The primary aim of this paper is to investigate the evidence provided by the Seventh Letter (hereafter VII) on the question of the relationship between Plato and Archytas. In the process I hope to throw some light on neglected aspects of the much discussed issue of the authenticity of that letter. In what continues to be a highly controversial area there remains a powerful school of thought according to which – whatever may be thought of the other letters – VII at least is an authentic work written by Plato at the end of his life. I cannot here offer anything approaching a conclusive argument on one side or the other of that vexed question – though the considerations I shall present tend to increase the unlikelihood of VII being by the same man who wrote XII (addressed to Archytas) or XIII (addressed to Dionysius II). Few scholars, nowadays, hold the opinion that all the letters are genuine, even though some take the opposite view that they are all inauthentic. There are, to be sure, cross-references between them, or at least between large groups of them, and by themselves these might suggest that the letters in question stand or fall together, and probably therefore fall. However against that, as noted, the urge to rescue VII at least is strong. It certainly stands out not just as the most substantial, but also the apparently most philosophical, of the letters and the argument can be used that the others feed off it, not it off them: indeed that some of the others may do so precisely to give them their (insubstantial) air of authenticity.

1 This paper originates from a contribution to seminars on the Platonic letters held in Cambridge during the Lent and Easter terms 1989. I am most grateful for the constructive comments made by the participants and for particular criticism from Myles Burnyeat and Malcolm Schofield.

2 The most recent analysis of the views of past and contemporary scholars is in Brisson 1987.

3 For example Edelstein 1966 and Gulley 1971. Certainly the Plato presented by some of the letters is very different from the one we are used to from the dialogues. Letter I, for instance, has him sharing power with Dionysius II, and XIII has him acting as Dionysius' agent in what appears to be unsavoury business involving Dion.
However VII itself faces problems, some well known and much aired in the literature, others less well known. Partly these relate to the question of the consistency of its views with those in the dialogues, partly they are to do with the internal consistency of VII itself. Let me mention some in the former category first by way of illustration. At 331ab we are told that people consult Plato about the most important things in their own lives. That is splendid, of course: but the odd thing is that that is then exemplified by (among other things) the acquisition of wealth – as if Plato would have thought that one of the ‘most important’ things. The defence would have to run, that that is from their point of view. But the counter to the counter would still insist on the anomaly of representing Plato as available for consultation, in the eyes of those consulting him, on their all too mundane preoccupations. Again at 334e the writer uses the expression ‘none of us is by nature immortal’ – at first sight an unPlatonic sentiment, even though the passage is immediately followed by standard Platonic doctrine on our souls being immortal. The first defence here would no doubt run that ‘as the many believe’ at 334e 4f qualifies not just the idea that if one were immortal one would be blessed, but the whole sentence, including none of us being by nature immortal. However the counter to the counter would still insist that the first clause has got to provide grounds that Plato can endorse for the thesis that whatever a man suffers when doing something noble is itself noble. So a second defence has to be tried, that there is a distinction between our nature and our soul, the first mortal, the second immortal, even though, to be sure, that point is still not expressed as lucidly as it might be. Then again, at a different level, there is the oddity of the use of a very similar expression to the one Theodorus uses when describing Theaetetus’ natural abilities (Th. 144a) when Dion’s outstanding talents are spoken of in VII, 327ab.

Then among the second type of problem (internal consistency within VII itself) there is the strange contrast in the presentation of Dion. On the one hand there are the glowing references to his excellence, to how marvellous a pupil of Plato he was (327ab) and to the stability of his character (328b). But on the other his behaviour as the story unfolds suggests a very different picture. There is his anger with Plato when Plato refused Dionysius’ overtures to return to Syracuse for the third visit (338c). There is, further, Dion’s own refusal to follow Plato’s advice on the course of the policy to adopt after that disastrous third visit (350c), where it is almost as if Plato

4 Note the γάρ at 334e3.
5 ἀπηχθόμην ἀμφοῖν (viz. Dion and Dionysius).