

Critical Notices



‘Pretty much the whole of Education’!¹ Virtue and Performance in the *Laws*

Marcus Folch

The City and the stage: Performance, Genre and Gender in Plato’s Laws. Oxford, Oxford University Press. 2015. pp. 12+386. ISBN 978-0-19-026617-2.

Susan Sauvé Meyer

Plato: Laws 1 & 2, translated with an introduction and commentary. Clarendon Plato series, Oxford, Oxford University Press. 2015. pp. xiv+361. ISBN 978-0-19-960408-1.

The first two books of the *Laws* are certainly among the most important in the dialogue. They reveal the aims of the dialogue as a discussion of laws and set up a conversational framework in which Athenian traditions, represented by the main speaker, are brought into a constructive confrontation with the Dorian ideas and customs of his Cretan and Spartan companions. At the same time they serve to establish the psychological and ethical presuppositions which underpin the more politically oriented discussions elsewhere in the dialogue. But these books are also puzzling. One reason for this is that a lot of space is devoted to the discussion of drinking parties. Another is that the key ideas evolve gradually in a conversational way. Unlike the leading speakers in other Platonic dialogues the Athenian does not subject his companions to searching examination. In consequence it is sometimes unclear precisely which claims are being rejected and which asserted.

For these reasons Susan Sauvé Meyer’s volume is particularly welcome. Its general format resembles that of other contributions to the Clarendon Plato series. A brief introduction is followed by an outline analysis of the two books, a translation, 262 pages of very detailed commentary, and a substantial

1 *Laws* 672e, translation adapted from Meyer.

bibliography. The translation is intended to be ‘optimal for the Greekless philosophical reader’. So far as I can judge it achieves this objective admirably. It lacks the panache of Saunders’ version but has greater precision. To my mind it also more readable and reliable than Pangle’s.² An added advantage is that the commentary discusses difficulties of translation in considerable detail. So in most cases where a competent scholar might disagree with Meyer’s version the alternatives are identified and discussed.

The commentary avowedly ‘reflects presuppositions characteristic of scholarship on Plato in the English-speaking world over the last half century’. One might wonder whether *Laws* I and II form a suitable text for this kind of treatment. But in fact Meyer is very successful in teasing out the structure of the arguments, identifying alternative interpretations and showing the underlying coherence of the dialogue. In particular she shows how, on some key issues, the Athenian seems to begin from positions suggested by the Cretan and Spartan but moves gradually to something rather different without clearly marking the shifts in his position or explicitly rejecting the views of his companions. Meyer’s outline analysis is particularly helpful in displaying the general shape and direction of the argument.

Meyer’s analytic approach means that she does not give much prominence to some issues which have bulked large in recent scholarship. She says little about questions of literary form, about the characterisation of the interlocutors or about the social, cultural and historical background to the dialogue. But she is careful to distinguish passages where she believes the Athenian responds to the Cretan and the Spartan by adopting their assumptions from ones where he is speaking with his own voice.

In *The City and the Stage* Marcus Folch also discusses large parts of *Laws* I and II in considerable detail, but the scope of his book and the methods of interpretation he employs are very different from those of Meyer. He focuses on the arts of poetry, music and dance in the *Laws* as a whole, and his treatment of these topics is heavily influenced by speech-act and performance theory. The underlying thought here is that the arts which Plato classes as *mousikē*—music, dance and theatre—are intimately bound up with the institutions and practices of society as a whole. They play a key role in determining and expressing political and gender roles within a society and in constructing the identities of its members. Thus Folch’s book is not simply a discussion of the performing arts, in the narrow traditional sense, but impinges on many other aspects of Plato’s thought as it is displayed in the *Laws*. In particular

2 It may now have a rival in the new translation by Tom Griffith, in Malcolm Schofield (ed.), *The Laws of Plato*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Cambridge CUP, 2016.