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Book Reviews

James A. Arieti. *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991. Cloth, \$46.25. Paper, \$16.95.

Doctrinal and nondramatic interpretation has dominated Plato studies, perhaps, since the generation of Speusippus. Since Schleiermacher, however, and especially in this century, it has been challenged with increasing frequency by those who doubt that there is any grand system of metaphysical, epistemological, moral, or political doctrines to be found in the dialogues and those who believe that dramatic or dialogical elements are essential to any valid interpretation of the dialogues. Thus Professor Arieti's experiment in strictly dramatic interpretation deserves attention by historians of philosophy.

The general approach is developed in his opening chapter, "Reading the Dialogues." Taking the development of Greek literature into consideration, Arieti argues that Plato's dialogues are actually less like the poetic nature-speculations of the Presocratics or the demonstrative post-Platonic expository prose essays than they are like tragedy and comedy, and especially the Old Comedy of Aristophanes (3). Thus, instead of ignoring the dramatic aspects of the dialogues or subordinating them to the arguments, as most scholars do, we should read Plato as we do Sophocles or Shakespeare and "see the arguments as subordinate to the drama" (11, cp. 5). The thesis of the book, as he puts it later, is "that Plato did not intend for us to read his dialogues as theses on philosophy, that he wrote them as prose comedies and would have expected his audience to react to them as such" (151).

This leads Arieti to unfamiliar and revisionist interpretations. The *Timaeus*, for example, which scholars usually treat as Plato's cosmology and physical theory, Arieti reads as "a parody of [Pythagorean] scientific gobbledygook" (27). Instead of the conventional theory that the *Cratylus* is Plato's theory of language, Arieti finds "Socrates showing us, by his endless crazy etymologizing, the silly lengths to which philosophers go when they pursue a line of reasoning . . . without any regard for common-sense or truth" (70). The *Symposium*, rather than the serious examination of love it is ordinarily taken to be, *locus classicus* for the Platonic Idea of love, is "an intellectual fraternity party" (99), "a comedy about people creating and perpetuating nonsense about things that are in truth beyond mortal grasp" (107). And overall Arieti undermines the usual picture of Socrates as the intellectual hero and ideal philosopher, describing his conduct as rude, nasty, savage, and blunt (89), bullheaded, tricky, and abusive (90), audacious (97), and abrasive (104).

Arieti's dramatic approach yields important observations about historical and fictional characters, allusions to historical events, myths, legends, anomalous events, and the reactions of Plato's contemporary audience that these would have engendered.

That audience, for example, knowing the actual lives of all the participants, would have been struck by the dramatic irony of the *Laches*, in which failed sons of famous fathers seek advice about raising their own sons from two generals involved in the Athenian failure in Sicily and a man who was later executed for corrupting the youth (55f.). With his emphasis on comedy, Arieti's interpretations are especially good on Plato's humor, helping us to recover parody, jokes, puns, satire, and farce from overly serious interpretations and translations.

However, the experiment of a purely dramatic, indeed comedic, interpretation swings too far away from the philosophic. To interpret the arguments as subordinate to dramatic elements and to emphasize comic elements is appropriate, but sometimes it seems that serious philosophic ideas and arguments are ignored. Arieti writes, for example, that Socrates' arguments in the *Gorgias* are not "entirely sensible or practical for this world" (80) and criticizes Socrates for being "wholly indifferent to reality" (90), a "failure as a teacher of virtue" (85), and Alcibiades is identified as "Socrates' great failure" (110, 117). But statements like these simply beg serious philosophic questions that are explicitly addressed in the dialogues. Is "this world" the one Socrates is really interested in? What is "reality"? Was Socrates a "teacher of virtue"? And if he was, does the misbehavior of a student make him a "failure"?

Moreover, Arieti asserts as a general principle that "in dialogues where various extreme positions are rejected, Plato is, I think, suggesting that the answer lies somewhere in between" (60; cp. 80, 92). And he gradually insinuates, without ever arguing, that the dialogues are not serious philosophy at all, but rather advertisements for the Academy aimed at potential students and their fathers (59, 81, 90, 110, 129, 163).

Nevertheless, Arieti's book is an important contribution to the contemporary movement toward a less dogmatic and more dramatic Plato interpretation. He is surely correct that interpreters should not struggle "to show by some tangled ingenuity that the argument actually makes sense or could have made sense," but rather should ask "a different question: why did Plato have Socrates or another character make this statement?" (5). Subordinating argument to drama helps us recognize much of the humor and restore the balance between seriousness and play or comedy. But the fundamental problem for Plato interpreters now is to find modes of analysis adequate to the dynamic unities of philosophy and drama that are Plato's dialogues.

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Edward C. Halper. *One and Many in Aristotle's Metaphysics: The Central Books*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1990. Pp. xxxix + 309. Cloth, \$49.50.

This book is the first part of a three-part study of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. It consists of a detailed analysis of most of the arguments in Books ZHΘ of that work along with a brief treatment of Book E. There is a useful analytic table of contents and a discursive glossary explaining many of the author's translations of key terms. The work concludes with a lengthy chapter which draws together the results of the previous analysis. There