



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

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Probably the last dialogue Plato wrote, the *Laws* represents the philosopher's most fully developed or revised views on many crucial questions that he had raised in earlier works. Yet it remains a largely unread and underexplored work. Some reasons for this disjunction have been addressed in the critical literature. The *Laws* is the longest work Plato ever composed, and its style has often been characterised as less creative and vivid than that usually employed in his other writings. Moreover, one encounters significant differences in the ideas given privileged discussion in the dialogue, especially when these are compared to what has always been considered the *Laws*' twin work, the *Republic*. Such discrepancies in form and content have in the past inspired some hesitancy about the authenticity of the work, despite the dialogue having been explicitly attributed to Plato even by Aristotle.¹ But for all its alleged idiosyncrasy, and to some extent because of it, the *Laws* remains an exceptionally intriguing piece of thought.

The present volume is a contribution to the increasing efforts to shed more light on this major but perplexing Platonic work.² More specifically, the volume aspires to illuminate one consistently underestimated aspect of the dialogue: its uniquely rich discussion of cultural matters.³ This enterprise requires the scrutiny of scholars whose expertise resides beyond the boundaries of pure philosophical enquiry. It calls for readings

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by those working in the broader area of literary, cultural, and performance studies.

A reader of the *Laws* soon realises that, more than in any other of his dialogues, cultural practices are fundamental to Plato's theorising about the formation of the citizen and the polis. And although recent scholarship has indeed brought to our attention the great significance of Plato's controversial social theories as they appear in his latest dialogues, and especially in the *Laws*, its almost exclusive focus on Plato's moral and political stance often leaves unexamined the all-encompassing nature of the philosopher's approach to society, which places cultural institutions at its core. Of course, the definition of culture – along with the breadth of its inclusiveness and its relationship to the whole of society – has been a notoriously challenging enterprise in philosophical, sociological, and anthropological studies.⁴ No attempt at such definition seems to be invulnerable to further conceptual questioning. Nevertheless, one of Clifford Geertz's well-known attempts to define 'culture' may be quite illuminating for our purposes. 'It denotes', Geertz suggests, 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life'.⁵ Interestingly, the notion of *paideia* in the *Laws*, which emphasises the importance of the transmission of, and further elaboration on, inherited communal values and attitudes, presents considerable affinities with such a conceptualisation of culture.⁶ At the core of *paideia* the dialogue puts those symbolic forms that are associated with the broader area of musical practices in the Greek polis.

Recent work has focussed on one of the major discrepancies between Plato's middle dialogues – especially the *Republic* – and the *Laws*.⁷ In the former dialogues, a fully fledged moral and rational formation, the absolute prerequisite of happiness, is restricted to philosophers. Those who reside outside the realm of philosophy have at most a limited grasp of this ultimate good. In the *Laws*, on the other hand, a larger pool

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of citizens, even though nonphilosophers, has the potential to attain virtue and consequently happiness. In this later, perhaps more generous Platonic model, legislation becomes instrumental for the formation and preservation of individual and collective morality. In addition, the *Laws* seems to favour a more unitary view of the relationship between body and soul as well as between the parts of the soul. This view is especially noticeable when compared with Plato's struggle, most conspicuously in the *Republic*, over stricter oppositions between the rational and the nonrational aspects of human motivation, a struggle illustrated through his tripartite division of the soul.

Such differences may be attributed to deeper shifts in Plato's thought or might be seen as resulting from the diverging programmatic orientations of dialogues such as the *Republic*, on the one hand, and the *Laws*, on the other.⁸ Examining them has been a crucial advance. The present volume, however, emerges from a related but quite distinct and overarching question, usually neglected or marginalised in studies engaged with Plato's political and moral deliberations. How are we to interpret Plato's pervasive, meticulous, and unusually constructive preoccupation with all things musical in the *Laws*? As an increasing number of publications over the past two decades indicates, *mousike* – that is, the various types and combinations of verbal, instrumental, and kinetic action – was not only the quintessence of cultural institutions in the Greek polis but also a decisive component in the making of the collective imaginary, especially in classical Athens.⁹ In fact, one can argue that it is precisely this socially dominant and influential function of *mousike* that drove Plato to agonise in most of his dialogues (above all, in the *Republic*) about diminishing or even eliminating its role in the city-state. Although this is not explicitly and systematically argued in his work, Plato's implicit assumption is that the prevalent musical culture of his time nourishes and strengthens the lowest constituent of the soul, the appetitive part. It thus prevents citizens from achieving virtue. As is well known, the tenth book of the *Republic*, a long portion of which is dedicated to musical and poetic matters, openly proposes

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banishing poetry. Interestingly, however, in this book Socrates leaves two interrelated issues open. First, despite his demand for the banishment of mimetic poetry, *hymns* and *encomia* are to be maintained, yet with no further specification as to their performance and function in the polis.¹⁰ Second, room is left for poetry lovers (*philopoietai*) to defend poetry in prose, if they can prove that poetry is not merely delightful but beneficial as well.¹¹

Is, then, the *Laws* Plato's own ultimate effort to reestablish poetry and, on a broader scale, *mousike* in the polis? Are the detailed descriptions of, and prescriptions about, musical matters in the *Laws* Plato's own response to the two issues that Socrates left open in the *Republic*? Or, to return to the divergences between Plato's middle dialogues and the *Laws* concerning moral philosophy and psychology, to what extent does Plato's more inclusive model of the virtuous and happy society in the latter affect the way he now thinks about musical – which is to say, cultural – matters? If indeed the *Laws* privileges a more unified perception of the human soul, how does this more consolidated perception of human motivation affect the philosopher's struggle against the prevailing Greek (especially Athenian) modes of creating and dealing with cultural artefacts and institutions? In the course of the *Laws*, it is made abundantly clear that the political and moral aspects of Plato's views either arise from or depend on his scrupulous discussion of the cultural institutions to which he refers. To put it in a different way: beyond abounding in often unique and valuable references to dance and music, customs and norms, the *Laws* seems to suggest a comprehensive model of culture for the entire polis – something unparalleled in Plato.

Precisely because culture looms so large in the *Laws*, we are enabled to appreciate, close up, its programmatic emphasis on the diverse cultural identities of the three interlocutors: Athenian, Spartan, Cretan. This marked heterogeneity widens the cultural spectrum of this dialogue in an unprecedented way, especially in the course of discussions about ritual and educational practices pertaining to *mousike*. At the same time,

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Plato's specific references to all three aforementioned cultures underscore one of the main differences between this work and the *Republic*. Unlike the *Republic's* ideal city, which is located beyond space and time, one soon realises that the *Laws'* exemplary city, Magnesia, is imagined within very specific historical and geographical coordinates: it is to be a fourth-century colony, located in the south of Crete and is supposed to operate under the control of Cnossus.¹² Thus the interlocutors, in order to identify the best cultural elements to be introduced into the new city, engage in illuminating investigations about diverging local traditions. In other words, although fantasised from the point of view of an Athenian aristocrat like Plato, the distinctive diversity of the *Laws* presents us with an active imaginary that is engaged in envisioning the Athenian milieu through the lens of differing cultural environments.

This kaleidoscopic examination of Greek cultural matters in the *Laws*, along with its important references to Egyptian practices, arises in most of the contributions to this volume but is exclusively addressed in two essays specifically dedicated to the subject. Mark Griffith explores some of the dialogue's geographical and cultural paradoxes. He carefully elucidates Plato's views on whether Magnesia should contain its own aesthetically consistent, geographically fixed, and overall purified *mousike*, or instead resemble Athens, filled with a polyphony of multifarious and heterogeneous sounds, both local and imported. Surprisingly, as Griffith shows, despite all his ideological constraints Plato's cultural vision in this dialogue allows for some variation and flexibility. Multiplicity and uniformity sustain and support one another in an otherwise well-monitored cultural regime. Ian Rutherford, on the other hand, focusses specifically on the way Egyptian culture is described and conceptualised in the *Laws*. He interprets Egypt's position in this Platonic work as a musical utopia that is likely to reflect prevalent ideologies rooted within Egypt and influential enough to affect the way in which Greek intellectuals perceived and idealised Egyptian culture in the fourth century B.C. A central issue in Rutherford's investigation is

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the way in which the *Laws* presents Egyptian *mousike* (and *choreia* more specifically) as an archetypal model for Spartan and Cretan musical ideologies and practices.

The institution of *choreia*, the coordinated song-and-dance performances by men or women of various age-groups, is a cardinal issue for the *Laws*. The significance of its extensive discussion for our understanding of the evolution of Platonic thought cannot be stressed enough. From extant choral poetry and sporadic references to *choreia* in later texts, we know that choral singing and dancing were of paramount importance for the formation of character and taste and a fundamental vehicle of social consciousness in most Greek cities. Yet Plato's *Laws* constitutes the *only* surviving ancient source that thoroughly theorises about Greek chorality. For the first time, Plato here presents not only the negative and dangerous aspects of poetic and musical practices in a society (as he sees them) but also a positive and comprehensive model of total participation in communal performances. Although secondary literature has generally noted the significance of this late Platonic approach to chorality, a focussed and extensive discussion of its multifaceted treatment in the *Laws* has long been wanting. The volume contains comprehensive discussions of the anthropological, political, and aesthetic aspects of Plato's views on the subject.

The initiatory function of the chorus, its traditional role in promoting and controlling the passage from one age-class to the next, makes *choreia* key to our understanding of social and cultural norms in Greece. Is Plato's program, concerning the age-group choruses of Magnesia, a vision of *choreia*'s initiatory role? A detailed approach to this question leads Claude Calame to the conclusion that Plato's musical vision in the *Laws*, clearly privileging melic genres, presents us with several novel aspects. While the philosopher's discussion of *choreia* may create the impression of a nostalgic return to archaic models of social organisation, Calame argues that Plato's choral ideal proposes a new musical and educational order. Although indeed meant to replace a musical regime that Plato perceived

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as utterly disoriented and disorderly in his native city, his ideal *choreia* does at the same time undermine the conventional initiatory role of this institution in the Cretan and Spartan traditions with which the Athenian interlocutor is supposedly in dialogue throughout the *Laws*.

Oswyn Murray as well argues for a Platonic subversion of the authority of the traditional Spartan model in analysing another major issue raised in the dialogue: the relationship between the institution of the *symposion* and that of the chorus, especially with reference to the puzzling overlap between the sympotic and the choral activities of the so-called chorus of the elders. This interesting institutional hybrid, at the same time choral and sympotic, is viewed by Murray in the broader context of Plato's fundamental reassessment of human nature in the *Laws*. Pleasure, instead of being confronted as the adversary of virtue, is now treated as a sensation that can be redirected to underpin a novel cultural ideal.

Plato's extensive analysis of the function of the chorus, then, is a mixture of archaising ideas and fresh, at times striking, approaches to the way in which *mousike* can restructure the world of the polis. The vital role of *choreia* in Plato's blending of traditional and innovative perceptions of society is explored by Leslie Kurke. Her interpretation of Plato's conceptualisation of chorality in terms of puppetry provides a new understanding of the programmatic yet enigmatic reference, in the first book of the *Laws*, to human beings as divine puppets. In the *Laws*, as Kurke shows, the image of divine puppets is intimately linked to Plato's modelling of choral education: in fact, this image distils and reenvisions certain deeply traditional Greek conceptions of the pleasures, powers, and aesthetics of choral dance as a means of social cohesion.

Social cohesion is a leading aspect of the philosopher's all-inclusive choral program, a notion that Barbara Kowalzig discusses in terms of Plato's underlying interest in the relationship between chorality and rhythm as social and political tools. Benveniste's well-known analysis of the etymological relationship between the verb *rhein* (to flow) and the noun

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rhythmos (rhythm) helps Kowalzig interpret Plato's vision of *choreia* as a collective 'manner of flowing', where Platonic notions of rhythmicity and temporality bring together not only the individual and the collective but also nature and culture. Finally, in my essay I claim that Plato's choral model, while apparently reestablishing *mousike* for the entire polis, in fact promotes a cultural model that is utterly untheatrical and inherently de-aestheticised. Thus, the all-participatory *choreia* of the *Laws* emerges as Plato's last (and perhaps most creative) device through which *mousike* can be ostensibly affirmed, while at the same time the Athenian musical scene is effectively undermined. Challenging notional and cultural bonds between spectatorship and aesthetic pleasure, well established within antiquity, is crucial to this Platonic strategy.

Choreia, thus, is unquestionably a key to better understanding Plato's vision of culture in this late work. But there are other, equally revealing, ways in which Plato interacts with and transforms established cultural categories, especially those related to performance genres. One of the innovations introduced in the *Laws*, having to do with the intersection of political and cultural institutions, is that of the 'preludes' (*prooimiai*) to all legislation governing the new city. That the term *pro-oimion* (prelude) is a deliberate choice on the part of the Athenian both to evoke and to transform established poetic and musical practices is made clear in the fourth book (722d–e), where the Athenian reminds his interlocutors that the original employment of this term applies, for instance, to the introductory segment of the *kitharodic nomes*. In this volume Andrea Nightingale argues that in the *Laws* the actual combined text of the preludes plus the laws, so central to the entire program of the dialogue, transforms the law code into a new and hybrid genre that becomes, in turn, an example for all discourse to be used in education. More importantly, if we take into account Plato's analysis in other dialogues of the function of the written text as opposed to oral composition and delivery, his insistence on the memorisation of the written law code in the *Laws* suggests that this text operates as a 'lethic'

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tool, meant to destroy the citizen's memory of earlier cultural practices.

The *Laws*' versatile transformation of the notion of genre is also explored by Kathryn Morgan, who illuminates the formalised structures of praise in the ideal city of Magnesia and the way in which the genre of praise becomes the organising principle of all cultural and civic life. As she emphasises, the society envisioned in the *Laws* involves an unprecedented supervising of the citizen body, in a world structured around the ancient discursive (mainly poetic) polarity of praise and blame, thereby turning the entire range of citizen life into a peculiar type of performance.

While the two just-mentioned contributions explore different aspects of Plato's transmutation of the very concept of genre, the three following contributions investigate the philosopher's approach to conventional genres: tragedy, epic poetry, comedy, and lament. The *Laws*' attitude towards tragedy is discussed by Penelope Murray, particularly in comparison with the *Republic*. Although ostensibly lenient towards the genre, in fact the Athenian asks for nothing less than a full redefinition of the tragic, thus completely altering its very essence and generic identity. Tragedy is therefore the genre to which the philosopher remains most hostile in his last work. Politely and tactfully, as Murray argues, the poets of tragedy are indeed banished from the city. Starting from the prominence of the interlocutors' local identities, Richard Martin asks why it is only the Athenian who cites the 'foreign' poetry of Homer and suggests that the *Laws* accurately captures for us a rhetorical habit of Plato's own contemporary city-state. The Athenian Stranger is not merely a stand-in for Socrates or Plato, and his habitual cultural stance may represent a contrast to Plato's own ideological treatment of epic in light of concerns about morality and mimesis.

Finally, Plato's attitude towards the 'lower' genres of invective and comedy, on the one hand, and of lament, on the other, is explored by Marcus Folch. In this case performers and audience are socially distinguished one from the other: these 'lower'

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genres can be *attended* by the body of Magnesia's citizens, yet they cannot be *performed* by them; their performers can only be the 'lower', disenfranchised, classes of noncitizens and slaves. Thus, as Folch suggests, despite Plato's struggle against teatrocracy, a new type of 'teatrocracy' is established in the *Laws*, the citizens' institutionalised viewing of social alterity. This is an emblematic instance of the way aesthetics and politics intersect in Plato's late thought.

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, the *Laws* remains one of the least read Platonic dialogues in modern times. By contrast, there are indications that this late Platonic work was read often and intently in antiquity. As the specific focus of this book is Plato's extensive and detailed discussions of cultural matters throughout the dialogue, it concludes with two essays exploring the way in which the *Laws* can illuminate the work of two remarkably influential authorities in musical and poetic matters. More specifically, the essays explore Callimachus' and Aristoxenus' views on musical and poetic decorum in the light of Plato's discussion of such matters in the *Laws*. Susan Stephens argues that Callimachus' choice of topics on which to confront his 'critics' is not random or merely indicative of contemporary Alexandria but a deliberate invocation of Plato and his attempts to regulate poetry in the *Laws*. Callimachus strongly questions and, at times, ironises those Platonic proposals. Andrew Barker, on the other hand, discusses the criteria by which, according to both Plato and Aristoxenus, a piece of music can properly be assessed as 'correct' or 'incorrect' and as 'good' or 'bad'. Examining how these issues were addressed by Aristoxenus, a non-Platonist musical expert in the late fourth century, enables us to identify more clearly the idiosyncratic components of Platonic approaches to musical decorum in the *Laws*.

The reader of this volume will realise that there are many other themes linking its four parts. Issues pertaining to the relationship between authority and performance, pleasure and manipulation, tradition and innovation, coherence and diversity, spectatorship and participation, the actual and the