

Plato's Designed Narratives: Contemporary Platonic Scholarship

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Abstract

Plato is one of the greatest philosophers in the western philosophical tradition and he is the first one whose complete works are still available to us. We have very little data on his life and literary activity. As a result, many conflicting theories have been developed by scholars of various times regarding the interpretation of Plato's dialogues and their chronology to the extent it bears on that interpretation. This paper delves into one aspect of Platonic scholarship that studies the literariness in Plato's dialogues, taking illustrations from two of his works. It argues how Platonic scholarship is slowly paying attention to his rhetoric and poetry while studying his comments on the same. This paper aims at studying the platonic writings of Socrates' speeches from the current critical perspective of western scholars and presents sample dialogues. Stephen Halliwell, Annie Mary Bowery, Griswold and Kauffman are some of the leading Plato scholars who view these philosophic writings as dramatic dialogues that are descriptive.

Keywords: Plato, dialogues, designed narratives, Griswold, Halliwell

Introduction

Plato was born around 427 BCE and died around 347 in Athens. He was the ancient Greek philosopher and the most important student of Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), teacher of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and founder of the Academy, best known as the author of philosophical works of unparalleled influence. Plato's works are traditionally arranged in a manner deriving from Thrasyllus of Alexandria (flourished 1st century CE): 36 works (counting the *Letters* as one) divided into nine groups of four. Unfortunately, the order of composition of Plato's works cannot be known. Conjecture regarding chronology has been based on two kinds of consideration: perceived development in content and "stylometry," or the study of special features of prose style, now executed with the aid of computers. Considering these aspects, scholars have arrived at grouping of works as early, middle, and late dialogues. These groups can also be thought of as the Socratic works, the literary masterpieces, and the technical studies

(Britannica). Current scholarship on Plato has attempted to re-read this classification and has come to the conclusion that there is actually no development of philosophical constructs that can be historicized. “Howland in “Re-Reading Plato” was the first to bring out and criticize the assumptions underlying the chronology of composition... concerning the development of Plato’s thought.” Later this perspective was taken up by Kenneth Dorter, Charles Kahn and Charles Griswold (Zuckert 3).

Plato did not write treatises, although commentators following Aristotle have tended to present him and his thought as if he had. Because Plato himself does not speak in the dialogues, we discover what Plato thinks – or at least what he wants to show his readers – in his selection of the characters, the setting, and the topic to be discussed by these individuals at that time and place, as well as the outcome or effects of the conversation. Socrates is usually but not always the philosopher guiding the conversation. Because Socrates is not the only philosopher Plato depicts – indeed, in some dialogues (like the *Timaeus* and *Sophist*), Socrates mostly sits and listens to another, possibly superior philosopher presents his arguments – we cannot assume that Socrates speaks for Plato. (Zuckert 5)

Scholars interpret Plato’s works viewing him as a genius who is a thinker and a writer. It is claimed that Plato is the only major philosopher who is also a supreme literary artist. His writings are complex inviting many aspects of interpretation. Plato is seen as “the first author to offer a systematic definition of the goals and methods of philosophy” and also conceived to be “a social reformer and an educator, whose conception of philosophy” has perhaps “entailed a radical transformation of the moral and intellectual culture of his own time and place” and therefore “a perceptive interpretation of Plato’s dialogues calls for attention to his revolutionary cultural enterprise as well as to the literary and philosophical dimensions of his work” (Charles H. Kahn Preface xiii). Currently scholars are engaged in giving more attention to this unique dimension of Plato’s works. Kahn argues that Plato is the only Socratic writer to turn the “popular genre” of dramatic dialogues into a “major art form, in rivalry with the great works of fifth century Attic drama.” Plato used the dialogue form as a device for presenting a “full-scale philosophical world view.” The descriptive descriptions in front of each dialogue is “indirect, ingressive, and incomplete.” Kahn says further:

Since the dialogues are so diverse, both in form and in content, even great scholars have been tempted to suppose that Plato changed his mind as often as he changes the literary presentation of his thought. And the traditional division of the dialogues into early, middle, and late encourages the belief that we can trace Plato’s philosophical development through these successive phases. However, this developmental approach systematically underestimates Plato’s cunning as an

author...It also assumes that what Socrates says is also what Plato thinks. (Preface xiv)

Stephen Halliwell, the British classicist, calls Plato's *Theaetetus* as the most intriguingly designed narrative. The opening part of the dialogue is framed by a conversation between Euclides and Terpsion. Euclides recounts to his friend about his encounter with the Athenian Theaetetus, who had been seriously wounded in battle against the Corinthians and was being taken home to his native city. Euclides remembers the philosophical discussion Theaetetus had with Socrates. He says that he has written it down exactly as it took place – like a dramatic dialogue. He also says that it is an accurate account as he has shown it to Socrates himself has got it corrected once or twice. Interestingly the ending part of the dialogue does not complete this framework. It stands unfinished. Hence the dialogue can't be called a play. Plato's *Theaetetus* comprises a conversation between characters who then listen to the recital of a reconstructed version of a philosophical discussion. As in *Symposium*, this style shows literary intricacy, self-consciousness and a compositional structure. It employs a narrative strategy, a perspective with psychological expressiveness and emotional resonance. Euclides vividly remembers the intellectual discussion between Socrates and Theaetetus. This is a literary layer that Plato has brought in to lend an authenticity (Halliwell 16).

Theaetetus was an Athenian mathematician who had a significant influence on the development of Greek geometry. He was a disciple of Socrates. Plato made Theaetetus the chief subject of two dialogues—*Theaetētōs* (*Theaetetus*) and *Sophistēs* (*Sophist*)—the former being the major source of information about Theaetetus' life, including his death in a battle between Athens and Corinth in 369 BCE. Theaetetus made important contributions to the mathematics that Euclid eventually collected and systematized in his *Elements*. A key area of Theaetetus's work was on incommensurables that correspond to irrational numbers in modern mathematics, in which he extended the work of Theodorus by devising the basic classification of incommensurable magnitudes into different types that is found in Book X of the *Elements*. He also discovered methods of inscribing in a sphere the five Platonic solids (tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron, and icosahedron), the subject of Book XII of the *Elements*. (Britannica) Plato constructs the lives of these scholars of his period in a literary style drawing our attention to their works too. *Theaetetus* opens in the following spectacular manner:

Euclid. Have you only just arrived from the country, Terpsion?

Terpsion. No, I came some time ago: and I have been in the Agora looking for you and wondering that I could not find you.

Euclid. But I was not in the city.

Terpsion. Where then?

Euclid. As I was going down to the harbour, I met Theaetetus—he was being carried up to Athens from the army at Corinth.

Terpsion. Was he alive or dead?

Euclid. He was scarcely alive, for he has been badly wounded; but he was suffering even more from the sickness which has broken out in the army.

Terpsion. The dysentery, you mean?

Euclid. Yes.

Terpsion. Alas! What a loss he will be! (Plato *Theaetetus*)

Blondell claims that *Theaetetus* “stands out among Plato’s dialogues for its blurring of the boundaries” and “is self-consciously “Socratic” in the elenctic manner,” making use of “rich scene-setting and characterization, substantial argumentation, and eloquent Socratic speech-making” and “recently, *Theaetetus* has been seen as anomalous among the later dialogues, prompted perhaps by a desire to pay homage to the eponymous interlocutor after his death.” (Blondell 251).

Scholars like Annie Mary Bowery argue that Plato uses narrative devices in a literary style in his *Symposium*. The following is the informal opening scene of *Symposium*:

Concerning the things about which you ask to be informed I believe that I am not ill-prepared with an answer. For the day before yesterday I was coming from my own home at Phalerum to the city, and one of my acquaintance, who had caught a sight of me from behind, hind, out playfully in the distance, said: ‘Apollodorus, O thou Phalerian man, halt!’ So I did as I was bid; and then he said, ‘I was looking for you, Apollodorus, only just now, that I might ask you about the speeches in praise of love, which were delivered by Socrates, Alcibiades, and others, at Agathon's supper. Phoenix, the son of Philip, told another person who told me of them; his narrative was very indistinct, but he said that you knew, and I wish that you would give me an account of them. Who, if not you, should be the reporter of the words of your friend? And first tell me,’ he said, ‘were you present at this meeting?’

‘Your informant, Glaucon,’ I said, ‘must have been very indistinct indeed, if you imagine that the occasion was recent; or that I could have been of the party.’

‘Why, yes,’ he replied, ‘I thought so.’

‘Impossible,’ I said. ‘Are you ignorant that for many years Agathon has not resided at Athens; and not three have elapsed since I became acquainted with Socrates and have made it my daily business to know all that he says and does. There was a time when I was running about the world, fancying myself to be well

employed, but I was really a most wretched thing, no better than you are now. I thought that I ought to do anything rather than be a philosopher’.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘jesting apart, tell me when the meeting occurred.’

‘In our boyhood,’ I replied, ‘when Agathon won the prize with his first tragedy, on the day after that on which he and his chorus offered the sacrifice of victory.’

‘Then it must have been a long while ago,’ he said; ‘and who told you - did Socrates?’ (Plato *Symposium*)

Plato takes great efforts to build a logically accurate discussion to bring Socrates into the dialogic framework. The narrator here is Apollodorus, who repeats to his companion the dialogue which he had heard from Aristodemus and had already once narrated to Glaucon. The scene is realistic and natural moving like a Greek realistic play fitting the content within a certain time framework. The plot is set in a rigid manner - Apollodorus is created as a person who knew Socrates thoroughly, so that when he quotes from memory the speeches of Socrates, it would be convincing to the readers and the students at his (Plato’s) Academy. Apollodorus is conceived as a rigorous critic of people except Socrates and therefore he is expected to remember everything that was spoken by Socrates. Apollodorus claims to quote the exact words of Aristodemus who says Socrates replied in Homeric fashion. Apollodorus and Aristodemus build the character of Socrates as a man lost in deep thought:

Socrates dropped behind in a fit of abstraction, and desired Aristodemus, who was waiting, to go on before him. When he reached the house of Agathon he found the doors wide open, and a comical thing happened. A servant coming out met him and led him at once into the banqueting-hall in which the guests were reclining, for the banquet was about to begin. ‘Welcome, Aristodemus,’ said Agathon, as soon as he appeared – ‘you are just in time to sup with us; if you come on any other matter put it off, and make one of us, as I was looking for you yesterday and meant to have asked you, if I could have found you. But what have you done with Socrates?’

I turned round, but Socrates was nowhere to be seen; and I had to explain that he had been with me a moment before, and that I came by his invitation to the supper.

‘You were quite right in coming,’ said Agathon; ‘but where is he himself?’

He was behind me just now, as I entered, he said, and I cannot think what has become of him. (Plato *Symposium*)

Socrates had retired himself into the portico of the neighbouring house as something hold him back from entering Agathon's house where a banquet was going on celebrating his victory. Earlier in the conversation he and Aristodemus discuss how Socrates refused to go to the feast the previous day and how he has changed his mind now and has dressed up for the occasion and asks Aristodemus if he would go along without an invitation. They discuss the proverb that says, "To the feasts of inferior men the good unbidden go." Socrates says he will change this as taking support from Homer: "To the feasts of the good, the good unbidden go." (Plato *Symposium*)

Socrates feels that Homer outrages the original proverb. "Two go together," says Socrates quoting from Homer. When one enters the enemy's camp, a companion helps, hints Socrates. Homer constructs Agamemnon as a great warrior. He makes Menelaus as a weak warrior. Menelaus comes to the feast of Agamemnon unbidden. Aristodemus feels like Menelaus attending a feast unbidden. Socrates says when two people go together, such situations might become easier to handle.

Very carefully Socrates' character as a philosopher has been conceived by Plato as a literary artist might do. "He has a way of stopping anywhere and losing himself without any reason" (Plato *Symposium*). When the feast is almost half over, Socrates enters. Agathon wants to sit next to him wanting to know what he has been thinking sitting in the portico. The group of men chooses to have a conversation instead of drinking, and the discussion begins. With this elaborate scenic background established the discussion on the idea of love begins. To make that very realistic once again Apollodorus says that Aristodemus does not remember everything that was said by Socrates on that day. Phaedrus claims that love is a mighty god. He quotes Hesiod's *Theogony* : "First chaos came, and then broad-bosomed earth, the ever-lasting seat of all that is, and Love" (Plato *Symposium*).

"Sokrates eschews normal human emotions, reserving the warmth of his feelings primarily for philosophy. This makes him difficult for ordinary people to empathize with, thus depriving mimetic pedagogy of its emotional foundation" says Blondell (107). Plato creates the character of Socrates as "uniquely memorable not only by means of his distinctive intellectual style, but also through various external behaviors." These peculiarities are designed "to serve as outward tokens of Sokrates' individuality, both encourage emotional identification and make him quite easily imitable in a superficial or slavish fashion" which is "exemplified" by the use of characters like "Apollodoros and Aristodemos, who parrot Sokrates' words and copy such idiosyncrasies as his shoelessness." Plato constructs contrasts with these admirers who try "to imitate Sokrates" bringing a comic effect as a differentiation Sokrates is portrayed as a man of

“extraordinary intellect and imagination.” Plato presents the “actual response to the historical Sokrates. Fifth-century comedy already mocked the way students imitated Sokrates’ appearance and mannerisms, and admirers imitated his personal behavior in his lifetime and for centuries afterwards” (Blondell 108).

Plato works like a playwright and the Platonic dialogues have no character called Plato in the discourses. “Plato” is mentioned twice in the entire corpus, once as being absent and once as being present (Grisworld 84). The dialogues are fictional in character. They do not read like technical and objective reports of discussions. Some dialogues could not have taken place even when the interlocutors were historical figures. For example, at the Phaedrus’ ostensible dramatic date the real Phaedrus was not in Athens. Not only are many of the characters entirely fictional, there is clear evidence that even “Socrates” is a fictionalized version of the historical character. Socrates of Plato’s dialogues is presented as being a super-human character. This is evident from Alcibiades’ description of him in the *Symposium* as well as from a number of subtle fictions. Plato has Socrates narrate the entirety of the *Republic* from memory fluently. The lengthy Protagoras is narrated in its entirety by Socrates who is carefully compared to Achilles, though the comparison is indirect (Grisworld 85).

Kahn says that “Plato’s extraordinary success in recreating the dramatic atmosphere of the previous age, the intellectual milieu of the late fifth century in which Socrates confronts the sophists and their pupils.” Plato has created an “art world” all the while working out his philosophy and the men about whom he was writing were “probably all dead when Plato wrote.” For example, “Protagoras ... must have died when Plato was a child, and the dialogue named after him is situated before Plato’s birth.” Plato reflected on ideas that were discussed in his society and “the intellectual world to which Plato’s own work belongs is defined not by the characters in his dialogues but by the thought and writing of his contemporaries and rivals, such as the rhetorician Isocrates and the various followers of Socrates.” (Kahn 2)

Alcibiades promotes the character of Platonic Socrates in the dialogue *Protagoras*:

Now if Protagoras will make a similar admission, and confess that he is inferior to Socrates in argumentative skill, that is enough for Socrates; but if he claims a superiority in argument as well, let him ask and answer-not, when a question is asked, slipping away from the point, and instead of answering, making a speech at such length that most of his hearers forget the question at issue (not that Socrates is likely to forget-I will be bound for that, although he may pretend in fun that he has a bad memory). And Socrates appears to me to be more in the right than Protagoras; that is my view, and every man ought to say what he thinks. (Plato *Protagoras*)

Platonic dialogues show a “discussion between Socrates and different interlocutors,” tracing his “intellectual and philosophical journey.” Usually the “first person account is not the account of the writer Plato, but of one of his characters” and “Socrates is both narrator of the account and protagonist in the story.” The *Protagoras* begins with the dramatic mode with the meeting of Socrates and an anonymous friend and continues with “Socrates’s account of his meeting with Protagoras” (Collobert VIII).

Socrates conducts himself with dignity and self-control before his death as per Plato’s narration in *The Apology*. The relation between the historical Socrates and the Platonic Socrates is the source of more detailed research in this field of study. The Socrates of Plato’s dialogues is fictionalized, made to present arguments with multiple levels of complexity and meaning—as a performance. Most of the dialogues are linked to each other by internal references. Examples are: the *Apology–Crito–Phaedo*, and *Theaetetus–Euthyphro–Sophist–Statesman* sequences. Plato thus creates an extended fictional history of the life of Socrates and to that extent lends the corpus a sense of fictional wholeness (Grisworld 86).

“Plato’s success as a dramatist is so great that he has often been mistaken for an historian. Hence the history of philosophy reports Socrates’ thought on the strength of Plato’s portrayal in the dialogues” (Kahn 3). Current Platonic scholarship also continues to research into the dramatic situations Plato creates in the dialogues, called the Platonic ironies. Plato refuses to present ideas as his own. He forces the reader to make up his mind about adopting them. This makes Plato elusive. We do not arrive at any conclusion about his personality. Scholars use his letters as explanations for certain arguments in the dialogues. The texts are open to different kinds of interpretations as even Socrates slowly recedes into the background and no more leads the central arguments in these dialogues. Different schools of philosophers interpreted him according to their doctrines. From the nineteenth century scholars have spent much energy on the chronology of the dialogues, including electronic analysis of stylistic traits. Accordingly, the earlier dialogues are strengthened by the views of Socrates and the later dialogues discuss the works of other philosophers (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 1155).

There is a “dazzling interplay of unity and multiplicity” which “is generated in part by a series of interlocking and overlapping dualities” in the dramatic dialogues that presents “a tension between “philosophical” content and “literary” form.” A scholar like “Cornford omitted certain dramatic elements from his translations of Plato, whereas Livingstone printed dialectical passages of *Phaedo* in smaller type so that they can be either read or omitted” (Blondell 1).

The dialogues of Plato are “from a literary point of view, the account of a meeting and a discussion between philosophical and non-philosophical characters” though they do not belong to any defined genre and Aristotle says that they are impossible to be classified (Collobert I). “In

antiquity there were several attempts to classify the dialogues, which according to Diogenes Laertius were essentially based on two major categories: narration and drama” and efforts are taken even now by scholars to classify the dialogues now, and Collobert in her extensive study identifies six distinct modes in the dialogues “keeping to the descriptive dimension of these modes” as “the plain diegetic mode, the wholly imitative mode, the mixed mode (the first two modes used in alternation), two composite modes (the diegetico-mimetic mode and the mimetico-diegetic), and the mode created by the mixing of these two composites.” Collobert argues that “Plato follows the prescriptions of Socrates for narrative accounts, because he primarily uses the diegetico-mimetic mode and therefore a good man narrator” (Collobert VI). Plato projects Socrates as the ideal man against whose characters all the others are contrasted – the meeting place of the philosopher and the layman. Further, drawing support from Stephen Halliwell who observes that in establishing his typology Socrates identifies the narrator with the poet, Collobert argues:

We can identify three major categories of narrators:

- (1) The narrator who is the author: (a) an account in the first person, and (b) in the third person (there is no dialogue exemplifying this type of narrator);
- (2) The primary narrator (distinct from the author): (2.1) he is a character in the story, (a) an account in the first person and (b) in the third person: (b’) he has witnessed the events he recounts, or (b’’) he has not witnessed them, (2.2) he is outside of the story: an account in the third person;
- (3) The secondary (internal) narrator who tells a story which he has or has not authored (for example, Socrates or Protagoras). (Collobert VII)

Accordingly, *Theaetetus* has the third type of narrative style as the internal narrators Euclid and Terpsion are launching the dialogue. Similarly, *Symposium* too has a narration setting the background scene by internal characters to open the philosophical discussion – Glaucon and Apollodorus, and mostly uses third person narrative. “The account in the third person (Parmenides, Phaedo, Symposium) offers two possible narrator statuses, which Plato exploited: (1) a character not in the story, and (2) a character in the story” (Collobert IX). The non-philosophers build the personality of Socrates just like how Aristophanes caricatured the character of Socrates in an uncomplimentary manner. It is as if Plato is depicting a counter picture of the philosopher through various other characters.

Zuckert says Plato not only “presented various philosophers in conversation with non-philosophers,” but he gave the philosophers and their “interlocutors specific individual identities,

backgrounds, and views.” Therefore, his philosophical writings are personal and not abstract in the usual manner of such writings. “Some of these individuals are known historical figures; others are not.” Thereby “philosophy is an activity undertaken by a variety of different embodied human beings, coming from different cities and schools, having different views and concerns, talking in different ways to non-philosophers” (Zuckert 1-2).

Conclusion

We have to keep in mind that Plato's Socrates does not know that he is speaking in the context of a written dialogue. There is general agreement that Plato perfected a new form of discourse. The Platonic dialogue is an innovative type of rhetoric. Plato's remarkable philosophical rhetoric incorporates elements of poetry. His dialogues have formal features in common with tragedy and comedy - the use of authorial irony, the importance of plot, setting, the role of individual character and the interplay between dramatis personae. His works narrate myths, and use literary devices like imagery, simile, allegory, and snatches of meter and rhyme. In the *Republic*, Socrates calls himself a myth teller (Eric Brown). These are imaginary conversations, imitations of certain kinds of philosophical conversations. The literary dimension of Plato's writings has created a new genre of philosophical literature. Plato's philosophy is embodied in the dialogue form of writing he brought to perfection.

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