

Susan Sauvé Meyer

Plato: Laws 1 and 2. Translated with an Introduction and Commentary. Clarendon Plato Series. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xiv + 361 pp. \$74.00. ISBN 9780199604081 (hbk).

In the Preface to this book Susan Sauvé Meyer sets a pretty high bar for it, by declaring her intention to offer to the English-speaking reader the equivalent (for books One and Two of the *Laws*) of the important works of Schöpsdau in German, Lisi in Spanish and Brisson/Pradeau in French. Without any question, the present volume comfortably clears this bar.

The book opens with an Introduction which succinctly provides the reader with the information necessary in order to follow the argument of the first two books of Plato's longest dialogue. A carefully composed Outline that serves as a guide to the text comes next, followed by the two items that make up the main dish: the Translation and the Commentary to the text.

The Introduction clearly achieves its goal of contextualizing and placing into perspective the work that follows, and it succeeds all the better because it is brief. It appropriately addresses the range of the Greek term *nomos*, which is commonly translated as 'law' in English, but which is substantially wider in Greek (pp. 2-3). The one minor concern that could be raised about it regards the issue of the identity of the Athenian Stranger. The improbable claim that Plato intends the Stranger to be recognized as Socrates is mentioned, and the author ultimately suspends judgement (p. 3). Although suspending judgement is definitely the prudent thing to do, one wonders if Cicero's (*Laws* 1.v) claim that the Stranger is supposed to be Plato himself could have been mentioned as well. Aristotle, who writes that the Athenian Stranger is Socrates, is notoriously unreliable on matters of Platonic scholarship, and it is hard to see why Plato would not use Socrates' name, if the latter was intended to be the Athenian. After all, he uses it in most of his other dialogues, and the fact that the *Laws* is a 'second sail' to the *Republic* might well be a reason for which Plato does not want to make his mentor the main character. Having said that, Sauvé Meyer is right that all three interlocutors are primarily 'paradigmatic exemplars of their own home cities' national characteristics' (p. 4) and staunch defenders of their values. In this context, the anonymity of the Athenian is nothing to marvel about.

As anybody who has translated Plato into any modern language knows, there is no such thing as the perfect translation, and a certain degree of philosophical interpretation is inevitable. Using the text established by Des Places, Sauvé Meyer produces a translation of high quality, uniform in style and reasonably

user-friendly. In doing so, she provides an excellent alternative to the most commonly consulted English translations of the *Laws*, those by Trevor J. Saunders and Thomas L. Pangle. The author opts for short periods, which brings her translation closer to modern-day English, but also leads, inevitably, to an increased syntactical distance from the longer periods of the original Greek. Her obvious command of the latter, however, and the diligence with which the translation is composed ensure that little, if anything, is lost in the process.

The Commentary is also construed with the utmost carefulness. All the philological and philosophical positions that the author adopts are defended with conviction and, where needed, in some detail. One particular strength of the Commentary is the many well-chosen references to other dialogues where Plato makes points comparable to the ones made in the *Laws*. This allows the reader to get a sense of how some of his positions in the latter dialogue relate to his earlier work.

If there is one area where one might have wished the Commentary to offer more, it is in its attention to the historical development of some of the linguistic terms and social institutions that are critical for our understanding of Plato's thought. For example, whereas *agathos*, *aristos* and *aretê* are discussed on several different points in the section covering 625c6 to 632d7, as well as elsewhere, little emphasis is placed on the way in which these concepts change between Archaic times and the fourth century BC. The change in the meanings of these terms, however, raises significant problems for Plato, because the notion of the *agathos anêr* that he advances includes some features of the traditional understanding of the term while rejecting others. (In the note to 629e9-630a2 the change of the meaning of *aretê* between the time of Homer and Tyrtaeus to that of Plato is noticed, but without further elaboration.) Similarly, Sauvé Meyer's discussion of institutions such as *syssitia* and *symposia* would be more thorough if certain issues pertaining to them were addressed at greater length. For example, is there a tension between *syssitia* and the individual household as the fundamental social and economic unit of the *Laws*? What is the historical relationship between the two institutions? How compatible is the type of *symposium* that Plato proposes at the end of book Two with the social outlook of Magnesian citizens? It is true that the author consistently offers detailed bibliographical references in which matters of this kind are taken up, but a more detailed discussion would likely be beneficial to the reader.

Given the quality of Sauvé Meyer's scholarship, however, this can only be registered as a minor reservation. Moving from the general to the specific, a few remarks on some of her comments: