

CLCS4009

READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY
OF ANCIENT LITERATURE



Lecture 12:

Greek Philosophy
and Literature:

Plato's

Symposium

Dr. Crystal Addey

Plato and Aristotle



Plato 429–347 B.C.E

- One of the most dazzling writers in the Western literary tradition.
- One of the most penetrating, wide-ranging and influential philosophers in the history of philosophy.
- An Athenian aristocrat – discusses contemporary intellectual and social issues.
- But he also raises profound questions and tackles them in a provocative and thoughtful way – massive influence on all subsequent philosophy.

Plato: Predecessors and Successors

- He was taught by (and massively influenced by) the elusive yet intriguing figure of Socrates.
- He taught Aristotle (see Lecture 11 Notes)
- The Academy
- Later philosophers who 'followed' and developed the thought of Plato:
- The 'Middle' Platonists: Plutarch (Greek); Apuleius (Latin); Alcinous etc.
- The Neoplatonists (2nd – 6th century AD): Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus etc.

Plato: Some central ideas

■ Theory of Forms

- Entities (called ‘forms’ or ‘ideas’) that are eternal, changeless and in some sense paradigmatic to the structure and character of our world.
- Abstract objects (not located in time or space)
- E.g. Goodness, beauty, equality, unity, sameness, difference, justice

■ Theory of Recollection

- The soul retains its ability to ‘remember’ or recollect what it once grasped of the forms (*Meno*, *Phaedrus*)
- The lives we lead are a result of choices made in a previous existence

Plato: some central ideas

- **The Immortality of the soul** (*Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*)
- **The tripartite nature of the soul** (reason, anger and desire)
- **Ethics: Knowledge *is* virtue:** no one ever does 'bad' knowingly – everyone thinks they are doing what is 'good' but differs to the extent that they really know what 'goodness' is.
- **Politics** (see the *Republic*, the *Laws* etc.)

Plato's Dialogues

- Almost all of Plato's works are written in 'dialogue' form (a striking exception: the *Apology*, Socrates' defence speech in court).
- Dialogue – familiar from 5th century Greek drama.
- But Plato not telling a story (as the dramatists do), his dialogues are not presented directly as a drama but often as a retrospective account of a discussion by a single speaker.
- Philosophical discussions between a small number of 'interlocutors' (many of whom can be identified with real historical figures)

Plato's Dialogues

- Setting: often begin with a depiction of the setting of the discussion—a visit to a prison, a wealthy man's house, a celebration over drinks, a religious festival, a visit to the gymnasium, a stroll outside the city's wall, a long walk on a hot day.
- They form vivid portraits of a social world, and are not purely intellectual exchanges between characterless and socially unmarked speaker.
- Socrates is often the dominant speaker in the dialogues

Plato's Dialogue and Myths

- Many of Plato's dialogue end, finish or culminate in a myth – but these are not the traditional myths of Greek culture, rather they are Plato's own creations.
- E.g. Plato's Myth of Er in the *Republic* – told by Socrates (a mythical story about what happens to humans after death; choosing one's own next life; reincarnation)
- Republic Book 6: dismisses the traditional myths (e.g. Homer) as unethical.

Why did Plato write dialogues?

- **Vividness and vivaciousness:** The use of character and conversation allows an author to enliven his work, to awaken the interest of his readership, and therefore to reach a wider audience. The enormous appeal of Plato's writings is in part a result of their dramatic composition.
- **Creating a sense of puzzlement?** (e.g. *Parmenides* – a baffling series of unresolved puzzles and apparent contradictions)
- **Philosophy as dialogue and conversation – philosophy in action? Philosophy as a living and unfinished subject?** The reader must contribute and become a philosopher.
- **Education / Pedagogy:** the dialogue form allows Plato's evident interest in pedagogical questions (how is it possible to learn? what is the best way to learn? from what sort of person can we learn? what sort of person is in a position to learn?) to be pursued not only in the content of his compositions but also in their form

What is a Symposium?

- Symposium (pl. Symposia): drinking parties, but also fundamental institutions for education, social definition, testing boundaries of acceptability and cultural norms.
- During the archaic period, they became a definitive part of Greek culture.
- A *symposiarch* or 'master of the symposium' was appointed to supervise the mixing of wine with water. *Civilised* drinking lies at the heart of the symposium.

What is a Symposium?

“Since it has been resolved, then,” said Eryximachus, “that we are to drink only so much as each desires, with no constraint on any, I next propose that the flute-girl who came in just now be dismissed: let her pipe to herself or, if she likes, to the women-folk within, but let us seek our entertainment today in conversation. I am ready, if you so desire, to suggest what sort of discussion it should be.”

Plato, *Symposium*, 176e

Plato's Symposium

- A series of speeches by men attending the symposium on the nature of love:
- Central question: what is love?
- Each man must deliver an enconium (a speech in praise of) on love (Eros).
- Setting: the tragedian (the tragic poet) Agathon's house.

Plato's *Symposium*: Characters

- Phaedrus (speech begins 178a): familiar from *Phaedrus* and other dialogues.
- Pausanius (180c): the legal expert.
- Eryximachus (186a): a physician / doctor.
- Aristophanes (189c): he at first skips his turn because of a bout of hiccups. The eminent comic playwright has become a focus of subsequent scholarly debate. His contribution has been seen as mere comic relief, and sometimes as satire: the creation myth he puts forward may be read as poking fun at the numerous 'aetiological' myths of origin in Greek mythology and culture.
- Agathon (195a): his speech may be regarded as self-consciously poetic, gently mocked by Socrates.
- Socrates (speech begins 201d): relates teachings told him by Diotima of Mantinea
- Alcibiades (214e): a popular Athenian citizen. Entering upon the scene late, he pays tribute to Socrates.



Questions?

Reading for next week

- For next week, please read the following:
- 1/ Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 1
- 2/ Workshop Handout on Thucydides:
History Speaks: The Speeches of Thucydides
- Please read the Workshop Handout, make some notes in response to the questions on the Workshop Handout (please be prepared to contribute to the discussion in class) and print out and bring the Handout to the sessions on Thursday.