry, his strictures clearly apply to other performing arts such as music and dance. In the *Laws*, on the other hand, these arts receive much more favourable attention. Poetic discourse is readmitted though subordinated to 'philosophical standards of excellence and mimetic correctness'. Poetry and 'music' (understood in a broad sense) play a key role in the life of the city. 'Every dimension of the citizen's life receives musical inflection, and many of the genres purged from the earlier dialogue become central to a life of virtue.' This is evident, not only in Books I and II but also in other parts of the dialogue, notably in Book VII, which describes the educational arrangements of the proposed Cretan city. Folch takes this to imply that Plato has made a 'striking about face'. As he sees it, the *Laws* represents a systematic rethinking of the nature of aesthetics and mimetic art, of the part played by poetry music, song and dance in the making of citizens and of how the individual and collective life of the *polis* is constituted in performance. It presents 'a renegotiation of the relationship between poetry and philosophy.' Both are now seen as collaborators in fashioning the ideal city and the virtuous life.

There is no doubt that the treatments of the performing arts in the *Republic* and the *Laws* differ from one another in important ways. But it is questionable whether the differences are quite as radical as Folch suggests. *Republic* Books II and III make it clear that a correct training in poetry and music is essential to virtue. Indeed it is the primary means of ensuring that the guardians do not go wild and attack the fellow citizens they are supposed to protect. The tone is very different from that in the *Laws* because the *Republic* concentrates on showing the corrupting effects of existing poetic and musical practices. But there is no doubt that correct training in these arts is central to the education of the young. So far as *mimesis* is concerned, most attention is paid to the dangers of imitating inappropriate characters, but the young will clearly be expected to learn poetry that imitates the characters of good men. Thus there are important continuities in the treatment of *mousikē* between the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Many of these are identified by Meyer in her commentary. One might therefore argue that, if there is an 'about face', it comes within the *Republic*. Socrates' claim, at the beginning of Book X, that he and his companions have agreed to ban all forms of mimetic poetry from the ideal city seems inconsistent with what was actually said in Book III. Much ink has been spent over this point, but the rejection of *mimesis* in *Republic* X is manifestly related to the idea, developed in Books VI and VII, that only the philosopher's access to the Forms provides genuine truth. It is not clear how it would apply in a city, like that of the *Laws* which lacks philosopher rulers.

On Folch's account the *Republic* and the *Laws* also differ sharply in their psychological views and the consequent accounts of virtue. He rightly points out that the *Laws* account involves the training of the passions so as to produce a concord (*sumphonia*) between the rational and irrational parts of the soul. This, he claims, contrasts with the *Republic* where the lower parts of the soul 'contribute nothing to the process of moral deliberation and action' and the virtuous man is virtuous 'because his reason dominates, restrains and redirects the lower parts of his soul' (81). Thus the virtuous man of the *Republic* would not even count as educated by the standards of the *Laws* because 'his passions have not been habituated to respond appropriately to the right kinds of object' (83-4).

There are plenty of passages in the *Republic* which may seem to confirm this view but, as Meyer points out, there are also ones which suggest that, when reason rules, the parts of the soul are in a state of concord (*sumphonia*) and harmony with one another (430e, 442c, cf. Meyer 210). The harmony to be found in the soul is likened to the harmony between musical notes. It is made clear that this inner concord can be achieved only if children are brought up in a beautiful environment and receive the right kind of musical and poetic education (401c-d). At 586e Socrates argues that, where reason rules, each part gains its truest pleasure, the ones that are most its own. So, although the *Republic* emphasises the struggle between reason and the passions and generally treats pleasure as something to be resisted, there are important passages which suggest something more like the harmony view of the *Laws*.

In fact there seems to be a similar duality in the early books of the *Laws*. Folch says little about the opening pages which start from the idea that courage is the key virtue because it ensures victory and move to the idea that the greatest victory is the victory over self. Meyer calls this the 'victory' model and contrasts it with the 'harmony' model which appears later in Book I and comes to dominate the discussion in Book II. She associates the victory model with the Cretan and the Spartan and argues that, when the Athenian appears to endorse it, he is simply responding to his interlocutors in their own terms.

A key passage in this context is Book I, 643-5. The Athenian here introduces the idea that genuine education leads children to find pleasure in a life of virtue, but he immediately reminds his companions of their agreement that virtue is a matter of self-rule. He goes on to elucidate this with an account of the soul. He argues first that the soul contains two 'witless' counsellors, pleasure and pain, together with opinions about the future. These are identified with the feelings of fear and daring or confidence. Besides these there is *logismos*, calculation, which 'when it becomes the common view of the city is called 'law'. When his companions express puzzlement about this the Athenian elucidates his view with an image of the soul as a puppet or marionette. The inner experiences which he has just mentioned are likened to 'cords' which pull against each other. Our task is to cling to the 'golden' cord of calculation or law rather than giving way to the iron cords of the other affections. Having given this account the Athenian goes straight on to discuss the benefits of drinking parties.

Meyer argues that the Athenian is here working with the 'victory' model put forward by his Cretan and Spartan companions but may not be subscribing to it himself. The passage thus implies an account of virtue as consisting in the capacity to cling to calculation and resist the

temptations of pleasure and pain. However she finds ambiguities in the subsequent discussion of drinking parties which suggest a shift to the 'harmony' model. It is certainly true that the Athenian seems to prefer the harmony model and to see it as constituting genuine virtue. It underlies the account of musical education and much else (including, it would seem, the idea that laws should have preambles). But one could argue that the victory model continues to play a role. It is not explicitly abandoned and may represent the only kind of virtue which some can achieve. It might help to make sense of, for example, the idea that punishment can improve the souls of malefactors.

Folch offers a very different account of this passage. In his view the first few lines with their reference to the witless counsellors invoke an Athenian political model which contrasts with the Dorian presuppositions of his companions. This model is, he claims, hierarchical in the sense that the irrational principles are subordinated to calculation. In this respect it resembles the *Republic's* account though there is no reference to a spirited part and no suggestion that pleasure and pain must necessarily conflict with calculation. However, in Folch's view, the introduction of the puppet image implies a different account in which the soul is seen as a 'horizontal structure' in which *logismos* is one among many competing impulses. This, Folch argues, provides the philosophical and psychological framework for understanding the role of sympotic and musical education as a preparation for citizenship (77). I am not convinced by this. As Meyer points out, the puppet passage is introduced as an elucidation of the account of the soul suggested in the previous lines, not as an alternative to it. Moreover the suggestion that it offers a 'horizontal' model of the soul is particularly puzzling. It may well leave room for pleasure and pain to play a more positive role in the virtuous life, but they can do so only in so far as they follow the guidance of calculation. That suggests that they operate on a different level.

A central issue in the *Laws* is the relationship between pleasure and the good. The Athenian evidently wants to insist that the virtuous life can be commended in terms of pleasure, but he draws back from identifying pleasure and the good. He raises this point in *Laws* II, 652a ff., where he argues that educating the young consists in training them to have correct feelings of pleasure and pain. Education, in this sense, is distinguished from complete virtue which consists in having 'a rational account' and feelings of pleasure and pain which agree with it. Music and dance are important because they are the means by which the young are trained to feel pleasure and pain in the right way and because they help older people to maintain their education. On Meyer's analysis this is followed by a complex piece of dialectic which demonstrates that 'virtue, not pleasure, is the standard of beautiful choral art'. The close connection between pleasure and virtue is initially taken to suggest that pleasure may be the criterion by which music and dance should be judged, but the fact that different age groups take pleasure in different kinds of performance shows that this needs qualification. The Athenian agrees that music is to be judged by pleasure but not that of any random person. Rather it should be judged by the pleasure of the best educated (658e). Commenting on this, Meyer suggests that the Athenian does not endorse pleasure as the criterion by which the best people evaluate music, but rather notes the extensional equivalence between the finest music and that which pleases the best educated. This could be taken to mean that there is no necessary connection between pleasure and excellence in

performance. Later the best educated are identified with the chorus of Dionysus, the older men, who sing under the influence of alcohol. They are qualified to judge music in so far as they can assess the accuracy with which it represents admirable (*kalon*) behaviour. Meyer sees this as a 'categorical rejection' of the pleasure criterion. There is thus a kind of development within Book II from the popular idea that the criterion of artistic excellence is pleasure, through the idea that what counts is the pleasure of the best educated, to the idea that it consists in the accurate representation of virtue.

As one would expect Folch's treatment of Book II is less concerned with the analysis of argument and more with the role of performance. Thus he assimilates the role of the chorus of Dionysus to that of the critic in modern performance cultures, and gives more stress than Meyer to the role of pleasure in artistic judgment. For example, he finds in 655d-e, a suggestion that 'declarations of artistic judgment, which are no more or less than expressions of pleasure and pain, are in fact declarations of moral judgment. We pronounce beautiful and we experience aesthetic pleasure in representations of characters and dispositions that accord with our own character and ethical disposition' (93). On the surface, at least, the suggestion that moral judgments are expressions of pleasure would contradict most of what Plato says elsewhere about pleasure and is at odds with Meyer's view that in *Laws II* categorically rejects the idea that pleasure is the criterion of artistic judgment. But the difference may not be quite as great as it sounds. Folch himself comments later that pleasure is a 'secondary feature in *mousikē* (141). Taking a cue from Meyer, one might take this to mean that experiencing the correct pleasure is not a sufficient condition for wisdom or genuine virtue but it is a necessary one. The point might be that, human nature being what it is, we can reliably form correct moral judgments and sustain them through our lives only if we learn to take pleasure in the right things. On that view pleasure would not be the criterion of artistic judgment, but only those whose pleasures are correctly ordered can make these judgments correctly. Similarly the pleasures experienced by the best educated may not be the true criterion of artistic excellence but they may be a reliable guide.

I have concentrated on Books I and II partly because that makes it possible compare the approaches of Meyer and Folch and partly because the account of human psychology and its relationship to musical performance which we find in those books provides the psychological and philosophical foundation for Folch's work. But he also has much to say about issues which are not directly considered in the first two books. This is particularly true of the second and third parts of his book which deal with Genre and Gender. A key passage for Folch's treatment of Genre is the account in *Laws III* of the way in which the decline in musical standards in Athens led to the corruption of Athenian democracy. One element in this is that poets began to aim at pleasing the masses who, as a consequence, came to see themselves as competent judges, not only of music but also of other matters. Another element is that poets began to ignore the laws which distinguished different kinds of music—hymns, laments, paeans, dithyrambs and 'nomes'. This lawlessness passed from music to the general life of the city. Folch discusses this, together with remarks elsewhere in the *Laws* about the types of music which should or should not be permitted, in the light of recent scholarship on the literature, music and politics of Plato's day. There is little room for doubt that Plato took seriously the idea that the corruption of musical genres could lead to

dangerous extremes of democracy and believed that they should be subject to strict supervision. But, as Folch recognises, it is more difficult to understand what genres precisely he would permit and why. The Athenian approves of hymns and encomia but neither seems really to constitute a unique genre.

Folch's treatment of Gender begins with an excellent discussion of the roles assigned to women in the *Laws*. The main difficulty here, as most scholars would recognise, is that, while some of the Athenian's remarks suggest in a general way that women will have a much more active role than was normal in Greek cities, he pays very little attention to this when he describes institutions in detail. Sometimes he seems to assume that all who take part in public life will be male. Very much the same seems to be true of music. For example, it is clear that girls should have some share in musical education, but the chorus of Dionysus, which determines musical standards is described in terms which suggest that it is an exclusively masculine institution. The one place where there is a detailed account of women's role in musical performance comes close to the end of the dialogue where there is an elaborate description of the funeral ceremonies for those who have held the office of auditor. Thus, to my mind, the evidence that performance plays an important positive role in the making of citizen women is somewhat limited.

Although they are very different, both Meyer's and Folch's books can be recommended with some enthusiasm. Meyer's will be indispensable to anyone who wants seriously to engage with the arguments of the *Laws*. Folch's is impressive because it demonstrates convincingly the central role Plato would give to musical performance. In particular he shows how it provides the psychological underpinnings for the institutions and practices described in the dialogue. In this way it does much to elucidate what Plato has in mind when he has the Athenian insist that every institution in the city must serve to promote complete virtue among the citizens.

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