

Ariel Helfer, *Socrates and Alcibiades: Plato's Drama of Political Ambition and Philosophy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. Pp. 232. ISBN 978-0-8122-4913-2. [cloth \$59.95]

I confess that I undertook the review of this book with some trepidation, owing to the various clues that the author worked in a tradition that I have sometimes found alien. The United States is a big enough educational market to allow for a variety of approaches to Plato, often conflicting approaches, without much common ground that could be the basis for dialogue between them. However, I lament any situation where scholars work entirely within their own comfort zones, and my reservations were therefore overruled by a strong feeling that Helfer's work should not be read only in and around the Political Science departments of the United States. I quickly found that he was by no means neglecting scholarship that had a different origin, and in fact referred even-handedly to the book on the *Alcibiades I* that I co-authored with François Renaud in 2015 (reviewed in this journal by James Ambury in 2016). Not only that, I have found myself actually quoting Helfer approvingly in support of points of my own.

It is perhaps unfortunate, given the present readership, that my primary reservations concern matters of ancient history. To my mind Helfer is at his best when tackling the issue of political ambition in the three dialogues that he has chosen to focus on, for which reason I especially enjoyed his conclusion, which systematically draws together various threads of Plato's portrait of Alcibiades' ambition: which was at that time almost necessarily political ambition. He also displays considerable ability in writing up the ways in which the works he deals with function as drama.

The three works tackled are the *Alcibiades I*, *Alcibiades II* and *Symposium*. The preferred approach is to see all three as separate planks of Plato's treatment of the seemingly hybriatic young Athenian Alcibiades. Helfer writes always as if the three constitute a unity, and even the many scholars who deny the authenticity of the *Alcibiades I*, not to mention the very many who deny that of the *Alcibiades II*, ought to admit that this is an interesting and perhaps productive exercise. Helfer is in fact happy to admit that the question of authenticity may never be reliably settled, and that scholars have often done themselves a disservice by adhering too dogmatically to one side of the debate (11). I have had many reasons of late to regret the lack of caution with which scholars still treat authenticity issues, and even in 2017 it can still be argued on the basis of a single substantive point that the *Critias* that has come down to us is spurious.

We must allow, then, that Helfer is not making any crude assumptions of authenticity, but following through a line of research, which, if it produces a coherent picture overall, would have the effect of offering modest support for the case for authenticity. Nor is there any insistence that the dialogues were actually *written* in the order of their dramatic dates (c. 432, shortly after and within the lifetime of Pericles, 416). It seems totally intelligible to me that even a Platonic imitator might

have written dialogues intended to provide the background to the failed relationship that Plato depicted in the final pages of his *Symposium*. The sequence is therefore worth examining regardless of authorship considerations.

After the introduction two chapters are devoted to the *Alcibiades I*, a dialogue of around thirty Stephanus pages, a fraction longer than the *Charmides*, for instance, or the average book of the *Republic*. The break, according to Helfer, comes at 116e when Alcibiades stands refuted, and accordingly the first chapter has the title “Socrates’ promise and Alcibiades’ failure”, while the second chapter is given the title “The Exaltation of Virtue”. A single chapter, “Rescuing Alcibiades”, is given to the *Alcibiades II*, a short dialogue of around a dozen Stephanus pages, and a further chapter, “A Puzzling Retrospective”, to *Symposium* 212c–223a. The astute reader will observe that one dialogue in which Alcibiades appears and speaks (though does not converse directly with Socrates) does not receive an extended treatment: the *Protagoras*. This is discussed briefly at 144–6, with the assertion that it belongs (sc. in dramatic date) after the *Alcibiades I*, apparently because Alcibiades is already a devotee of intellectual debate; I take a different view, and note rather that his appearance there *in Critias’ company* does not suggest that he is currently influenced by Socrates.

From the historical point of view such discussions are artificial, and belong rather to discussions of Platonic drama. In general my reservations about the book stem from the ease with which the author slips into seemingly historical statements as a result of his reading of the literary situation. So remarks at *Alcibiades* 120a give rise to the statement (64) that “his contest will in fact be against the Lacedaemonian and Persian kings if he is to lead the Athenians, since Athens is often at war with Sparta and Persia.” It is not a misrepresentation of Socrates’ remarks, but it is not entirely true if an historical claim is being made. The emphasis on “kings” is particularly suspect: one cannot assume that the real leadership will come from a king, any more than one can assume that the role of the *strategos* at Athens is as exclusively military as Helfer appears to assume (113, 124).

From the fact that *Alcibiades II* does not specify a location for the conversation Helfer infers that it is set before Potidaea (101), yet if Athens is the location then we should be told which god Alcibiades is about to pray to, while if Potidaea itself was the location then it would have been obvious that the god whom Alcibiades intends to approach is Posidon, a god of horses to whom Alcibiades (like Pheidippides at *Clouds* 83) would naturally be devoted. Helfer in fact draws attention (153) to Alcibiades’ oath by Posidon at *Symposium* 214d6.

Chronology appears to be fudged when Agathon’s dinner party, surely after his victory at the Lenaea in 416, is said to “take place on the eve of the Sicilian expedition” (147), while it is said that Phaedrus and Eryximachus were also implicated in the “crimes of 416”, referring to the profanation and mutilation crisis. Helfer has I think been misled by his desire (not totally misguided) to bring the

Symposium and the events surrounding the Sicilian expedition into the closest possible relation.

An important admission is made by Helfer when he observes that, despite the implications of the *Alcibiades*-dialogues, “the evidence of his [Alcibiades’] seeking tyranny is vanishingly thin” (176). In such cases the line between drama and history have been recognised. But how does one explain the prominence of tyrannical ambitions in these dialogues? If they are not linked with fifth century history, might they have fourth century relevance? By the end of that century the Greeks had seen the emergence of ambitions that really had extended to something like world domination, arguably at the price of the leader’s own life (cf. *Alc. II* 141c1–3), and Athens had seen in Demetrius of Phaleron a philosopher ruling directly over Athens, and ultimately in a somewhat tyrannical manner. Would these dialogues be read differently at that time, and might some of the material at least involve post-Platonic political commentary? Hence the presence of spurious elements in the *Alcibiades*-dialogues would matter after all, and it would affect Helfer’s reading of Alcibiades’ speech in the *Symposium*, which is taken as highly deceptive *because* it omits part of the picture that they offer.

While for the purpose of a review in this forum I have mainly examined the historical credentials of this book, I must add that there are many details that enhance our reading of the dialogues themselves. Much serious thought has been given to a variety of dramatic, philosophic and political questions, and for balance this needs to be acknowledged.

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