Book Reviews

Folch, M.


The City and the Stage welcomes its readers warmly: the introduction states the author's aims clearly, situates the book in the context of current scholarship, clarifies its methodology and provides a careful overview of the Laws targeted at the non-specialist reader. While the subtitle neatly points to the book's three parts, 'performance' is no doubt the most important notion, and Folch succeeds in presenting a rich account of a Platonic theory of performance, a task made difficult by the lack of a corresponding Greek terminology. Folch is very careful in approaching a dialogue that is both normative and descriptive: while drawing from many different traditions, the Laws presents them in a purified and ultimately idealized form.

This 'idealizing' method (orthē methodos, 1.638e) allows Plato to build his 'second best city' according to the time-honoured tradition of mousikē: while in the Republic he is busy making away with traditional poetry and music, in the Laws his ambition is to re-program (e.g. 41) them in an old-and-new form. To study Plato's appropriation of Greek musical traditions requires a variety of approaches, with a special focus on historically grounded anthropology. Folch situates his work at the crossroads of different disciplines, and makes good use of such methodological tools as Geertz's search for a middle term between culture and politics (ch. 1: Folch argues that Plato's answer would be the soul) and Schofield's distinction between 'rejectionist' (Republic) and 'immanentist' (Laws) critique of existing practices (e.g. 32, 150, 157, 230).

Performance is the title of part 1, whose two chapters are ' Marionettes of the Soul: Performance and the Psychology of Mousikē in Plato's Laws' and 'The Chorus and the Critic: Literary Criticism, Theatocracy and the Performance of Philosophy'. Two more chapters form part 11 (Genre), namely 'Law's Genres: Hymns, Encomia and the Remaking of Lament' and 'Unideal Genres and the Ideal City: Comedy, Threnody, Tragedy and the Limits of the City Dancing'. 
Finally, part III (Gender) comprises chapter 5 on ‘Women’s Statuses in Plato’s Laws: Nature, Gender, Law, and the Performance of Citizenship’ followed by 6, ‘Engendering Harmony: Women’s Songs in Plato’s Laws’. After an interesting Epilogue arguing against the hypothesis that Plato’s code was ever intended for choral performance, the book closes with a bibliography and a general index.

Through the lens of performance, Folch explores various aspects of the Laws, and has very good points to make on a number of questions: the relevance of books 1-2 to the rest of the work, the coherence of the two-part simile of the marionettes, the “microscopic generic appropriation” (209) of tragedy in the exchange between legislator and tragedian, the continuity of Plato’s proposals with historical practices of marginalization of non-citizens, the remarkable role of women in Plato’s performance culture (despite the Laws’ alleged revisionism vis-à-vis the Republic) and many more. The convenient umbrella provided by performance ensures that these points are related to one another, yet, it seems to me, the book sometimes lacks argumentative force, insofar as a descriptive mode, prone to repetition and meta-discursive rhetoric, often prevails.

A related problem is that Plato’s text is sometimes lost sight of. This is true at a minimal, philological level: for example, Folch’s discussion of ‘genres of ecstasy’ revolves around a section (7.790d-791b) that is “problematic and corrupt” (216), yet Folch provides no close examination of the Greek text, and the reader is left wondering where the problems lie. In a book devoted to one, if very long, dialogue, one would expect a closer engagement with the intricacies of the text. On a more general level, Folch quotes and discusses very few passages from other dialogues (cf. 382). This is surprising because Folch, time and again, emphasizes the Laws’ ‘departures’ (a recurrent catchword) from earlier dialogues while also maintaining that “the Laws relies on Plato’s earlier works for philosophical justification of the positions it assumes” (37). In fact, Folch eventually espouses a rather rigid form of developmentalism. For example, we hear that “according to the psychology of the Republic, the lower parts of his [i.e. the good man’s] soul will contribute nothing to the process of moral deliberation and action; indeed, he is virtuous precisely because his reason dominates, restrains, and redirects the lower parts of his soul. This analogy is, of course, oversimplified, but it underscores a significant distinction between the two treatises” (83, my emphasis). This is to ignore, among other things, a striking passage in the Republic that describes the channelling of desires (485d, often compared to Freud’s so-called hydraulic model).

While it may be less problematic for the Laws, construing the Republic as a ‘treatise’ surely does not help grasp its subtleties. Folch is not oblivious to the risk of oversimplification, and often cites Halliwell’s Aesthetics of Mimesis,