

Articles

Plato and Aristophanes: Poets of Hope

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1. Introduction: Readers of Riddles

In the final scene of Plato's *Symposium*, Aristodemus opens a sleepy eye just in time to hear "Socrates driving [Aristophanes and Agathon] to the admission that the same man could have the knowledge required for writing comedy and tragedy—that the fully skilled tragedian could be a comedian as well."¹ In the twilight between waking and sleeping, slipping into the early dawn following a night of hard drinking and even harder talking, Aristodemus hears a Socratic riddle, delivered like an oracle from the lips of a man drunk with love or inspired by a god. Socrates speaks in riddles to the sweet but uncomprehending tragic poet, Agathon, and the comic poet, Aristophanes, while Plato's readers listen in, as much participants in the night's mysteries as are the characters in the dialogue.

Whether tragedies, comedies, or Plato's Socratic dialogues,² plays, like oracles, invite their audiences to be readers of riddles, and, like seekers of guidance at Delphi, partners in the paths to their own destinies. One is not given the answer, firm and comforting or even demanding and coercive, in Aristophanes's work or in Plato's. The oracle at Delphi rarely hands out unambiguous advice. Thinking of plays and dialogues as awakening human consciousness, as setting into motion the creativity and introspection of the present, these productively ambiguous forms hold up mirrors to their audiences. One could take the reflections they show as straightforward affirmations of "what is" in our human-made cultural lives. But, mirrors can

¹ Plato, *Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 223d4-6.

² In the *Poetics*, Aristotle mentions the Socratic dialogues when he is discussing plays as belonging in their own category. Yet, he still puts them into the discussion of the poets-makers. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. W. Hamilton Frye (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946), 1447b.

also reflect the light in ways hitherto unexamined and so can reflect to us what could be (or, “what Is,” if we consider the phrase from a Platonic perspective).³

In *Have You Been to Delphi?* Roger Lipsey suggests that when one went to the god at Delphi for guidance, one was challenged to “complet[e] the oracle.”⁴ That is, one was turned inward, challenged to search beyond oneself through self-knowledge. The oracle was a puzzle to awaken the critical and creative powers of the petitioner,⁵ as Socrates’s were after Chareophon’s legendary visit to the oracle. While I think both Plato and Aristophanes had intentions and were purposeful in their work, I experience their work as in a sense oracular. Plays and dialogues offer a challenge and a puzzle, awakening my critical and creative powers as a reader.⁶ When I consider them side by

³Aristotle makes a similar distinction when he discusses the difference between historians and poets. The distinction is not between the use of prose or verse but “that one tells what happened and the other what might happen” (1451b). Part of the puzzle of the dialogues, though, is about what “is” means. Plato deals with the “is” of human contingencies, but seems also to point to the “Is” of the ordering of the cosmos as a pattern for the ordering of our souls and politics. The second “Is” is something he seems hopeful that we will find in ourselves, and it also is the motivation for the search.

⁴ Roger Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi? Tales of the Ancient Oracle for Modern Minds* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 29.

⁵ I hesitate even to separate those two ideas. It seems to me a modern distinction.

⁶ The different understandings of Aristophanes’s intentions are, in the main, outside the scope of this article. I tend to agree with A. M. Bowie, who contends that we can never know with certainty what the comic poet intended but that trying to understand as much of the cultural context in which the plays were composed, performed, and received—“the ‘grammar’ of Greek culture”—can open avenues for understanding; see A. M. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual, and Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 5. Yet, Old Comedy was known for its political and social commentary; G. E. M. de Ste. Croix argues in his *Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London: Duckworth, 1972), p. xxix, that we can know Aristophanes’s intentions. Malcolm Heath gives an overview of the debate in his *Political Commentary in Aristophanes, Hypomnemata* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987). Using Plato as his primary ancient source, Heath argues that Socrates’s reference to Aristophanes as he defends himself against what he calls the older accusers (*Apology* 18-19) is inconclusive. De Ste. Croix and Dover take Socrates’s comments as evidence of Aristophanes’s hostile intent, while Heath argues that Plato could just as well have been commenting on audience misunderstanding (Heath, *Political Commentary in Aristophanes, Hypomnemata*, pp. 9-10). Heath takes the *Symposium* as better evidence that Plato did not consider Aristophanes to be hostile either to Socrates or to philosophy. Heath can find no evidence outside of the play that Aristophanes intended to harm Socrates (*ibid.*, pp. 11-12) and sees Plato’s “inclusion of Aristophanes as an active member of the Socratic circle [to be in accord] with the known facts” (*ibid.*, p. 11). For example, Diogenes Laertius, in his “Life of Socrates,” cites Aristophanes’s

side, I feel compelled to examine my life and my cultural context, or maybe to consider the constitution of soul and society, as John Sallis writes in his discussion of Plato's title, *Politeia*.⁷

Aristophanes, Plato, the oracle—each is a poet, a maker of realities—and in each audience members can find a pattern for re-evaluating their lives, for being better than they are. From the murky night of the *Symposium*, from the inspired place of sleeplessness, wine's or love's drunkenness, audiences at a play, like petitioners at Delphi, are transported. We are sent forth into our everyday lives to complete Plato's riddle on comedy and tragedy, as Socrates went about his usual business after a long night's festivities before going home to sleep.

2. Like a Scene-Shifting Periact in the Theater

If we shift our attention away from Socrates as the main character or concern, and instead focus that attention on ourselves, then the oracle begins to become clear. If human goodness and compassion are our leading characters, our leading lights, then both Aristophanes and Plato become poets of hope, in the sense that they seem to believe their audiences capable of rising to the best in ourselves. I read the riddles of the texts as if the authors take for granted that their audiences are capable of leaving the performances empowered to seek human excellence as a practice of living. With this revolution in consciousness, we audience members *could* imagine a better world into existence.⁸ Aristophanes's comedy can point us in that direction from below, mirroring a pattern best avoided. In Plato's hands, tragedy and comedy might take us to that same place, now from above, mirroring the human excellence inborn in each soul and from below through his ample scenes of self-deprecatory laughter. Comedy and dialogue are now on the

extolling Socrates's wisdom as evidence that "the Comic poets, who in the act of ridiculing him give him high praise"; see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 27. Philip Walsh, too, gives an overview of the debate, from Gomme in the 1930s, who believes Aristophanes had political views but that these, practically, do not influence our understanding of the plays, through MacDowell, who contends that the plays' entertainment value does not diminish the advice audiences might glean from them. Philip Walsh, "A Study in Reception: the British Debates over Aristophanes' Politics and Influence," *Classical Receptions Journal* 1 (2009), pp. 55-72. As with oracles and Platonic dialogues, there is something both exciting and daunting about being challenged to interpret the experiences of the works and to take stock of one's own life in light of their suggestions.

⁷ John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 313.

⁸ Sonja Tanner highlights the importance of imagination both for poets and philosophers; see Sonja Tanner, *In Praise of Plato's Poetic Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

same side,⁹ leading us away from the tragedy of ordinary human failures of generosity and kindness.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle encourages a shift from a singular focus on the “Socrates question,” when he writes that comic poets “construct their plots out of probable incidents and then put in any names that occur to them. They do not, like the iambic satirists, write about individuals” (1451b).¹⁰ And, Aristotle says, “comedy . . . is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad . . . the comic mask, [being] ugly and distorted [is] not painful” (1449a). Using Aristotle’s *Poetics* as a lens through which to view *The Clouds*, we can see that the play is not primarily about the life of the historical Socrates. Instead, Socrates’s life lends itself to caricature so that his seems a reasonable name to insert as a characteristic name representing all sorts of other figures on the Athenian stage. As Aristotle suggests, comedy works in distortions. Every character in *The Clouds* wears the twisted comedic mask, but through the fun-house mirror of obscenities and ribald humor, social and political satire is hardly excluded. Exaggerated,

⁹ Lisa Wilkinson examines *charis* as a value perhaps more pervasive and important to the Greek world than a focus on the more familiar *agon* often obscures. Although rhapsodic performances of Homer and other poets were attached to competitions, Wilkinson “identif[ies] Greek ‘oral poetic performance’ as an essentially non-*agonistic* practice, and [she] suggest[s] that it is this practice more than any contest that inspires the type of social unity required for genuine *demokratia*”; see Lisa Wilkinson, *Socratic Charis: Philosophy Without the Agon* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 37. Extending her argument to the performance of plays like the *Clouds*, which were also attached to competition, it occurs to me that part of what makes Aristophanes a poet of hope is the idea that his audiences were smart enough to see his work as encouraging carefully engaged citizenship. Similarly, she suggests that rather than reading the Platonic dialogues as inherently *agonistic*, as many scholars do (see her chap. 4), one could read Plato’s Socrates as non-*agonistic*. Wilkinson writes that Plato’s Socrates “is simultaneously a ‘stranger’ and a ‘gift,’ he is like and unlike those to whom he speaks, he does and does not belong. His *charis* is reciprocated by those who vote to acquit, encouraging the conversation to continue. His *charis* is not reciprocated by those who operate on a different account of the value of citizenship” (Wilkinson, *Socratic Charis*, p. 130). Plato seems to me hopeful enough that his audiences might make the choice to go the route of *charis* rather than not. Yet, the choice is ours, which again suggests Plato’s hope in our abilities to discern.

¹⁰ In a note to his translation of Aristotle, *Poetics* (p. 36 n. a), Frye suggests that Aristotle was discussing New Comedy with this remark. Yet, I still find the idea instructive, in the context of Aristotle’s distinction between history’s “what has happened” and poetry’s “what might happen.” No question, Socrates was a real person and Aristophanes’s character bore that name, yet it seems to me that Aristophanes’s play can give an audience insights into the shifts in their own culture, with the character of Socrates serving as a vehicle for this. Similarly, many of Plato’s characters were historical figures; yet, in Plato’s hands, they also stand in for a variety of human types. We might see ourselves reflected there, either as a model to emulate or to avoid.

ludicrous dialogue and action do not preclude oracular riddles from being completed.

In his introduction to *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual, and Comedy*, A. M. Bowie writes, “one might say . . . that comedy holds up a miraculous mirror to the audience, which does not simply reflect, but refracts and distorts in a kaleidoscopic manner.”¹¹ A careful reading of Plato’s discussion of *mimetic* arts in the *Republic* might also lead one to a similar conclusion about the dialogues. In Book X of the *Republic*, Socrates says to Glaucon, you could be a creator of all things “most quickly if you should choose to take a mirror and carry it about everywhere. You will speedily produce the sun and all things in the sky, and speedily the earth and yourself and the other animals and implements and plants and all the objects of which we just now spoke.” In Glaucon’s answer, we get confirmation that Socrates is not speaking in earnest. He says, “‘yes,’ . . . ‘the appearance of them, but not the reality and the truth’” (596e).

Although Arthur Danto, among others, seems to have taken this passage as evidence for a Mimetic Theory of art,¹² I am unable to read the dialogues as simple mirrors of Plato’s world. Neither am I convinced that Plato dismissed *mimesis* categorically. On the simplest level, he is clearly presenting us with characters; the dialogues are often *mimetic*. And in her compelling study, *In Praise of Plato’s Poetic Imagination*, Sonja Tanner writes, “*mimesis* alone does not distinguish philosophy from poetry.”¹³ Plato’s mirrors are more complex, as are comedy’s. They may make visible something once so common as to be taken for granted; they may, too, give a glimpse of another model for living, like the “scene-shifting periact in the theatre” (*Rep.*, 518c)—the prism with different scenes painted on its different faces, to give audiences a glimpse of different scenarios at a play.¹⁴

Socrates’s philosophical life began in prophecy that shifted the course of his and his interlocutors’ lives. When the Delphic oracle told Chaerephon that no man is wiser than Socrates,¹⁵ Socrates spent the rest of his

¹¹ Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual, and Comedy*, p. 15.

¹² Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), pp. 571-84.

¹³ Tanner, *In Praise of Plato’s Poetic Imagination*, p. 21. Tanner argues that those who make *mimesis* the central distinguishing feature between poetry and philosophy consider two definitions of *mimesis*. Poetry’s is an imitation of the sensible while philosophy’s is of the intelligible. Yet, Tanner concludes that “because philosophy and poetry participate in *mimesis* in both of these senses[, *m*] *mimesis* alone does not distinguish philosophy from poetry” (ibid., p. 21).

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, vol. I, books 1-5, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), p. 134 n. c.

¹⁵ Plato, *Apology, Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 21a8-9.

life badgering his compatriots, nagging and pursuing and talking, finally completing the oracle and deciding that it meant little about the man Socrates. Instead, Plato's Socrates fades from view as an individual and becomes a character in a larger human drama, standing in for all human beings. In the twisted comedy of human life, Socrates holds up a mirror for us all, concluding:

The oracle means this: 'Human wisdom is of little or no value.' And it appears that he does not really say this of Socrates, but merely uses my name, and makes me an example, as if he were to say: 'This one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he or she is in truth of no account in respect to wisdom.' (*Apology*, 23a-b)

It is as if the Delphic god were a comic poet, who created the plot of our strange human lives along some bizarre lines of probability and then inserted a characteristic name. Socrates is a fine choice to stand in for all of us, both because he stands out and also because he insists always that his life is about the betterment of all of Athens. If we let Socrates slip into the background, as Socrates himself urges us to do, and focus instead on the audience who represents us, then we are further on the way to completing the oracle of the dialogues—and of *The Clouds*.

During the late fifth century, when Aristophanes first presented his play, natural philosophers and sophists were relative newcomers on the Athenian scene. And, as Marie Marianetti suggests in *Religion and Politics in Aristophanes' Clouds*, Aristophanes also took the "opportunity [in *The Clouds*] to caricature the cult-based, religio-philosophical views of the Pythagoreans," the "mystery cults, with the exception of the Eleusinian mysteries, [being] foreign in origin, style, and spirit."¹⁶ Aristophanes represents all three of these groups in the singularly outrageous character of Socrates, whom we first meet reflected in his Pondertorium students studying things under the ground bent double, in order that they might simultaneously study the heavens using "arse-stronomy,"¹⁷ and who makes his own appearance in the play suspended from a hook, the better to "merge [his thoughts] with the similar atmosphere of thin air!" (230-31). Multi-talented, and therefore doubly or triply hilarious and dangerous, the character Socrates initiates Strepsiades into the Thinkery with what is perhaps a parody of the

¹⁶ Marie Marianetti, *Religion and Politics in Aristophanes' Clouds* (New York: Olms-Weidmann, 1992), pp. 43-44.

¹⁷ Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, trans. Peter Meineck (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), pp. 185-95.

initiation into a Pythagorean-like mystery cult,¹⁸ and the Thinkery is no doubt the home of duplicity and deceit, father and son promised training in lying but powerful rhetoric, to win their arguments at all costs, despite their dimness, if the fee is right.

Strepsiades, Twister, and his son Pheidippides, Spare the Horses, bear characteristic names, their characters standing in for conflicts between fathers and sons, for citizens worried about debt and trying to worm their way out of it. The two characters are exaggerated and outrageous, but the audience all knew the type, maybe even having played the part themselves.¹⁹ The character named Socrates, too, can be seen as a type, representing challenges to Athenian society, precisely because Socrates the man was well known for his strange appearance and for his eccentric role challenging his contemporaries not to play Strepsiades on the stage called Athens. He was no traveling scholar or con man from a distant city; he was Athens's own homegrown gadfly, a part he played with great energy his whole long life. Ancient audiences and present-day readers seem prone to let the father and son drop from view, when, or maybe because, they show us the worst in ourselves. Aristophanes's play is a gadfly, stinging us into self-recognition; it seems easier for audiences, then and now, to focus on blaming or lionizing the elusive Socrates instead of looking into more mundane mirrors that reflect closer to home.

Douglas MacDowell points out that Martha Nussbaum "has maintained that Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates is less inconsistent with Plato's than has generally been supposed and that it is largely correct."²⁰ Nussbaum argues that Socrates may well have been involved in Natural Philosophy, and, at any rate, in the *Apology* Socrates says he has no reason "to cast dishonour upon such knowledge" (19c6-8). And the Socratic method presented in Plato takes the same form as the method Strepsiades learns at the Thinkery. MacDowell continues, "the difference (an all-important difference, though Strepsiades does not see it) is that the Platonic Socrates refutes statements which are *apparently* true, whereas the Aristophanic Socrates refutes statements which are *actually* true."²¹ MacDowell is right. This makes all the difference in the world, as Plato himself had his character, Glaucon, remind us.

¹⁸ Marianetti, *Religion and Politics in Aristophanes' Clouds*, p. 45.

¹⁹ Douglas M. MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens: An Introduction to the Plays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 128.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132. The article from which he paraphrases is Martha Nussbaum, "Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom," *Yale Classical Studies* 26 (1980), pp. 43-97.

²¹ MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens: An Introduction to the Plays*, p. 133.

3. A Play of Appearances and Realities

In a play of appearances and realities, Plato presents exaggerated characters in Book II of *The Republic*, one representing the just person, who in all ways seems unjust, and the other playing the unjust person, who in all ways seems just.²² Even if one had Gyges's ring and could become invisible, the truly just person would be just. In a sense, Plato's Socrates has such a metaphoric ring, appearing as the often unpleasant, never elegant, always impoverished, unshod pursuer of people and wisdom while embodying justice.²³

Plato's character who appears just also has a cover, in order to act invisibly for personal gain. For this character can and does act with impunity, hiding behind the mask of justice, Thrasymachus-like, to benefit the stronger and to harm the weaker. Plato constantly reminds his readers that in each soul is justice, in each person the ability to be turned toward the Good, through turning "the organ of knowledge . . . around from the world of becoming together with the entire soul, like the scene-shifting periaet in the theatre, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being" (*Rep.*, 518c8-11). His Socrates no longer takes center stage when we take Plato's injunction to focus on our own lives, to shift our own souls to the Good. Still, Nussbaum makes a fair point, not because the two Socrates characters look so much alike, but because the two poets might inspire audiences toward the same goal.

Ancient audiences, though generally able listeners to and judges of oratory,²⁴ failed to see the character of Socrates as a type, although in hindsight his name seems an obvious and brilliant choice. Kenneth Dover even suggests that Socrates the man may have been too well liked when *The*

²² Plato, *Republic*, trans. Shorey, 360e1-361d4.

²³ In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final book of J. K. Rowling's series, Albus Dumbledore explains the unique power of Harry's cloak of invisibility, one of three "hallows." The other two hallows include the elder wand (a wand so powerful that it can never be defeated, and so has left a trail of bloody destruction through history) and the resurrection stone (which can be used to recall the dead to a sort of half-life). Dumbledore recognizes that as a young man he sought the stone and the wand but not the cloak, except that it would complete the collection of hallows. Looking back on his life, he recognizes that he didn't think he needed the cloak, because he could make himself invisible without it. He also recognized that he had a weakness for power that might have bordered on the tyrannical. Symbolized by the second and third hallows, this power over others nearly always led to violence and misery. The cloak offers power of a different sort, because, as Dumbledore reminds Harry, its "true magic is that it can be used to shield and protect others as well as its owner"; see J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic, 2009), p. 716.

²⁴ K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972) p. 113.

Clouds was first produced at the Great Dionysia of 423 B.C.E. for the judges to give first prize to a play appearing to lampoon the man. Dover writes, "Socrates, according to Plato (*Laches* 181b), had acquitted himself very bravely at the battle of Delion the previous summer, and . . . it is conceivable that the spring of 423 was just the wrong time to attack Socrates."²⁵ Although Dover is offering one explanation for *The Clouds*'s third-place finish, he is also offering an explanation for Aristophanes's use of Socrates's name in the play. Since Socrates acquitted himself so well, and because he was a well-known, if eccentric, Athenian, 423 B.C.E. might have been the perfect time to insert the name Socrates into a play that was not really about Socrates at all. Although Socrates's friends and admirers saw Socrates as defender of Athens always, through his philosophical exhortations to the just life, current public opinion could also have seen Socrates as defender of Athens from outside threats.

For Plato's Socrates, defending Athens always assumed that Athenians were capable of reflecting on their own lives and, once understanding virtue, living virtuously. Plato's Alcibiades quotes Aristophanes to himself in the *Symposium* in order to make plain what everyone, including Aristophanes, already knew: At Delion, says Alcibiades, "I had an even finer view of Socrates than at Potidaea—to use a phrase of yours, Aristophanes . . . —'strutting like a proud marsh-goose, with ever a sidelong glance,' turning a calm sidelong look on friend and foe alike . . ." (*Sym.*, 221a7-8; b1-5). Aristophanes's audience should have been able to see the character Socrates as standing in not for himself, except in obvious physical and social habits, but for a variety of intellectuals common in fifth-century Athens. That is, some of them, at least, seem to have looked into the Aristophanic mirror straight, taking the reflection they saw there as a report of both what is and what ought to be. But it is possible to look into that mirror and catch a glimpse of another reality. With Socrates fairly certainly not representing himself, audiences could be freed from a focus on him in order to be able to see the dangers of Strepsiades's behavior, both for their own personal lives and for the life of their city. They should have been able to leave the theater less inclined to cheat their neighbors or to value wealth and reputation above the common good. They should have been more discerning about appearances and realities, knowing that their local eccentric meant them only well and that they had the power to shape their own political and social realities.

Plato's presentation of a character named Aristophanes in the *Symposium* contains no hint of bitterness or vengeance, as poets and philosopher share a discussion shrouded in the mysteries of night, love, and wine. Heath comments on the closeness of the symposiasts and cites Plutarch's report of Socrates's good-natured response to Aristophanes's comic abuse. Heath writes, "for the victim to react, as the Socrates of Plutarch's

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

anecdote reacts, with amused equanimity, could be seen as an ideally appropriate reaction to such non-hostile abuse in the theatre. . . .”²⁶ Plato’s Aristophanes’s speech brings to life comically distorted mythical “double people” not to raise the issue of whether they “actually existed.” Instead, those round and speedy people, who managed to challenge the gods and bring us an especially satisfying and comic metaphor for love, tell us a truth about ourselves. Dover suggests, “by presenting the story of Agathon’s party as a story told by Apollodorus at second hand many years after the event Plato is clearly warning us that he wants us to judge it by its quality and utility (as we would judge a myth), not by its relation to fact.”²⁷

That, after all, is one way to judge the *Clouds*. Plato’s Socrates in the *Apology*, while in one way obviously standing for himself, also does not stand for himself but as a model for human wisdom. Likewise, we might also see Aristophanes’s Socrates as standing not for himself, but as representing Sophists, Natural Philosophers, and leaders of newly introduced cults. An audience might, if it is self-reflective enough, see in both depictions of Socrates a warning about scorning the truth for personal gain. We are also capable of seeing that character as a direct mirroring of the historical Socrates, something of which Plato’s Socrates was aware in his defense and which played some part in the condemnation of the historical man.

In the *Symposium*, Plato writes a comic role for Socrates in Alcibiades’s speech. The Socrates about whom Alcibiades speaks has the distorted appearance and bullying ways of Marsyas the satyr and is as seductive. Alcibiades says of Socrates, “his talk resembles the Silenuses that are made to open. If you chose to listen to Socrates’ discourses you would feel them at first to be quite ridiculous; on the outside they are clothed with such absurd words and phrases—all, of course, beneath the hide of a mocking satyr. . . . But when these are opened, and you obtain a fresh view of them by getting inside, you will discover that they are the only speeches which have any sense in them” (*Sym.*, 221e1-222a7). Beneath the Silenus-like comic mask, one finds “images . . . divine and golden . . . fair and wondrous” (*Sym.*, 217a1), and a pattern for all to follow who would avoid the life of a Strepsiades. Only in the presence of this Socrates-satyr, one whom Plato has just characterized as Love itself, Love being between Plenty and Poverty, always barefoot, always enchanting, always appearing strangely twisted like a comic mask, and always pursuing wisdom and justice, Alcibiades feels shame. Only then does Alcibiades want to reform, to play the noble part he is well capable of staging.

As the two portraits Socrates paints of the just and unjust person suggest, Plato seems to be hopeful that his audiences are capable of choosing

²⁶ Heath, *Political Commentary in Aristophanes, Hypomnemata*, p. 26.

²⁷ Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, p. xx. See Heath, *Political Commentary in Aristophanes, Hypomnemata*, p. 11 n. 11, for a skeptical response to Dover’s assertion.

and even of choosing well about justice and virtue, about beauty and goodness, about the constitution of our lives together. If one is able to tear oneself away from the figure of Socrates in *The Clouds*, and instead look at the lives of Strepsiades and his son not as models to emulate, but as exemplary of the kind of life to avoid, Plato and Aristophanes start to look as if they are comrades rather than adversaries. Each presents the same challenge to their countrymen: lift up the distorted masks covering Alcibiades's shame and be better than you are, be the people you are capable of being.

4. Midnight's High Noon: Descents and Ascents

In Er's myth at the end of the *Republic*, Lachesis reminds us that we have choices, and, in that reminder, shows us our responsibility. She says, "Let the one who gets the first lot choose first. . . . Virtue has no master; as he honors or dishonors her, each will have more or less of her; the blame is to him who chooses, god is blameless" (617d-e). The story suggests that choice is in some ways neither free nor easy. As Socrates contemplating the Delphic oracle thought it impossible for Apollo to lie (*Apology*, 21b), the philosopher desires that ultimate freedom—avoiding wickedness (*Apology*, 39b)—without having the option of choosing otherwise. For the other "choice" would be a kind of slavery to tyrannical avarice. Yet, between the divine and the incurably tyrannical, Lachesis suggests, are most of us, with more or less virtue, with many choices still to make.

Lachesis's words are at "the dead center of the myth," its "dramatic high noon."²⁸ They are also at dawn after a conversation beginning the night of the Bendideia. The descent and ascent in Er's myth recall the dialogue's many descents and ascents: Socrates's trip to the Pireus, Gyges's ring, the cave, the rise and fall of regimes, the journey up and down the divided line. At the "dead of the night's high noon,"²⁹ at the dialogue's center,³⁰ Socrates

²⁸ Andrew German, "The Philosopher and the Tyrant," manuscript, presented at the Ancient Philosophy Society conference (San Francisco, CA), April 2012, p. 2.

²⁹ To borrow from Gilbert and Sullivan's "Chorus of the Ancestors" in *Ruddigore*.

³⁰ I calculated the dialogue's numerical center crudely using a word processor to count characters, which, nevertheless, came out to very nearly the same place in the dialogue as John Bremer, *On Plato's Polity* (Houston, TX: Institute of Philosophy, 1984). Bremer renumbers the dialogue using "Bremer numbers" based on a division of the dialogue into 240 equal units of 750 syllables each, based on a reading (out loud) time of three minutes; see *ibid.*, p. 44. Based on this renumbering, he identifies this passage as the numeric center of the dialogue (at end of Bremer 120 and beginning of Bremer 121), at the point where he notes that "Glaucou . . . tires of speaking of war and demands that Socrates address whether or not the polity that has been described is possible and, if so, how" (*ibid.*, p. 48). Soon after, Socrates raises the third wave of political power and philosophy coming together in the same place in order for justice to live both in people and the polity (*ibid.*, p. 49; *Rep* 473c-d). In the chapter titled "The *Republic's* Third Wave," Jacob Howland notes that an "indication of the importance of the third wave is provided by the fact that it breaks at the exact center of

urges his companions toward the mystery of *aporia*, in which “the soul would then be puzzled, would look for an answer, would stir up its understanding, . . . and turn . . . around towards the study of that which is” (524e). In other words, in Plato’s looking glass, Socrates attempts to replace one sort of unbridled lust, the tyrannical lust of greed and power, with erotic passion for the mysteries of learning, for wisdom.

One of the most compelling things about Plato’s writing is the way in which he uses nearly the same words to mean entirely different things. When Meno defines virtue as “desire for beautiful things and the power to acquire them” (77b), he means something very different from Diotima, who says that the lover becomes *eudaimon* through a desire for and attainment of beautiful and good things (204d-205a), through “wanting to possess the good forever” (206a). For Diotima, lovers desire the good, and “this kind of love . . . is common to all human beings” (205a). Meno’s definition betrays an unbridled lust for power to rule over others (73d) and acquisitiveness. Diotima’s reveals an unquenchable *eros* for wisdom and Beauty, inquisitiveness empowering the soul to “catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature” (*Symposium* 210e-211a). When Meno says Socrates is a torpedo fish, stinging him into confusion, he shows how far he has hobbled his own soul, how his power and wealth bind rather than free him. By contrast, his slave is inspired by the torpedo fish, the *aporia* causing him to remember not particular facts of geometry, but the nature of his own soul. In his unpublished study of the *Meno*, John Bremer writes, “Socratic memory is the creative act of learning. That is the mystery.”³¹ Bremer continues, “The responsibility is ours and the dialogue is like a mirror in which we see ourselves; if we don’t like what we see, then we must try, and try hard, to practice *anamnesis* so that the soul remembers its own nature.”³² Socrates pushes Meno, pushes us to become lovers, to remember the soul’s power to glimpse something eternal, like the slave boy’s moment of recognition of the square on the diameter.³³

the text as measured by Stephanus pages”; see Jacob Howland, *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 633. Eva Brann, too, highlights the importance of the central books (V-VII) and, in them, Glaucon’s education; see Eva Brann, *The Music of the Republic: Essays on Socrates’ Conversations and Plato’s Writings* (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2004).

³¹ John Bremer, “Plato’s Meno and the Mystery of Learning,” unpublished manuscript, May 2011, p. 29.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³³ In the mystery at the heart of philosophy, Plato also hints at The Mysteries in his many images of descent and ascent. See, for example, Howland’s discussion of the Bendideia as an imitation of initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries in the descent into and ascent from Hades in each, and the openness of the initiates to being unsettled and to considering new vantage points from which to understand and live in the “everyday” world (Howland, *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy*, pp. 46-47). Bremer, too,

Andy German notes that “the tyrant is eros incarnate (573b6-7) simply because, in his case, eros no longer needs the pretense of recognizing the legitimacy of external limits.”³⁴ It is instructive to note the “all-consuming *eros*” of tyranny and philosophy, which, as German says, Plato also associates with madness.³⁵ But there is madness and there is madness. There is a consuming passion and a passion for consumption. Plato paints us a picture of the philosopher as *eros* incarnate in the *Symposium* (203c-d). The two portraits share nothing but the words used to describe them. There is the philosopher’s all-consuming *eros* that makes the soul burn brighter in the light of the Good and its offspring, the sun (506e). And there is the tyrant’s frenzy for material goods beyond what is necessary for a comfortable and healthy life. The tyrant, as Thrasymachus suggests, seeks to enslave the population for his or her own benefit. The philosopher exhorts one and all to reject self-made enslavement. It is curious and amusing that German imagined the child-eating tyrant to have been a “mild-mannered bank teller,”³⁶ for it is those who deal with money in Socrates’s city of artisans who are least capable (*Rep.*, 371d). Yet, the ordinary citizen who chose a life of tyranny was, upon reflection, horrified by his choice (*Rep.*, 619b). Plato sees in him and in each of us, the possibility of the soul blazing with the consuming *eros*, born from *aporia*, for the Beautiful and the Good.

For it is philosophical *eros* that might free the prisoners bound at the bottom of the cave, spending their days hearing and seeing the shadows cast by political factions and traders in greed. Those prisoners in the cave have their necks and legs bound. Unlike the incurably tyrannical in the Myth of Er, who have bound hands, feet, and heads (615e), the prisoners in the cave still have a choice. They are not gagged; their hands are free. They have the power to speak to each other, to undo their bonds, to turn their heads and bodies toward the sun and the Good. So, although German claims that Socrates has a “fatal attraction to tyrannical types,”³⁷ another possibility is that he sees, even in Meno, even in Thrasymachus, even or especially in Alcibiades, something

in his interpretation of the *Meno*, draws a connection between Demeter and her search through Hades for Persephone and initiation into the Mysteries and the slave boy’s search through his soul upon encountering the *aporia* (Bremer, “Plato’s Meno and the Mystery of Learning,” pp. 17-18). The slave boy’s freedom of human creativity (something sleeping deeply in Meno, enslaved by his love of power and by his greed) awakens during his contemplation of the square on the diameter, diameter and Demeter playing a similar role in Bremer’s analysis (*ibid.*, p. 20).

³⁴ German, “The Philosopher and the Tyrant,” p. 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4 n. 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

still human, still able to recall “the power to learn, [which] is present in everyone’s soul” (*Rep.*, 518b-d).

Eros and *philia*—as Socrates mentions in the *Lysis*—shatter all conventional limits, in the sense of justice being only a reluctantly entered political agreement and not an activity or power of the individual living together with others in the *polis*. The conventional limits recognize humans as too willing to prey upon each other, especially if they can do so undetected and unpunished. When Socrates says in the *Lysis* that he “would rather possess a friend than all Darius’ gold, or even than Darius himself” (211e), he recognizes that the human being is fundamentally something those conventional limits fail to understand. Friendship and *eros* are not tools for using and abusing others or even reluctant agreements neither to abuse or use; rather, they are ways we help to lift each other up, to have the flash of recognition of the power of our own souls.³⁸

German claims that “the Er myth presents an almost unrelievedly grim scene.”³⁹ His conclusion, “except (perhaps) for philosophers, . . . everyone falls through the trap door into Tartarus,”⁴⁰ reinforces that grim reading. Yet Plato writes ascents as beautiful and powerful as the descents, precisely because the two are mutually informing and assisting; the descent into mystery and darkness is as powerful as the ascent into light. Plato sends aid to those heading for tyranny, because they are in the most danger. German understands the Er story as one of damnation, saying, “all lives eventually reduce to two, and except for the philosopher, everyone goes to hell.”⁴¹ But Plato keeps sending Socrates, hoping like hell that when the trap door opens, no one is standing on it! But even that is the wrong language. There is no trap door, except the one we make for ourselves. And, at dawn, Plato’s Socrates ends another night’s mysteries with hope, saying, “we’ll believe the soul is . . . able to endure every evil and every good. . . . Hence, both in this life and on the thousand-year journey we’ve described, *eu prattomen* [may we fare or do well]” (621c-d).

5. The Fully Skilled Comedian Could Be a Tragedian as Well

It is in ancient and present-day audiences’ failures to consider how we might both do and fare well that the tragedy of the larger drama of both

³⁸ In the *Lysis*, Socrates compares friendship to a cup of wine that a father values precisely because the wine can save his son from poison. Friendship and the wine become extrinsic goods, valuable for their power to give aid to and receive aid from others (*Lysis*, 219d-220b) in the journey of a thousand years back to ourselves (*Rep.*, 621d).

³⁹ German, “The Philosopher and the Tyrant,” p. 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Aristophanes's and Plato's Athens (and of our own time) begins to unfold. As Aristotle explains in his *Poetics*, tragedy, like comedy, "tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts" (1451b). Furthermore, tragedy "represents incidents arousing pity and fear, . . . pity for . . . undeserved misfortune, fear for the [misfortune of the] man like ourselves" (1453a). That is, the tragic character is "not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the misfortune, but rather through some flaw in him" (1453a). Clearly, watching an evil character fall would not move an audience to pity, for, whatever the virtues of enjoying such a thing, such a fall would seem to be deserved. Even more importantly, the audience would not feel fear, as the way to avoid such a fall would be obvious. Aristophanes's Socrates seems to deserve his great misfortune by the end of the play. The audience, also a character in the play, mistakenly understood this to mean that Socrates was not a person like themselves or like the man Socrates, who was known and even admired in 423 B.C.E., but a willful and vicious destroyer of society. The fall of such a man would hardly seem tragic.

For, as Aristotle continues, the change in tragedy is "from good to bad fortune, and it must not be due to villainy but to some great flaw in such a man as we have described, or of one who is better rather than worse" (1253a). Plato's Socrates is not a tragic figure, then, for although he lost his life, he did not lose his integrity, and seems to think that his lot is perhaps not so terrible as living badly would have been. "It is not hard to escape death; it is much harder to escape wickedness," he says in the *Apology* (39a9-11), and would have impoverished his own condition by leaving Athens or quitting philosophy. Neither is Aristophanes's Socrates a tragic figure. He is presented as victimizing Strepsiades, so if he comes to a bad end, the audience could perceive that as deserved; if he profits from his vice, he is so much less the tragic figure.

Including Aristophanes in the small group of characters discussing the intertwining of comedy and tragedy at the end of a dialogue on love's power to move the soul toward wisdom and justice, one might see a tragic figure in both *The Clouds* and the Platonic dialogues. This figure is audience, jury, citizen, ordinary person, not Socrates. In Aristophanes's comedy, this same tragic figure lurks in the form of the audience, later turned jury, citizen, ordinary person. This audience character wears a Strepsiades or Pheidippides mask, but if the audience were to lift the mask, they would see not a professional actor's face, but a mirror looking back at them through their own eyes. And in Plato's work, the audience is always present, always encouraged to lift the masks of Athenians who pretend to wisdom for the sake of personal gain or public praise, and to see there not dim-witted Meletus, easy to blame, not pompous Meno, for whom (as a slave-holder) "virtue" includes ownership even of another person but not of the power of his own faculties, not dangerous and charming Alcibiades, easy to hate, admire, or even pity, but a mirror, reflecting us back at ourselves through our own eyes.

It is the audience—ancient and contemporary—ordinary people of no great malice and of no great compassion, who often fail to see ourselves in comic mirrors that dramatize the worst in us or in mirrors that show us the best we could be. We instead prefer to turn away or to see the ancient Athenians reflected, while not noticing that we are standing right behind them. If we change, if we strive for the betterment of all, not only ourselves, we learn the comedy's lessons. If we fail, we are the tragic figures, who harm ourselves not only by suffering others' malice and greed, but especially by harming others, even unintentionally. One could see Aristophanes and Plato as concerned in the main about the well-being of their home, of Athens. And Socrates is their own, loved or hated. The "incidents [which] seem dreadful or rather pitiable," continues Aristotle, are "when these calamities happen among friends" (1453b).

Lest we come too quickly to the conclusion that Aristophanes and Plato point fingers of blame at their audiences, at us, and therefore remove the tragic component of fall through error or frailty, both writers seem to have had great confidence in their audiences' abilities to understand, discern, and to change. In this great confidence is hope that if we do understand the right way to live, we will quite naturally put it into practice. Nearly no one, in Plato's view, is an Alcibiades, who, seeing what ought to be done, flees from it, embracing a consciously chosen life of vice.

It is not too much of a stretch, perhaps, to find this same hopeful view of his audience in Aristophanes. Daphne O'Regan argues that the first version of the play, which won only third prize at the 423 B.C.E. City Dionysia, seems not to have relied on coarse scatological humor and assumed a subtle audience. O'Regan writes, "imagining his audience to be smart and sophisticated, Aristophanes had discarded many of the obscene and violent aspects of conventional comedy in favor of purely verbal wit."⁴² Written in response to his failure to win first prize, Aristophanes's second version, the text of which survives, includes much more ribald humor. But even in its cruder form, or especially in its cruder form, the play incorporates the Athenian audience into itself as perhaps the most important character. Instead of simply resigning himself to the need to give in to public tastes, Aristophanes mercilessly skewers his audience in the second version, saying through the Chorus: "I thought you were an intelligent audience, I thought that you would truly enjoy this, the most intellectual of my comedies. . . . But look what happened. I was utterly defeated, thwarted by those other vile, despicable hacks" (521-25).

The original version of the play seems not to have included Pheidippides beating his father or Strepsiades setting his torch to the Pondertorium roof. MacDowell suggests "that, when the Athenians saw Strepsiades triumphing as a result of his adherence to the sophists, they

⁴² Daphne O'Regan, *Rhetoric, Comedy, and the Violence of Language in Aristophanes' Clouds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 5.

thought that the play implied approval of sophistry . . . Aristophanes seemed to them to be recommending dishonesty, false rhetoric, and—worst of all—atheism.”⁴³ Aristophanes and Socrates were painted with the same brush, accused of corrupting others and of atheism. Behind that mistaken appearance are two men warning against these very things. If we think of Strepsiades as representing ordinary citizens, his triumph in the original play was a false triumph. Instead of recommending such behavior to his audience, Aristophanes could plausibly have been enjoining them, and us, to heed the Delphic inscription “Know Thyself,” and then to change.

With the hindsight of thousands of years of history, contemporary audiences, too, can read the play’s revised ending to show the dangers of both dishonesty and also of vengeance and violence. Plato’s Socrates argues at his trial that if he corrupted the citizens around him, he would not only risk harm to himself from their corrupt behavior but harm to the entire city as well. Vengeance and violence, then, are not an antidote to dishonesty, lack of respect, and false rhetoric; rather, they grow from those corrupt sources.

6. Changing the Currency

Diogenes the Cynic, influenced by Socrates and a contemporary of Plato, visited the oracle at Delphi for advice after the exile of his father, who, according to Lipsey, had “debased [the state] coinage to his own advantage and was found out.”⁴⁴ Left in charge of the mint, Diogenes faced the same temptation as his father, to reduce the percentage of precious metal in the city’s currency and to sell the surplus for his own gain. Diogenes took his temptation to the oracle at Delphi, who “urged him to change the city’s currency (*politikon nomisma*).”⁴⁵ As Lipsey reminds us, “*nomisma* means not only coinage and currency but also custom and usage.”⁴⁶ The oracle is Diogenes’s to complete: either change the coinage for personal benefit or change his way of life to be a better person and citizen.

When an audience goes to the oracle of Aristophanes’s *Clouds* or Plato’s dialogues, that audience can read the same message there in either of the two ways Diogenes considered. The audience at its worst can take Strepsiades as a model for personal gain through duplicity and spite, thus sowing the seeds of blame and retribution. Nussbaum seems to suggest this view when she writes:

⁴³ MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens: An Introduction to the Plays*, p. 146.

⁴⁴ Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi?* p. 130.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

The Clouds . . . presents us with a picture of private hedonism impervious to reason and even to sympathy. These men simply do not *care* about anything but their own satisfactions when it comes to a choice. And lest we too quickly feel ourselves superior to them, the *Clouds* insists that we members of the audience are no different. We are all just *euryproktoi* [“wide-assed”] waiting passively for pleasure.⁴⁷

But given the other possible way to complete Diogenes’s oracle, this is too easy, a betrayal of Aristophanes’s belief in our abilities to change the currency in the second possible reading of the oracle. It seems that Aristophanes is providing not just a reflection, but a challenge to us to recognize how Strepsiades-like behavior warps and distorts the soul. This is a challenge the audience, and we, often fail to meet. In order for the playwright to be angry with the judges and the audience for failing to understand his play and the warnings there, he had to assume that audiences, then and now, have the ability to rise to the challenge. Socrates, too, relied on this assumption. His life of philosophy, trying to complete the Delphic oracle’s prophecy, was not a declaration of rhetorical war against Athens, but rather an assumption that the people of Athens were on the same side as he was. We are not supposed to come away from *The Clouds* having our behavior reinforced—*euryproktoi*, an abusive epithet in the play and hardly one to be embraced. Nussbaum is right; we ought not to feel superior to the audience. Instead of learning the wrong lines, playing the wrong part, and doing ourselves real harm, we can change the currency, change the custom. My response to Plato and Aristophanes is not that they think all their audiences and I are objects of scorn. There seems at least some space in each author’s work for instruction and self-reflection. Thousands of pages devoted to deriding their audiences would seem to me both a swindle and a waste of good talent and careers. Plato and Aristophanes seem, through their words, to be more generous than that.

An audience at its best could come away from *The Clouds* laughing horrified laughter at the portrait just painted of itself, and, with a bit of self-deprecatory laughter, set about acting differently in the theater of Athens so as to increase security for all. An audience at its best would hardly see the burning of the Thinkery with living people trapped inside as exemplary behavior. This, too, is an exhortation to change the currency, for as Plato’s Socrates says repeatedly, as one harms another, so one harms also oneself. O’Regan notes, “in a sense, [Plato’s] Socrates’ fate fulfills Strepsiades’ threat to Pheidippides. The crime for which he is ‘tried’ is that of offense against the state, which carried the penalty of the barathron or house razing.”⁴⁸ If the

⁴⁷ Nussbaum, “Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom,” p. 95.

⁴⁸ O’Regan, *Rhetoric, Comedy, and the Violence of Language in Aristophanes’ Clouds*, p. 200.

Platonic Socrates's "school" was all of Athens, Aristophanes's *Strepsiades*, in his vengeance rather than triumph in the second play's ending scene, harms not only the characters Socrates and Chaerephon, but even more, razes his own home in the form of destroying both his own and his city's moral integrity. This is precisely Socrates's message in the last scenes of the *Apology*. The play's triumphant first ending leads to the second vengeful one. For, from greed and self-interest come vengeance and retribution; they are not opposites, but instead grow from the same corrupt source.

It is mistaken, then, to say either that Aristophanes failed, even though his first *Clouds* did not win him first prize, or that Socrates failed, because his defense did not win him acquittal. At his trial Socrates, of course, represented himself. But he, like the Socrates in Aristophanes's play, the Socrates in the Pythian riddle, and the Socrates in Plato's dialogues, also represents the concepts of integrity, caring more for truth than public opinion, and the best that Athenians could be. As J. Redfield suggests, "comedy weakens the control of the performers over their audience, and thus increase[es] the power of the people."⁴⁹ Similarly, Socrates's public philosophy and Plato's record of it increase the power of the people. Of course, this power is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it increases the power of the people to change, to change the currency of society, to become better than we are. On the other hand, it increases the power of the people to do harm, to use the images and arguments as weapons of vengeance. In any event, Aristophanes and Plato are poets of hope in their unflagging faith in the abilities of their audiences to rise to the challenge, or they would have had no reason to engage in public *poesis*, risking the second possibility of comedy for the promise of the first.

7. Poets of Hope

Plato's Socrates's philosophical life ended, as it began, in prophecy. At the end of his life, Socrates becomes the oracle, saying:

And now I wish to prophesy to you, O ye who have condemned me; for I am now at the time when men most do prophesy, the time just before death. And I say to you, ye men who have slain me, that punishment will come upon you straight-away after my death, far more grievous in sooth than the punishment of death which you have meted out to me. For now you have done this to me because you hoped that you would be relieved from rendering an account of your lives, but I say that you will find the result far different. Those who will force you to give an account will be more numerous than heretofore; men whom I restrained, though you knew it not; and they

⁴⁹ J. Redfield, "Drama and Comedy: Aristophanes and Some of His Rivals," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysus?* ed. J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 331.

will be harsher, inasmuch as they are younger, and you will be more annoyed. For if you think that by putting men to death you will prevent anyone from reproaching you because you do not act as you should, you are mistaken. (*Apology*, 39 c-d)

At the end of that life, he again completes the oracle to show that he has suffered no tragic fall, even while he faces the cup of hemlock. Again, the oracle is not primarily about the elusive yet everywhere-present Socrates. When Socrates takes his final exit, we are left to complete his parting oracle: he or she has lived well, who, like Socrates, refuses to bow to peer pressure or threats from the mob, but holds to integrity in the face of retaliatory fear. We would do well to act on Alcibiades's shame, and to be moved to give an account of our lives (*Sym.*, 216a6-7).

Plato's readers and beloved contemporaries are ordinary. We are often foolish but are not especially great or terrible people. At this time of stress in our own day, we have choices to make similar to the ones that Socrates's compatriots faced. What is the ordinary citizen to do? There is the risk of a mob mentality, or of hunkering down to take care of oneself alone. Or, in times of crisis, ordinary citizens might read the riddle of an ancient series of dramas, and realize that we can complete the oracle of Aristophanes's play and the prophecies of Socrates differently this time around. Comedy and tragedy point us to this conclusion, one showing the distortions if we fail, the other showing the ennobling if we succeed. For we are characters in the ongoing play, standing not only for ourselves but for the best a society might be. One way, then, to read our role is: "a society is tragic, which, like Socrates's, puts fear and the wealth of the few above the well-being of the many." Aristotle tells us, "since tragedy is a representation of men better than ourselves we must copy the good portrait-painters who, while rendering the distinctive form and making a likeness, yet paint people better than they are" (1454b). Aristophanes and Plato give us the chance to rise to the best in us, challenge us to plumb the depths of our being to find the golden and divine that Plato suggests has been there all along. We are the tragic figures if we fail. But we have the ability and opportunity to work against that role, to recast ourselves, to see ourselves in Aristophanes's mirror and not turn away from its hopeful challenge.

