

## BOOK REVIEW

*The City and the Stage: Performance, Genre, and Gender in Plato's Laws*. By MARCUS FOLCH. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 386. Hardback, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-190-26617-2.

Plato's critical treatment of *mousikê* in the *Republic* is well known: Books 2 and 3 highlight the shortcomings of traditional *mousikê* in the sphere of moral education, while stressing the transformative power of *mousikê* with regard to the soul; Book 10 presents the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, with the poets ultimately being banished from Kallipolis. Scholars have long been interested in Plato's treatment of various literary genres, his worries about the political and moral effects of mimetic art and theatrical performance, his radical views on the social and political role of women and the ways in which he critiques Athenian democratic norms and practices. Against the relatively familiar backdrop of the *Republic*, Folch grapples with such issues in *The City and the Stage* as he offers an engaging assessment of the elaborate treatment of *mousikê* in the *Laws*, Plato's lengthy and much less studied final work.

Part One, "Performance," contains two chapters that focus on the account of the soul in the early books of the *Laws* and the ways in which performative activities such as communal singing and dancing are presented as a means of shaping the soul of the citizen, fostering both individual virtue and identification with the *polis*. Folch demonstrates that there is an emphasis on using *mousikê* to bring souls into an internal state of harmony (the personal) as well as to bring individuals into collective harmony (the political). The second chapter offers an engaging exploration of the ways in which the second-best city, Magnesia, is structured around a rich and elaborate, and strictly hierarchical, performance culture.

Part Two, "Genre," contains two chapters that focus on the roles played by various kinds of poetic and performative genre in the development of virtue. Folch outlines how Plato presents hymn and encomium in particular positively, while declaring comedy and iambic poetry, on the other hand, to be subversive. The key conceit underpinning Plato's preoccupation with genre is the notion that the choice of manner in which people express themselves not only reflects but also influences the nature of a society's morality and politics for better or

worse, and so it must be policed carefully. The exercise of critical judgement on performative acts, who is allowed to exercise that authority and on what basis, is also a key concern: Plato condemns the democratic practice in which each and every observer is entitled to use his or her own pleasure as the criterion of taste and insists that there is a vital role for the knowledgeable critic. These two chapters raise a number of fascinating issues regarding performative and critical culture, politics and the arts, freedom and authority, and Folch helpfully orientates his discussion not only with the Platonic corpus but also with the wider cultural context of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Part Three, "Gender," focuses on the role of women in Magnesia and seeks to intervene in the scholarly debate concerning Plato's feminist credentials. Folch argues that, although not as radical or progressive as what we find in the *Republic*, there remains a relatively positive picture in so far as women have important performative and critical roles to play in the functioning of the city. In the *Laws* Plato offers a model in which women, alongside men, take part in the full range of *mousikê* and are thus involved as genuinely active participants in the essential aspects of moral and political life in the second-best city. The argument is fairly convincing: the performative and political opportunities offered to women in Magnesia, though not equal to those available to men and not of the level depicted in the *Republic*, are certainly greater than in contemporary Athenian culture.

There is much to commend in this book. A particular highlight is the discussion of continuities and developments in Plato's thinking between the *Laws* and the earlier *Republic*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a different analysis of *mousikê* and the role of women emerges in the context of the second-best city, Magnesia, but there is a significant degree of thematic overlap, and the complexities of Plato's ongoing critical engagement with contemporary Athenian poetic and political concerns become more and more apparent as the book progresses. There are some grumbles: in particular, there are a significant number of typos and syntactical infelicities that ought to have been tidied up, and the use of endnotes rather than footnotes also means a lot of flipping back and forward. Those minor irritations aside, *The City and the Stage* is an engaging and informative study of a very interesting aspect of Plato's *Laws*, and Folch does well in selling the case for why more scholars should direct their attention to this neglected and much-maligned work.

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