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0521793009 - The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues

Ruby Blondell

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IN PLATO'S DIALOGUES

Despite the recent explosion of interest in alternative ways of reading Plato, a gulf still exists between “literary” and “philosophical” interpretations. This book attempts to bridge that division by focussing on Plato’s use of characterization, which is both intrinsic to the “literary” questions raised by his use of dramatic form, and fundamental to his “philosophical” concern with moral character. Form and content are also reciprocally related through Plato’s preoccupation with literary characterization on the discursive level. Two opening chapters examine the methodological issues involved in reading Plato “as drama,” and other preliminary matters, including ancient Greek conceptions of “character,” the figure of Sokrates qua “dramatic” hero, and the influence of literary characters on an audience. The rest of the book offers close readings of select dialogues, chosen to show the wide range of ways in which Plato uses his characters, with special attention to the kaleidoscopic figure of Sokrates.

RUBY BLONDELL is Professor of Classics at the University of Washington, where she has taught since 1985. She is the author (under the name Mary Whitlock Blundell) of *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge, 1989) and of many articles on Greek drama and philosophy. She has also translated several plays of Sophocles for the Focus Classical Library. Under the name Ruby Blondell, she is a co-author of *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides* (Routledge, 1999), for which she translated Euripides’ *Medea*. Among other professional honors, she has been a Junior Fellow at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC, where the present book had its genesis.

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In memory of my mother
Hester Whitlock Blundell
12 May 1928–1 January 2000

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Every great artist has been such by synthesis. Our strength is transitional, alternating; or, shall I say, a thread of two strands. The sea-shore, sea seen from shore, shore seen from sea; the taste of two metals in contact; and our enlarged powers at the approach and at the departure of a friend; the experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at home, nor yet in traveling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible; this command of two elements must explain the power and the charm of Plato. Art expresses the one, or the same by the different. Thought seeks to know unity in unity; power to show it by variety; that is, always by an object or symbol. Plato keeps the two vases, one of aether and one of pigment, at his side, and invariably uses both.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Perhaps perversely, in view of the size of the present volume, I begin it by regretting some absences. The body of this book consists of readings of a select number of Plato's dialogues. Even at its present length, issues of enormous importance for understanding these works – especially the longer ones – have inevitably been neglected and other dialogues that would richly repay study from the present perspective have received little or no attention. I particularly regret the lack of a chapter on *Symposium*, and a concluding chapter, originally planned, on *Timaeus-Critias*.

My readers will probably feel, however, that the book is quite long enough as it is. In order to prevent it from bulking still larger I have, with regret, drastically reduced the number of secondary references that were present in earlier versions. For this reason the Bibliography contains many items that are no longer referred to in the text or notes. I hope this will make it useful to anyone who wishes to pursue these topics in more detail.

I write at a time when the canons for orthography and linguistic convention of various kinds are in flux. I therefore take this opportunity to clarify my usage in two such areas. First, when speaking of ancient authors and their views, I normally use the traditional, supposedly “unmarked,” pronoun “he,” reflecting the norms employed by these writers themselves. To supply them with gender-neutral pronouns would both be culturally misleading and provide credit where it is not due. When speaking of modern writers and interpreters such as myself, however, I use either “he” or “she,” with a preference for the latter.

Secondly, any writer on ancient Greek texts must make certain choices with regard to the spelling of proper names. On the one hand, accurate transliterations are both closer to the original and provide a fresh sense of ancient Greek writers that liberates them from the fog of Latinity. This practice reflects various attitudes that have transformed and reinvigorated ancient Greek studies over the last few decades. On the other

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hand, many well-known names, such as “Plato,” have been “naturalized” in English in ways that depart from the original Greek. To transliterate such names – turning Plato back into Platon – seems not only pretentious but actively misleading (unless pronunciation is to be revised along with spelling). Moreover in many cases, transliterating the names of ancient authors, historical figures, and places impedes the ability of students and less specialized scholars to form connections with their pre-existing knowledge, or conduct further research using standard texts and reference tools.

Since this is a time of transition, each writer must devise some more or less uneasy compromise. My own is as follows. I have transliterated the names of mythological, literary, and dramatic figures, including characters in Plato's works, unless such transliteration would clash with “naturalized” modern English pronunciation (thus Sokrates not Socrates, but Ajax not Aias). I have, however, retained the “traditional” Latinate names for ancient writers and the titles of their works, place names, and historical figures who are not mentioned in the dialogues. This has the somewhat anomalous result that certain names will receive two spellings, depending on whether they occur as the name of a dramatic character or the name of a Platonic work (*Theaitetos* or *Theaetetus*). This superficial inconsistency seems to me a price worth paying, since it reflects my desire to bring out the “dramatic” qualities of Plato's characters in a way that cuts through many traditional preconceptions, while at the same time acknowledging the scholarly tradition that constructs our reading of his dialogues, and allowing for easy cross-reference to texts of existing works by and about him.

This book started its long gestation in 1991–2 during an unforgettable year at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC. For financial support since then I am also most grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Summer Stipend, and to the University of Washington for sabbatical leave, a Royalty Research Fund Award, and a grant from the Simpson Center for the Humanities. For less concrete but equally necessary forms of support, I have more individual people to thank than I can list here. Innumerable friends, teachers, students and colleagues have helped and encouraged me, during the long gestation of this book, in a host of ways: by reading and discussing my work, inviting me to present portions of it at conferences and colloquia, and generously providing me with written comments, specialized knowledge, and/or copies of their own work. For these and other less tangible services I thank especially Hayden Ausland, Larry Bliquez, Joy Connolly, Dan

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Devereux, Michael Halleran, Stephen Hinds, David Keyt, John Kirby, Susan Lape, Pierre Mackay, Mark McPherran, Ann Michelini, Mitch Miller, Gary Scott, and Velvet Yates.

I owe further special debts of gratitude to the late great Gregory Vlastos, who like Sokrates lives on to provoke his intellectual progeny; to David Halperin, for inspiration and encouragement over many years; to my department at the University of Washington, than which no group of colleagues could be more congenial; to my undergraduate and graduate students, especially those who have served as my research assistants; to Nick Smith, who elicited the spark that developed into this book; to Zeph and Diana Stewart, and Lisa Kallet, for their friendship and support during my year at the Hellenic Center; to Jerry Press, who gave me much-needed encouragement at a difficult time; to Debra Nails, Lee Perlman and Kenneth Dorter, all of whom read and commented on the entire manuscript at various stages; to Tom Tuozzo, with whom I spent a memorable summer of wine and Plato; to Diskin Clay and Charles Kahn, who refereed the manuscript for the Press and were both, in their different ways, enormously helpful; to Pauline Hire of Cambridge University Press, who patiently encouraged this project over many years, and Michael Sharp, who took it over with tact, courtesy, and accommodation.

Ultimate responsibility for this volume must, however, lie with those who enabled me to produce it: my cats, my friends, and my therapist.