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CHAPTER 1

Drama and dialogue

The reader of Plato's dialogues is seduced by a dazzling interplay of unity and multiplicity. This is generated in part by a series of interlocking and overlapping dualities, the chief of which is presented most often – and most reductively – as a tension between "philosophical" content and "literary" form. By articulating these two factors as interdependent we have already created an artificial split that distorts the lived experience of reading Plato. This emerges vividly from the way Cornford omitted certain "dramatic" elements from his translations of Plato, whereas Livingstone printed dialectical passages of *Phaedo* in smaller type "so that they can be either read or omitted."[1] Yet the "Western" history of ideas in general, and of Platonic studies in particular, makes some such formulation inescapable. Ironically, Plato himself is in part responsible for this situation, through his focus on the "quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (*Rep.* 607b). Indeed, it has recently been argued that he was the inventor (rather than an inheritor) of this supposedly "ancient" quarrel.[2] If so, he was also the inventor of his own mutually hostile, or at least mutually suspicious, interpretive communities, which may be crudely divided into "literary" and "philosophical" camps.[3]

Throughout the last century, however, increasing numbers of interpreters have acknowledged that it creates a false dichotomy, and one that undermines the specific power of Plato's writings, either to disregard the "dramatic" elements, or to view "the arguments as subordinate to the drama."[4] The challenge posed by this admission is not merely to accord

[1] Livingstone 1938: 73; contrast e.g. Cornford 1941.
[2] See Nightingale 1995: 60–67 and cf. Murray 1996: 230–31.
[3] I use these terms as shorthand for the two main branches of Platonic interpretation recently identified by Nails as "literary contextualist" and "analytic developmentalist" respectively (1995: 24–7, 34–50). On "interpretive communities" see Fish 1980: ch. 13–16.
[4] This was the fundamental insight of Schleiermacher that initiated much of the modern debate about Plato as "literature" (see Dobson 1836: 5–19). The latter view, though much less common, is exemplified by Arieti, who is the source of the quotation (1991: 11).

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due weight to both content and form, but to address their interrelationship. The present book attempts to do this by looking closely at Plato's use of characterization. As the site of an intrinsic and indissoluble connection between aspects of Plato that are still often viewed as distinct, characterization provides a unique point of purchase for approaching the interdependence of the "literary" and the "philosophical." Since dialogue form entails the representation of persons, a concern with human character and its portrayal is literally essential to reading Plato's works in a way that takes their form into account. At the same time a concern with human character, its formation and representation, pervades the dialogues on the discursive level.[5] Form and content are further reciprocally related by means of Plato's preoccupation with the effects of literary characterization on the moral character of an audience. His own manipulation of his dramatic characters thus intersects in a unique way with issues of moral philosophy, literary form, cultural tradition, and philosophical and pedagogical method.[6] It is integral both to the "literary" enterprise of representing human interaction in spoken dialogue, and the "philosophical" inquiry into the best form of human life and behavior.

This approach to Plato raises a series of questions that will recur throughout this book. Many of these concern human individuality and its transcendence, which are explored on a dramatic level through Plato's representation of characters ranging from the uniquely particularized to the bland and generic. Not least of the ironies that pervade his writings is the fact that the philosopher who did so much to discredit idiosyncrasy was also the most compelling individual portraitist of the ancient world. Most strikingly, and paradoxically, Sokrates, who is represented by Plato as unique in his commitment to the universal, is characterized with an unparalleled degree of particularity. Plato's varying modes of characterization thus replicate a tension in his thought regarding the value of human individuality as such, its philosophical and ethical significance. This echoes a tension in ancient aesthetics between admiration for richness of detail (*poikilia*) and a restrained ideal of human perfection. And this in turn is related to concerns about the impact of artistic representation on the consumer. Mimesis also provides us with

[5] By this I mean the level of what is said, as opposed to the circumstances in which it is said, which I call the dramatic level.

[6] Compare the way Aristotle's definition of dramatic *ēthos*, or "character," as what reveals a moral choice (*prohairesis*), becomes a site for the intersection of mimesis and moral philosophy, poetics and ethics (Halliwell 1986: ch. 5; Blundell 1992a).

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Plato's most notorious model for the relationship between the material and transcendent worlds.

Dramatic characterization thus offers us one way of approaching the Platonic concern with placing the particular, or the individual, in larger contexts. On a metaphysical level, there is the problem of how individual human beings, who are inescapably grounded in the particular, can transcend that condition. On a pedagogical level, the different kinds of individual interaction that Plato dramatizes pose various questions, including how such personal relationships may lead to transcendence of their socio-cultural circumstances. Those circumstances include social and especially familial relationships, both synchronic and diachronic, which may themselves have philosophical or pedagogical significance. When such questions are linked to issues of mimesis, they generate anxiety about reproduction of the philosophic or authorial self for future generations, as a mode of immortality or transcendence. Above all, Plato is concerned with the possibility of Socratic self-reproduction. This in turn raises issues surrounding the significance of various modes of "imitation" of character by author and reader, and authorial strategies for attempting to control the uses and effects of the text.

My first two chapters are devoted to clarifying certain preliminary matters that underlie this way of approaching Plato. I begin, in this chapter, with some general questions about "dramatic" form and "literary" interpretation, which will help to clarify my methodology. Chapter 2 explores issues surrounding literary and philosophical notions of character and its interpretation in ancient texts generally, and in Plato in particular, with special attention to the figure of Sokrates. Subsequent chapters offer readings of a select number of individual dialogues: *Hippias Minor*, *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*. These works were chosen in part to exemplify a broad range of Platonic styles and methods, and in part because most of them have received relatively limited "literary" study, but also because their discursive content connects with my particular concerns, especially in their focus on the representation and use of literary character. Thus *Hippias Minor*, besides being an exemplary "aporetic" dialogue, airs an issue of huge importance to Plato: the adequacy of traditional heroes as educational models, and their reform or replacement by a newly philosophical ideal. *Republic* notoriously shares this preoccupation with the ethical effects of the representation of character. It also provides a special opportunity for examining the various uses Plato makes of dramatic form, because of the clearly marked shift in style between Book 1 and the remainder of

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the dialogue. *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* are of particular dramatic interest because of their interconnections as a triad and the replacement of Sokrates with the Eleatic visitor as the dominant character.[7] This triad is also concerned with issues of likeness and pedagogy, especially *Sophist*, which revisits questions about appropriate and inappropriate imitation and their educational effects on an impressionable audience.

READING PLATO

To approach Plato through his characters is clearly to throw in one's lot with the "literary" camp of his interpreters. It is an article of faith among many such scholars that their approach subsumes the philosophical, since on this view no interpretation that neglects the "literary" or non-argumentative features of dialogue form can count as philosophically adequate. A "philosophical" reader will agree with this, of course, only if she shares the "literary" assumption on which it is based, namely, the fundamental literary-critical axiom that every detail of a text contributes to the meaning of the whole.[8] This assumption has its origins in Greek antiquity. The idea that any discourse should compose an organic whole, with properly proportioned parts, occurs most famously in *Phaedrus* (264c). But it is pervasive elsewhere in Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient authors, and is never challenged within Plato's works.[9] Even the famous story of Plato "combing, curling and rebraiding" his dialogues, suggests an organic model that extends to the minutest detail of the text.[10]

[7] The phrase "dominant character" is adopted from Dickey 1996: 112.

[8] See e.g. Griswold 1986: 11–16. This hermeneutic principle remains axiomatic in the contemporary interpretation of literary texts (see Fish 1980: 322–7). Note, however, that it does not presuppose any one model of what "unity" consists in. As Heath argues (1989), the classical Greek conception of "organic unity" is rather different from e.g. an aesthetic requirement for thematic unity (which was introduced by the neo-Platonists [Coulter 1976: ch. 3]), meaning only that "the text must have all and only the parts proper to it" (Heath 1989: 21; cf. Heath 1987: 98–111).

[9] Cf. e.g. *Gorg.* 503d–504a, 505d, *Phileb.* 64b, *Tim.* 69b, 87c–88b. An organic model is also suggested by the repeated likening of written works to statues or paintings of human beings (e.g. *Euth.* 11b–e, *Rep.* 361d, *Stat.* 277abc, Arist. *Poet.* 1448a1–18, Dion. Hal. *Comp. Verb.* 25). The unity of other kinds of items is also conceptualized in organic terms, including the state (cf. *Laws* 964d–965b, *Rep.* 420cd, 423d, 462a–d, 464ab, d), and the universe itself (cf. *Laws* 903bcd, *Tim.* 30b–31b and below, p. 370). Conversely, in *Tim.* the artistic model is applied to the human body, in which every detail, down to hair and nails, is an artistic "product," and as such has its function as part of an organic whole (76e; cf. *Laws* 768cd, 769a–e). See also e.g. [Longinus] 40.1 and see further Heath 1989: 19–20.

[10] Dion. Hal. *De Comp. Verb.* 25. This and other ancient anecdotes portray Plato as a supremely careful author (Riginos 1976: 185–6). Cf. the Eleatic visitor's declaration that nothing is too trivial to serve the dialectician's purposes (*Soph.* 227a).

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Neither Plato nor other ancient authors translated the principle of organic composition into an interpretive principle (cf. below, p. 94). But we are (fortunately) not bound by the canons of ancient criticism. As with other methodologies, the application of the organic axiom to the interpretation of Plato depends on the critic's agenda. If, for example, the goal is to explicate an argument, to assess its validity in abstraction from its interpersonal and cultural context (if such a thing is possible), or to use it as stimulus to philosophical creativity, then such features as scene-setting and characterization may be irrelevant. But such an activity is distinct from the interpretation of the dialogues as such. If one's aim is to gain a better understanding of the Platonic texts in themselves, or to use them as evidence for "Plato's philosophy" as expressed through those texts, then the "literary" principle of organic unity, which is presupposed by this approach, must stand.

This does not, of course, mean that everything in the text matters *equally*. What matters, and how it matters, are always questions of interpretation. The framework within which one understands and assesses the relative importance of details inevitably shapes the meanings that one finds in the text as a whole. Nor does the axiom commit the critic to the impossible task of explaining everything in a Platonic text. Any interpretation can only look at parts of the text from a partial perspective. But whatever one's starting point, the axiom suggests that it is desirable to try to retain an interconnected vision of parts and whole, in ways that respect both the text itself and the insights provided by a range of interpretive strategies. In order to minimize the risk of arbitrariness, the interpretation of details should be supported by their place in the larger web of textual evidence. All this is also true, of course, of interpreting other kinds of writing, including philosophical treatises. (The axiom is not exclusively "literary.") But it has special implications for the Platonic dialogues. For if everything in the text matters, so do its formal and "dramatic" aspects.

A corollary of the "literary" axiom is that any work presented as a whole by author to audience must be considered in the first place on its own terms.[11] Plato himself encourages this approach by the paucity of cross-references in his dialogues.[12] The resulting formal autonomy

[11] On the role of the author-function in determining what constitutes a discrete work see Foucault 1984: 103–4. For Plato, as for many ancient texts, there are sometimes difficulties in ascertaining what counted as a unified text for the author himself (see Haslam 1976: 337–8). But the general principle is clear enough.

[12] Dramatic form of course precludes "cross-references" in the formal scholarly sense, but there are also remarkably few internal links among the various conversations portrayed in the dialogues (see Clay 1988a). On the dialogues' open-endedness see also Schaerer 1969: 84–92.

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suggests that the individual dialogue should be the primary object of interpretation on the textual level. Moreover the general principle of the primacy of the individual work applies particularly to works of fiction like Plato's (as opposed to e.g. a treatise), each of which presents us with a freshly-imagined world (even when the subject is historical). We are not entitled to *assume*, for example, that Plato's oeuvre as a whole presents us with a coherent set of characters or ideas. This might turn out to be the case, but such issues cannot be decided a priori. Another way of putting this is to say that the dialogues should not be treated as an ahistorical unity, like a single composite work of art. They may be called a "cosmos" by neo-Platonist commentators, but it does not follow that "*Plato* viewed his dialogues . . . as a kind of literary cosmos held together by a variety of dramatic and thematic devices," at least not the orderly kind of cosmos envisaged by Plato and the commentators from whom the metaphor is derived.[13]

The primacy of the individual dialogue does not, of course, mean that nothing *outside* the text matters, or that Plato's texts are "hermeneutically sealed" with respect to each other or other cultural artifacts of their time. On the contrary, the open-endedness of the corpus suggests that the dialogues should be read against a larger intellectual background. Philosophy itself is presented as an open-ended process, and no single conversation as complete. The dialogue form invites us to locate these events in a web of spatial, temporal and cultural contexts. And despite the lack of dramatic cross-references, there are obvious thematic links among Plato's works on the discursive level, some more explicit than others. As with any author, tracing such interconnections may shed interpretive light on our understanding of individual works and the corpus as a whole. I shall therefore proceed by assuming the hermeneutic primacy of the individual work, but at the same time try to follow Plato's own textual indicators of the relative importance of shared themes and apparent ties to other dialogues.

Plato's works are also dramatically linked through their shared historical framework, most notably in the case of the series of dialogues surrounding Sokrates' death.[14] Some critics, ancient and modern, have taken this particular mode of interconnection as an invitation to read

[13] The quotation is from Howland 1993: 30 (my emphasis). On the neo-Platonists see Coulter 1976: ch. 4. For a sensible weighing of this issue see Griswold 1999b.

[14] The dramatic dates of the dialogues, in so far as they can be ascertained, range from before Plato's own birth (e.g. *Parm.*, *Prot.*) to the death of Sokrates, when Plato was in his mid twenties. The issue is complicated, however, by the fact that some of them are reported or narrated many years later (e.g. *Symp.*, *Tht.*).

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these dialogues in the order of the events depicted. One recent scholar writes, for example, of *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Cratylus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*, "there is an unbroken dramatic sequence, guaranteed by the speeches of Sokrates himself, that arranges [these dialogues] in that order, a sequence that makes of them an evident entity and thus a true hermeneutic object."[15] But we must be cautious here. Despite their common dramatic setting on the verge of Sokrates' death, these works share no formal links of a kind that invites us to view them as subordinate parts of one artistic whole. There is, of course, a sense in which the entire Platonic corpus constitutes a "true hermeneutic object." Equally, any writer's oeuvre in a sense creates and presents us with a complete authorial "world."[16] But this should not be allowed to obscure the differences between the works viewed discretely as productions over time. We must always bear in mind the possible – though unknown – variety of contexts, both methodological and pedagogical, in which particular Platonic dialogues may have been produced. The fact that we do not know the dates or circumstances of composition of any of them does not mean that we can overlook the more general fact that each was in fact composed in a particular situation, for particular purposes, and at a particular point during an extended period of time in which the author's intellectual and pedagogical concerns are likely to have varied considerably.[17] It is therefore dangerous to put too much weight on simple arrangement by "plot" for works that may have been composed many decades apart, each for its own purposes.

This kind of connection may of course be significant, but without entailing either close coherence among a group of works or an authorial desire to establish a specific reading order. We may contrast, for example, Aeschylus' trilogy, *Oresteia*, with Sophocles' so-called "Theban Plays" – *King Oedipus*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* – which are connected by their interlinked stories of the house of Oidipous, overlapping dramatis personae, and clear cross-references within each script. The three plays of *Oresteia* not only have a close internal coherence of theme, character and imagery, but were written to be performed together as a single tripartite work of art, like a triptych. Sophocles' three tragedies, by contrast, were

[15] Cropsey 1995: ix.

[16] It is worth recalling, in this context, that as far as we can tell, all Plato's dialogues have survived. But the picture of "Plato's world" that we recover from them will depend on how many of them – and which ones – are deemed authentic.

[17] Though few details of Ryle's imaginative account carry conviction, it has the merit of reminding us of the many possibilities for the circumstances of the dialogues' composition and performance (1966).

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composed and produced many years apart, in a different order from the mythic sequence of events that they portray. The interconnections between them, like allusions to other works by Sophocles and other writers, may shed light on the author's shifting purposes. But they do not make the three plays into a single work.

The distinction between triad and trilogy is specially pertinent to Plato's *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*, which are often referred to as Plato's "trilogy" since they are linked not just thematically but dramatically.[18] In this respect they form a striking (though limited) exception to the absence of clear internal links among Plato's dialogues. But the term "trilogy" remains misleading, in so far as the dramatic model suggests a strong *presumption* of unity that is unwarranted. Since we have no knowledge of the original circumstances of performance of Plato's dialogues (below, pp. 22–5), there is no clear criterion for the employment of this kind of technical dramatic terminology. Certainly there is no reason to believe that simply because the central conversations of *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* are dramatized as occurring on subsequent days, they were therefore meant to be performed together. Nor may we infer that they were *composed* either close together in time, or in the order in which the conversations they dramatize take place.[19] Both these things *might* be true, but to use the dramatic order as evidence for them is analogous to dating Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* before his *Antigone*, simply on the basis of plot sequence. At the same time, the links among *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman* do invite us to read them as a developing set, regardless of the original order or circumstances of composition. In my chapters on these dialogues I shall therefore try to respond appropriately to this invitation.

A closely related problem concerns the way in which one chooses to read the many figures of Sokrates with which Plato presents us. Some critics, both "literary" and "philosophical," are committed to the view that Plato's oeuvre represents a single coherent Sokrates for which each dialogue provides further evidence. Others have seen some avatars of Sokrates as more "real" or "historical" than others. To place this problem in context, it is helpful to compare parallel practices in other ancient Greek genres, such as epic and tragedy, many of whose characters appear

[18] See esp. Klein 1977. For ancient critics see below, p. 15.

[19] Pace e.g. Bostock 1988: 2–3. The fact that *Tht.* refers "forward" to *Soph.* and *Stat.*, and the latter two "back" to *Tht.*, could easily be a product of later editing. In particular, *Tht.* 210d could have been added in revision, or started life as a casual reference to a non-specific future conversation (Friedländer 1964–9: III.243; Bostock 1988: 10, 14; cf. *Phileb.* 50e, *Crat.* 396e).

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and reappear in more than one work. A single name and attached identity lead us to expect such figures to display a single coherent character across various works. To the ancient Greeks as well, the name of a well-known mythic or historical figure would evoke certain fairly well defined characteristics that would be familiar, at least in broad outline, to most of the audience. At the same time, such figures are treated in surviving texts with considerable flexibility. In tragedy, for example, a single myth-historical figure may receive strikingly different treatments in different plays, even by the same author. A character like Odysseus retains salient features (such as verbal dexterity or cleverness) from his traditional epic character; but these traits may be interpreted and re-interpreted, often with a varied moral coloring, as with the figures of Odysseus in Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, or the various Helens in Euripides' oeuvre.

As with Odysseus, the fact that the many Platonic Sokrateses are all named "Sokrates," and linked to a single formal and historical identity, raises certain expectations of adherence to a core identity, expectations that are partly satisfied by the large areas of overlap in the character of Sokrates in different dialogues. Plato's Sokrateses are more than just a collection of figures with the same name who just happen to appear in a variety of works. The accumulation and repetition of numerous, often consistent, details of character contributes to the strong unitary sense of "Plato's Sokrates" experienced by many readers. And the more of these details we encounter, the stronger a presumptive backdrop we acquire against which to assess new avatars of Sokrates. Yet this family resemblance among Plato's various Sokrateses, strong though it is, does not entitle us a priori to treat them as an essentially single or coherent figure. We cannot posit a single Platonic Sokrates any more than a single Oidipous, Odysseus or Kreon in Sophocles' various plays – unless we find that the texts do in fact present us with a single cohesive figure. As it is, his shifting persona remains one of the most significant variables in Plato's works. This does not mean, however, that we may not draw useful comparisons between these Sokrateses, as we can between the two figures of Odysseus in *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, who share a recognizable core of character traits despite the differences in their dramatic presentation.

Depending on our purposes, then, we are entitled to posit an indefinite number of Platonic Sokrateses, ranging from a "maximal" Sokrates – the figure constructed out of everything attributed to Sokrates in Plato, with all his inconsistencies as well as commonalities – to the particular Sokrates of each dialogue in which he appears. In between lies a range

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of overlapping figures who have more or less in common with each other and with the maximal Sokrates. The Sokrates of each dialogue must be assessed both on his own terms, as a fresh literary/philosophical creation, and as a more or less distant relative of these other Sokrateses. Both similarities and differences among these various avatars of Sokrates may be important for understanding individual works and the particular manifestations of Sokrates that they contain.[20] These refractions of the Socratic persona accompany, and are intrinsically related to, Plato's exploration of various approaches to philosophical method and pedagogy, as we shall see.

For my purposes, three of these more general figures will be of special use. One of these, whom I shall call "Plato's Sokrates," "the Platonic Sokrates," or just "Sokrates," is the maximal figure who emerges from the corpus as a whole, who maintains, at a bare minimum, the same identity and name, with all the ideas and traits that are ascribed to him. The second I shall call the aporetic or elenctic Sokrates. This is the figure that dominates such dialogues as *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion,* and *Laches* – works in which Sokrates employs the method of question and answer commonly known as the elenchus, which he describes in *Apology* as his life's mission. This character and his methods will be discussed in more detail below (pp. 115–27). For the present, it suffices to say that he claims to know nothing, his mode of argument is essentially adversative and ad hominem, and its results usually aporetic (though he also has a protreptic side). He appears to a more limited extent in some other works, such as *Meno*, *Republic* and *Symposium*. Though his methods cannot be boiled down to a single formula, and the edges of his dramatic persona are somewhat blurry, he is for the most part quite easily recognizable.[21]

This Sokrates, fleshed out with biographical and personal details from other works – especially *Symposium* and *Phaedo* – is the figure whose personality has dominated the European intellectual imagination, as "a kind of vessel into which men and whole epochs projected their own ideals."[22] But he is not the only Sokrates in Plato's dialogues. In other incarnations Plato's Sokrates can be wildly creative, dogmatic, or a polite

[20] This is also true to some extent of the interlocutors: e.g. Glaukon and Adeimantos appear in both *Rep.* and *Parm.* (cf. Miller 1986: 18–21, 65–7).

[21] The philosophical criteria that distinguish this figure are rigorously – indeed, too rigorously – articulated in Vlastos 1991: ch. 2–3. For a critique see Nails 1995: ch. 5.

[22] Jaspers 1962: 18. For the appropriation of Sokrates by the later European tradition, in particular by Christianity and humanism, see e.g. Priestley 1803; Merlan 1947: 416 n. 33; Marcel 1951; FitzPatrick 1992; Nehamas 1998; C. C. W. Taylor 1998: 83–99; Lane 2001: ch. 2.

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