Classical Quarterly 48 (i) 126–133 (1998) *Printed in Great Britain*

THE HISTORICAL READER OF PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS*[1]

The popular question why Plato wrote dramatic dialogues, which is motivated by a just fascination and perplexity for contemporary scholars about the unique form of the Platonic texts, is confused and anachronistic; for it judges the Platonic texts *qua* philosophical texts in terms of post-Platonic texts not written in dramatic dialogic form. In comparison with these, the form of Plato's early aporetic dialogues is highly unusual. Yet, in its contemporary milieu, the form of Platonic literature is relatively normal. Dramatic dialogue was the most popular form of Attic literature in the late fifth and fourth centuries. This explains why Plato wrote dramatic dialogues.[2] The problem with interpreting Plato's texts does not lie in determining the explanation for

[1] A version of this paper was originally written for a seminar conducted by the late Arthur Adkins at the University of Chicago in 1994. It has undergone several revisions, initially through the suggestions of Professors Elizabeth Asmis and Peter White, subsequently through the comments of various audience members upon its presentation at the University of Chicago, the University of Pittsburgh, and DePaul University, and finally through the helpful advice of the anonymous referees at the *Classical Quarterly*. I would like to dedicate this paper to the faculty and students in the Department Classics at the University of Chicago in grateful acknowledgment of their support and friendship.

[2] In a recent article on the origins of the σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι Diskin Clay discusses the influence of Attic comedy and tragedy on the form of Plato's dramatic dialogues ('The Origins of the Socratic Dialogue', *The Socratic Movement*, ed. Paul A. Vander Waerdt [Cornell, 1994], pp. 23–47). But Clay equivocates about the validity of the ancient tradition that claims the mimes of Sophron provided a model for the Platonic dialogues.

That Sophron's mimes are in significant respects similar to Plato's dialogues is not in doubt, but that Sophron's mimes provided a model upon which Plato developed the philosophical dialogue seems to me highly suspect. External and internal evidence for Plato's acquaintance with Sophron is collected and evaluated by J. M. S. MacDonald, *Character-Portraiture in Epicharmus, Sophron, and Plato* (University of the South, 1931), pp. 129f. Only two sources survive before the first century A.D.: one, Duris of Samos (*c.* 240–70 B.C.), who is cited by Athenaeus (11.504b), the other, Timon of Phlius (*c.* 320–230 B.C.) is cited by John Tzetzes of the twelfth century A.D. (*Chiliades*, 10.806–10). The citation from Duris does not mention that Plato modelled the dialogues on the Sophronic mimes, only that Plato read them fondly. The citation from Timon specifically does say that Plato developed the dialogues on the model of the mimes, but Tzetzes' as well as Timon's reliability are suspect (MacDonald discusses the problems of Timon, p. 131). The internal evidence for Plato's acquaintance with the Sophronic mimes is extremely slight (MacDonald, pp. 134–41). Plato never mentions Sophron. In fact the only plausible allusion to Sophron is that of *Rep.* 451c, where Socrates says: 'Perhaps it might be well, after the completion of the men-drama, to go through the women-drama'. In antiquity, the mimes of Sophron were categorized according to men- and women-dramas, according to the gender of the characters—so, Diogenes Laertius and Choricius of Gaza, and cf. MacDonald's remark: 'Interestingly, a σίλλυβος intended to be attached to a book-roll, bearing the title "Solon's Women-Mimes" and dating from the late first century or early second century A.D. has been found' (Grenfell and Hunt, *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. 2 [1899], p. 303, no. ccci; cited by MacDonald, p. 80). However, MacDonald also notes the remark of a scholiast on Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, 148–55, explaining: 'Those dramas in which the chorus consists of women are called "women-dramas"; those in which it consists of men are called "men-dramas"' (p. 135, n. 33). Just as it is unclear whether Sophron's mimes were in the classical period viewed as men- and women-dramas, it is unclear whether this choric terminology was used in the classical period. The evidence seems too slight to make a determination. A further problem is that Plato's first trip to Syracuse was not until 388/7. If Sophron's mimes did influence his use of the dramatic dialogic form, he would have had to have access to these mimes in Athens in the late fifth century and early fourth centuries. There is no evidence that Sophron's mimes were known in Athens at this time.

the employment of the form of the writings, but in the content of the dramas. The Platonic dramas are philosophical dramas and the main hermeneutic problem they present is how elements we perceive to be dramatic and elements we perceive to be philosophical correlate.

The dialogues are recognized by philosophers and classicists alike as being outstanding and enchanting specimens of dramatic literature. A striking characteristic of the dramas is their realism. The realism of the texts has two basic constituents: (i) its characterology—the characters speak, act, and react in ways that seem to us normal for humans, i.e. Ancient Greeks; and (ii) its historicity—the dramas are quasi-historical in that, while nothing ever happened precisely as it is portrayed in the dramas, many of the dramatic *personae* are historical individuals and many of the dramatic settings are historical places. But realism can be deceptive; it is sometimes assumed to be a default mode of dramatic representation. Scholars sometimes view the dramatic realism of the texts merely as an instrument to engage the reader in the philosophical substance of the text that begins only when Socrates asks questions, like his What-is-*F*? question. The drama is like a comfortable vehicle that conveys the reader through the philosophical landscape; or, to use another simile, the realism of the text functions like a window, through which the reader beholds Socrates and interlocutors engaged in philosophical discussion. According to the window-simile, transparency corresponds to the insignificance of the dramatic elements. Such a view suggests that the dramatic elements of the texts can be ignored while one gets on to the philosophical substance of the work.

The broad aim of this paper is to suggest ways in which to understand the correlation of drama and philosophy in Plato's dialogues. Specifically, I will focus on one constituent of the realism of Plato's dialogues, their historicity. By discussing the historicity of several dramatic elements in Plato's *Protagoras* I will show how these dramatic elements correlate with some of the philosophical elements of the dialogue.

Socrates, when he meets Protagoras, acts skeptical that ἀρετή can be taught. Protagoras insists that he can teach ἀρετή:

> If [Hippocrates] comes to me he will learn . . . good counsel regarding private affairs, how he may best govern his household, and regarding public affairs, how he may be most effective as a speaker and actor in political matters.[3]

Yet, in the course of Socrates' and Protagoras' discussion, Plato reveals Protagoras to be incapable of teaching good counsel concerning these affairs. By the end of the dialogue it is clear that Protagoras does not even know what ἀρετή is. Protagoras' ignorance and false pretensions are exposed through the work of the Socratic elenchus. But, even before Socrates begins asking questions, Plato intimates that Protagoras cannot teach good counsel regarding public and private affairs; he does this dramaturgically, by locating the discussion at a particular house and by introducing particular dramatic *personae* as visitors there.

Socrates and Protagoras' discussion of the teachability of ἀρετή occurs at the house of Callias, son of Hipponicus. Callias was a notorious figure in the social life of the Athenian leisured class of the late fifth century. He came from an extraordinarily wealthy and prominent Athenian family.[4] When he inherited his patrimony in the late

[3] Pl. *Prot.* 318ef.

[4] At the Olympic games in 564 Callias' great-great-grandfather was victorious in the horse-race (Hdt. 6.122.1; Σ. Ar. *Aves* 283). He is also known to have purchased the confiscated property of Peisistratus (Hdt. 6.121.2). Both events suggest pentakosiomedimnal status for the

420s, he became one of Athens' richest citizens. Despite these most auspicious beginnings, Callias, in the course of his life, became notorious for squandering the family's wealth, and ultimately he brought the prominent name of his genos, Ceryces, into disgrace. A modern historian suggests that Callias' financial losses were due to the collapse of mining revenues after 413, but that is not how the Athenian public viewed Callias' misfortunes.[5] The most damning of references is found in Andocides' *De Mysteriis*:

As you may remember, when Athens was mistress of Greece and at the height of her prosperity, and Hipponicus was the richest man in Greece, a rumour with which you are all familiar was on the lips of little children and silly women throughout the city: 'Hipponicus', they said, 'has an evil spirit in his house and it upsets his τράπεζαν.'[6] You remember it, gentlemen. Now in what sense do you think that the saying current in those days proved true? Why, Hipponicus imagined that he had a son in his house; but that son was really an evil spirit, which has upset his wealth, his morals, and his whole life. So it is as Hipponicus' evil spirit that you must think of Callias.[7]

In the late fifth century and thereafter, Callias was infamous for his profligacy and hedonism. 'O, I know of other wastrels', Athenaeus writes, 'I'll talk about those men, but I'll leave out Callias, the son of Hipponicus, even children's slaves know his story.'[8] Aelian calls him φιλοπότην;[9] and, regarding his lavishness, Athenaeus asks with exasperation, 'What dishes did that man not serve at his feasts?'[10] 'Yes, there was much revelry at Callias' house', Eupolis sings, 'amid the fine herring, crayfish, and hare and free-wheeling hussies.'[11] Callias was notorious for his licentiousness too. A list of his catamites can be assembled from various scholia.[12] In addition, he suffered a scandalous marital career.[13]

family at this early period. Callias' grandfather is the first member of the family for whom we have definite evidence of political prominence. He held the official religious office of torch-bearer for the Eleusinian mysteries (cf. J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* [Oxford, 1975], p. 254); and he served as ambassador to Susa in 449 and to Sparta in 446 (Diod. 12.7). His relationship to Cimon through his marriage to Cimon's sister Elpinice testifies to his political significance (Plut. *Cimon* 4.8). Pericles and he also became related when Cimon married Isodice. (There is controversy over Cimon's marriage(s) and offspring. The problems are neatly summarized in *RE* Kimon 2, pp. 452–3, and Davies, p. 304–5.) He increased the family fortune through his involvement in the Laureion silver mines (Nepos, *Cimon* 1.3; Xen. *Vect.* 4.15). Consequently, he was perceived as the richest Athenian of his day (Andoc. 1.130; Isoc. 16.31; Nepos, *Alcib.* 2.1). Callias' father, Hipponicus, married Pericles' ex-wife (cf. Davies, pp. 262–3), and Callias became half-brother to Pericles' sons, Xanthippus and Paralus. Hipponicus inherited his father's property and the office of torch-bearer (Andoc. 1.115), and he continued the massive capital accumulation begun by his father (Xen. *Vect.* 4.15). His other known significant magistracy is the generalship with Eurymedon in an incursion into Tanagra in 426 (Thuc. 3.91; Diod. 12.9).

[5] Davies interestingly indicates that Callias' personal characteristics 'need not have had the permanently crippling effect which [they] did on the family fortunes but for a second factor, ignored by the ancient tradition and undervalued even now, namely the collapse of the mining revenues from Laureion after 413' ([n. 4], p. 261).

[6] Maidment translates 'books' with the note, 'Lit. "his table," with a play on τράπεζα meaning "bank." The pun cannot be rendered exactly in English' (*Minor Attic Orators* [Harvard, 1982], vol. I, p. 437). See also C. A. Cox, *CQ* 46 (1996), 572–5.

[7] §130–1.

[8] Ath. 5.169a.

[9] Ael. *Var. Hist.* 4.16.

[10] Ath. 12.536a.

[11] Eupolis fr. 161.

[12] Σ. Luc. 181R; Σ. Ar. *Aves* 283a; Xen. *Symp.* 1.2 f.; Σ. Ar. *Pac.* 803; Σ. Pl. *Apol.* 20a; Suid. s. v. βομβοῦσι. On one occasion, when he was caught committing adultery, he paid a hefty three-talent fine to escape a lawsuit (Σ. Luc. 83R).

[13] Callias married twice. His second wife was the daughter of Isomachus and Chrysilla. In the course of this marriage, Callias began having an affair with his wife's daughter. The mother

Finally, in 421, the year Aristophanes won second prize at the Dionysia for his *Peace*, first prize was awarded to Eupolis for *The Flatterers*.[14] Surviving fragments and comments on the play suggest a symposiastic scene at Callias' house with Protagoras and Alcibiades present.[15] The drama shows that Callias had just recently come into his inheritance.[16] Ancient sources attest that Eupolis' objectives were to deride Callias for having squandered his patrimony, committed adultery, and paid damages for it, as well as for falling prey to flatterers at his dinner-parties, where the prizes consisted of cups, courtesans, and other low and slavish pleasures.[17] Athenaeus had read both Eupolis' *Flatterers* and Plato's *Protagoras*, and he comments on them:

> Plato's wonderful *Protagoras*, in addition to attacking numerous poets and Sophists, outdramatizes even Eupolis' *Flatterers* in its treatment of Callias' lifestyle.[18]

Plato's own portrayal of Callias and his house in the *Protagoras* supports the lurid impression evoked in the preceding citations. Hippias calls Callias' house the greatest and most prosperous in the city.[19] Before this, when Socrates and Hippocrates arrive at the front door, they are greeted by a eunuch porter. The presence of a eunuch servant in an Athenian household clearly indicates exorbitant luxury. Furthermore, when Socrates enters the house he notices Hipponicus' storeroom. Callias' frugal father once kept it full of *medimnoi* of grain, but now the son has converted it into guest-quarters to accommodate a surplus of Sophists. In it, Socrates finds Prodicus lazily abed, wrapped in numerous rugs and blankets and babbling Sophistic nonsense.

In the *Apology*, Socrates accuses Callias of spending more money on the Sophists than any other man.[20] Callias was especially close to Protagoras.[21] The two men are mentioned together in several passages in ancient literature.[22] Most significantly, in Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates urges Theodorus to defend Protagorean theory.[23] Theodorus demurs: 'Not I, Socrates, but rather Callias, the son of Hipponicus, is the guardian of those ideas.'

In the *Protagoras*, Protagoras claims to teach good counsel regarding household management, how best to govern one's estate. By locating the dialogue at the house of Callias, a man notorious for squandering his family's wealth and debasing his family's reputation, Plato undermines the validity of Protagoras' claim. Plato intimates that Protagoras cannot teach good counsel concerning household management, since his most devoted patron and disciple manages his estate so poorly.

Inside Callias' house, Plato describes a vivid picture of enthusiastic students engaged in Sophistic instruction. Among those Plato mentions as present are Critias, son of

eventually drove the daughter out; but then Callias drove the mother out as well. Later the daughter claimed she was pregnant with Callias' child, but at the Apaturia Callias denied the child. Only later was he reconciled with the mother, that is to say his former wife's daughter, and gained legitimacy for the boy (Andoc. 1.126 ff.).

[14] *Arg.* Ar. *Pac.* [15] Eupolis fr. 146a,b, 158; Diog. Laert. 9.50.

[16] Ath. 5.218b.

[17] *Σ*. Ar. *Aves* 283; Max. Tyr. 20.7; Philostr. *Vit. Soph.* 266.10.

[18] Ath. 11.506. Athenaeus' statement suggests a real nexus between the texts. No single citation serves as definitive evidence, but it is possible that Eupolis' comedy influenced Plato to set the scene of his *Protagoras* at Callias' house.

[19] Pl. *Prot.* 337d. [20] Pl. *Apol.* 20c.

[21] In fact, Callias would have been Protagoras' προστάτης, if Protagoras ever did reside at his house.

[22] Athen. 5.218b; Diog. Laert. 9.50; Plut. *Stoic. Repugn.* 1047d.

[23] Pl. *Theat.* 65a.

Callaeschrus; Charmides, son of Glaucon; Alcibiades, son of Cleinias and adopted son of Pericles; Eryximachus, son of Acumenus; Phaedrus, son of Pythocles; Andron, son of Androtion; Adeimantus, son of Leucolophides. All of these people were notorious for their immorality. Alcibiades betrayed Athens to Sparta during the Peloponnesian War and fought against his country. He was also charged with profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries and mutilation of the Hermae. Critias was a leader of the Thirty Tyrants and one of the most bloodthirsty of them.[24] Charmides also was one of the Thirty Tyrants.[25] Andron was arrested as a debtor to the state and imprisoned.[26] Adeimantus, son of Leucolophides, was considered by Aristophanes one of the most dangerous citizens in Athens.[27] He served as general in the débâcle at Aegospotamoi in 405.[28] In this campaign, he fell into captivity and was the only Athenian to be spared by Lysander, ostensibly because he had objected to the gruesome attack of Philocles in which the right hand of every enemy prisoner was cut off. Actually, Adeimantus was notorious for having bribed Lysander and advised him in battle against his countrymen.[29] Adeimantus too was charged with profanation of the mysteries.[30] Phaedrus was also charged with profanation of the mysteries,[31] and Eryximachus (with his father, Acumenus) was charged with mutilation of the Hermae.[32]

A remarkable contrast to this group is the collection of *personae* assembled in the *Phaedo*. In fact, of the nineteen *personae* mentioned as present at Callias' house in the Protagoras—the largest collection of *personae* in a Platonic dialogue—none is present in the cell at Socrates' bedside in the *Phaedo*, the second largest collection of *personae*.[33] The relationship of *personae* to Socrates in the *Phaedo* is intimate. The characters have come to share last moments with a dear friend and teacher. The Phaedonic group are disciples of Socrates and adherents of philosophy. Several of the historical people are known to have founded philosophical schools of their own, while others are well attested in extra-Platonic literature to be devoted friends of Socrates and adherents of philosophy.[34] Xenophon writes of these men:

> Crito was an intimate of Socrates; Hermogenes and Simmias and Cebes and Phaedonidas and the others, these men associated with him, not in order to become demagogues or win law-suits, but in order to become good and noble men, the sort that could be of good service to their

[24] Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.2, 15–16, 4.1–19; *Mem.* 1.2.12–38; Aristot. *Ath. Pol.* 38.1, 39.6; Diod. 14.4, 33.2.3; Plut. *Lys.* 15.5, *Alc.* 33; Lys. 22.124; Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 1.40.

[25] See n. 24. [26] Dem. 22.33, 56, 68; 24.125.

[27] Ar. *Ran.* 1513. [28] Plut. *Alc.* 36.

[29] Xen. *Hell.* 2.1.30, 32; Lys. 14.38; Dem. 19.191; Paus. 4.17.3, 10.9.11.

[30] Andoc. 1.16.

[31] Ibid. 1.15. 'The property of those condemned in the cases of the Mysteries and the Hermai was confiscated and sold by the official sellers of state property. . . . Records of sales were inscribed on stone and set up in the Eleusinion as permanent reminders of the punishment of the guilty. Some fragments of these stelai were published as *IG* i² 325–34, but since then other fragments have been found. All have been re-edited by W. Kendrick Prichett, *The Attic Stelai i* (in *Hesperia* 22, 1953) 255–99' (Macdowell, *Andokides on the Mysteries* [Oxford, 1960], p. 71). These stelae confirm that the *Φαῖδρος* mentioned in Andoc. 1.15 is in fact the Phaedrus who appears in the *Protagoras* and *Phaedrus*.

[32] Andoc. 1.35.

[33] The personae of the *Phaedo* include: Apollodorus of Phaleron; Critobolus, son of Crito; Crito of the deme Alopece; Hermogenes (probably Callias' brother); Epigenes, son of Antiphon; Antisthenes, son of Antisthenes; Ctesippus of the deme Paianias; Menexenus, son of Demophon; Phaedo; Simmias and Cebes, brothers from Thebes; Euclides of Megara; Terpsion of Megara; and Phaedonidas.

[34] See Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.48, 3.11.17, 3.12 f.; Suidas s.v. *Φαίδων*; Diog. Laert. 2.60, 105 f., 106 ; Cic. *Acad.* 2.42; Plut. *de Fratr. Am.* 18.

families and kin, to their friends and fellow citizens; and not one of them, neither in youth nor in adulthood, acted unjustly nor was guilty of wrongdoing.

Despite its hyperbole, Xenophon's praise firmly corroborates that the Phaedonic group are a distinct class of *personae* in the Platonic corpus. The Phaedonic and Protagorean groups stand in sharp contrast. Historically, the *personae* introduced in the *Protagoras* suffered severe punishments. For example, those charged with mutilation of the Hermae or profanation of the mysteries, if the arrest was made in Athens, were executed, their property confiscated and sold. Alternatively, if the offender had fled into exile, his property was confiscated and sold, and he suffered banishment. In the *Protagoras*, Protagoras wonders:

> the Athenians think ἀρετή is teachable in both private and public affairs. . . . In a matter where the death penalty or exile awaits their children if not instructed and cultivated in virtue—and not merely death, but confiscation of property and practically the entire subversion of their houses—do they not have them taught or take the utmost care of them?[35]

The crowd in the *Protagoras*, many of whom suffered either death, exile, or confiscation of property as a result of their antisocial conduct, undermines Protagoras' claim that the Athenians teach their children ἀρετή. Moreover, Protagoras himself claims to teach good counsel regarding political affairs, how one can be most effective in speaking and acting in the political arena.[36] The presence of the surrounding crowd whose political and civic histories involve violence, tyranny, sacrilege, and treachery undermines the validity of this claim too. Admittedly, when he first describes them, Plato does not portray all of the immoral Athenians as students of Protagoras; some are described as sitting at the feet of Hippias and Prodicus. Nevertheless, Plato's dramaturgical strategy of setting the dialogue at Callias' house and selecting certain notorious Athenians to be students of the Sophists there correlates Sophistic activity and the corruption of the Athenian people. The relationship need not be viewed as one of cause and effect, but rather as symptomatic of Athens' general moral depravity. If Protagoras is not portrayed as a direct influence upon them, their presence at Callias' house and as students of the other major Sophists also in attendance there undermines Protagoras' claim to teach good counsel regarding domestic affairs and political affairs.

Historians of philosophy typically do take an interest in the historical dimensions of Plato's writings—but only in a limited sense. Historians of philosophy typically attend to the place of Plato in the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy as it is commonly understood charts the transformation of a domain of thought, defined as philosophical, as it passes from philosophical mind to mind through time. So, in the case of Plato, he begins as a student of Socrates, but gradually transcends Socratic philosophy and develops his own theory of Forms; Aristotle becomes Plato's student and Aristotle subsequently breaks from Plato, and so on. This is one, legitimate approach to the history of philosophy; it delineates a domain of philosophical thought and maps its transformation from mind to mind through the *rest* of history, i.e. the growth and decline of cities and states, the struggles of classes, the metamorphosis of social behaviour, social categories, political ideologies, and language. In saying that historians of philosophy have paid attention to history only

[35] Pl. *Prot.* 325b.

[36] Ibid. [εὐβουλία] . . . *περὶ τῶν τῆς πόλεως, ὅπως τὰ τῆς πόλεως δυνατώτατος ἂν εἴη καὶ πράττειν καὶ λέγειν.*