

POLITICAL PLATONISM IN THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE

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ABSTRACT

DONALD WELLS: Political Platonism in the English Renaissance
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I argue that the influence of Platonic thought in Renaissance England cannot be properly understood without attending to what I call “Political Platonism”—a particularly civic approach to Plato and his works. Political Platonism, which derives in part from the efforts of early humanists such as Leonardo Bruni, differs sharply from the approach favored by more well-known Platonists such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. Where Pico and Ficino are drawn primarily to Plato’s metaphysical and cosmological speculations, Political Platonists tend to favor his moral, political, and rhetorical ideas. After identifying Political Platonism and distinguishing it from the Cosmological Platonism favored by Ficino and Pico in the first chapter, I trace its appearance in English writers with significant Platonic influence throughout the Renaissance in subsequent chapters. Chapter Two examines early Tudor writers such as Thomas More and Thomas Elyot, with whom the pressing needs of the new political regime combine with their own humanist ideals to produce a uniquely civic approach to Plato. Chapter Three explores how Francis Bacon uses, changes, and challenges Plato in the course of developing his own program for the advancement of science. Finally, in Chapter Four I show how John Milton continues to read Plato as a civic philosopher even as he wrestles anew with the difficulties confronting the adaptation of classical philosophy to Christian culture.

DEDICATION

With love, to my mother, without whose support this dissertation would not have been completed.

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CHAPTER 1

ENGLAND AND RENAISSANCE PLATONISM

In the last book of *Paradise Regained*, Milton's Jesus offers a remarkable and dismissive account of ancient philosophy. Of particular note are his words at the outset on Socrates and Plato¹:

The first and wisest of them all profess'd
To know this only, that he nothing knew;
The next to fabling fell and smooth conceits. (ll. 293-5)

At first glance the judgment seems clear enough. Socrates at least admitted his ignorance, but Plato was a liar, a poet, a maker of fables. On closer examination, however, these lines become more and more confusing. How could a Milton who elsewhere makes use of technical matters from dialogues such as *Cratylus* and *Philebus* seriously dismiss the whole of Plato as “fabling” and “smooth conceits?” Though there is certainly precedent for calling Socrates the wisest of philosophers, in what sense is he “first?” Why would he make Jesus go on to complain that the philosophers accuse God under names like Fortune and Fate when Milton himself elsewhere praises Plato and others precisely for not doing so? What at first seems an almost casual and simple dismissal upon reflection becomes a locus for serious questions.

Jesus' words on the philosophers are all the more startling in their immediate context. He is replying to a fourth temptation—one Milton has added to the three found in the biblical account of the wilderness encounter between Jesus and Satan. Further, this

¹ All references to Plato are to the English translations available online at *The Perseus Digital Library*.

new temptation sounds much like one which classical studies posed to Renaissance Christians:

Be famous then
By wisdom; as thy empire must extend
So let extend thy mind o'er all the world
In knowledge, all things in it comprehend,
All knowledge is not couch't in Moses' law,
The Pentateuch, or what the Prophets wrote,
The Gentiles also know, and write, and teach
To admiration, led by Nature's light. (ll. 221-8)

When Satan adds that Gentile knowledge is most useful for one who would deal with Gentiles, “ruling them by persuasion as thou mean'st” (l. 230), one is reminded of the love and hope Renaissance authors held for classical learning and rhetoric. Many humanists, for instance, hoped to find what Satan offers here—guides to knowledge, writing, and teaching; wisdom to supplement and expand that offered by the Bible, the Church, and the Fathers—in classical authorities. When Jesus replies, “He who receives / Light from above, from the fountain of light, / No other doctrine needs, though granted true” (ll. 288-90), it sounds like a repudiation of the Renaissance rehabilitation of classical learning. If divine revelation alone is necessary, what authority and value can pagan Greece and Rome hold?

Milton's words can sound harsh to ears accustomed to hearing only praises sung of the classics or of Plato. But the manner in which classical authority is subordinated and circumscribed in this passage is most useful for outlining the manner in which many English Renaissance authors read, understood, and used the classics in general—and Plato in particular. I begin with the distinction and subordination of wisdom, implied at the beginning of Satan's speech, into natural and revealed. What the classics, and Satan, offer is bracketed by the rare use of rhyme: we may extend our minds over and

comprehend “the world,” that is, nature. Wisdom, expressed by the traditional metaphor of light, seems to come in two forms: we may be led by the light of Nature, and Satan offers the fruits of this, or we may receive “light from above,” or from the divine. The authority of the classics lies entirely with the light of Nature, which has decidedly the second place in honor.

We must be careful, though, with this distinction. It is not absolute. Rather, the one, the light of Nature, in some way depends upon or derives from the divine light—for it is not only “from above,” it is “the fountain of light.” Matters which seem worldly or mundane are not entirely to be separated from matters eternal and divine. For instance, Jesus insists that the Prophets better teach “the solid rules of civil government” (l. 358) than any of the orators of old. No thoughtful writer in Renaissance England could fail to notice, say, how problems of politics could influence religion and vice versa. And one who believed in the incarnation of the deity, or who looked for a true resurrection of the flesh, might well find an absolute division between temporal, ever-changing matter and timeless, eternal spirit difficult to sustain. Nevertheless, a distinction can still be drawn between things known by one’s reason alone and those known only by revelation—and hence too between nature and the divine.

I believe that Jesus’ line about Plato refers not to the whole of his philosophy but to what he considers Plato’s most characteristic and fundamental error.² In Plato’s case, the error is directly related to the two lights, natural and divine. Jesus’ conclusion concerning the philosophers asks what they can know since certain essential principles, being the province of revelation only, are unknown to them:

² This is in keeping with the way Jesus handles the other philosophical sects he addresses: “A third sort doubted all things, though plain sense; / Others in virtue placed felicity, / But virtue joined with riches and long life; / In corporeal pleasure he, and careless ease” (ll. 296-9).

Alas! What can they teach, and not mislead,
Ignorant of themselves, of God much more,
And how the World began, and how Man fell,
Degraded by himself, on grace depending? (ll. 309-12)

That their errors derive from faulty principles is clear at the very beginning of the passage, where Jesus calls their doctrines “false, or little else but dreams, / Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm” (ll. 291-2). In the light of these objections, Plato’s fables and smooth conceits are most likely the myths and images which Socrates and others pretend to know not by reason but by some kind of special revelation. Diotima’s account of love and the soul in *Symposium* comes to mind, or the Myth of Er in *Republic*, or the vision of the divine realm and the image of the soul in *Phaedrus*.

This complaint is particularly noteworthy given that Jesus seems to be objecting to precisely those features of Plato which many scholars find most characteristic of Renaissance Platonism. Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and other Renaissance philosophers who studied and used Plato often assume, for instance, that Plato’s fables and fascinating metaphors are signs of a secret, revealed wisdom. Milton’s assessment of Plato thus seems somewhat anomalous or unique for his time—and as can be seen in the fourth chapter, this is precisely how some scholars have regarded Milton’s Platonism. In the following pages, however, I hope to show that, far from being anomalous, Milton’s understanding of Plato is in fact of a piece with other major English authors of the period. For many—including writers as different as Thomas More and Francis Bacon—it was not the revealed or inspired wisdom of Plato but the Plato “led by Nature’s light” which most intrigued them. To understand the ways in which Plato was read and used by such writers we need to revise and update our understanding of Platonism in Renaissance England.

Existing Scholarship on Plato and Renaissance England

In his 1903 doctoral dissertation, *Platonism in English Poetry* (reprinted in 1965), John Smith Harrison examined the influence of Platonic thought on Elizabethan poetry. The source of this Platonism—or Neoplatonism—was, for Harrison, Marsilio Ficino (vii-viii), and its “fundamental doctrine” was that the reality of heavenly beauty was known in and by the soul, while earthly beauty was known only to the senses (1).³ Following Harrison and others, the accepted wisdom became this: lacking a formal school of Platonism in England, English writers turned to the Continent for their understanding of Plato; since Ficino was the most influential Platonist on the Continent, he must therefore be the source of the Platonism we find in England.⁴ So influential was the view of Ficino’s importance to English Platonism that Irene Samuel could advance the claim, in her 1947 study *Plato and Milton*, that Ficino held Erasmus, Ascham, and More under his “spell” as a matter “too generally agreed upon to need further comment” (42-3; Samuel refers the reader to Schroeder’s work at this point).

The view presented by Harrison and others remains dominant. Isabel Rivers’ account of Platonism and Neoplatonism in her *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry* (a work aimed at beginning students of Renaissance literature) is representative. Rivers emphasizes as a central belief common to Plato and his followers the “two worlds” of an intelligible world apprehended by the intellect and a sensible

³ The influence of Ficino and Neoplatonism on the English Renaissance was later explored and Harrison’s initial observations established by Kurt Schroeder (*Platonismus in der Englischen Renaissance*, 1920), W. F. Schirmer (*Antike, Renaissance und Puritanismus*, 1924), Friedrich Dannenberg (*Das Erbe Platons in England*, 1932), and Ernst Cassirer (*The Platonic Renaissance in England*, 1932). For discussion of the influence of these works on our understanding of the Platonism of the English Renaissance, see Jayne (“Ficino” 214-5, and PRE xi-xiii).

⁴ This argument is identified and dismantled by Jayne in his essay, “Ficino and the Platonism of the English Renaissance” (214-5, *et passim*).

world from which the soul strives to escape (35), and traces the Renaissance revival of Platonic thought to late fifteenth century Florentine Neoplatonists, “Ficino in particular,” who were responsible for the dissemination of Platonic and Neoplatonic texts (37). The most influential aspect of Ficino’s thought for English poetry is his theory of Platonic love, which is notable for its influence on poets such as Spenser and Milton (38-9).\

Some scholars point out the limitations of this view, but continue to accept it as descriptive of at least the most significant aspects of English Platonism. Sarah Hutton’s essay in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, which serves as an introduction to the Platonism of the Renaissance, is perhaps the best and most recent example of this position. Hutton points out that certain areas of Plato’s thought largely ignored by Ficino and his followers still found a receptive audience in the Renaissance:

Plato’s concern with moral philosophy and his discussion of the nature of true eloquence coincided with the central pre-occupations of the humanist. Later humanists, notably Erasmus...continued to draw on Platonism as a repository of spiritual and moral values...Sir Thomas More...on the other hand, is distinctive for his interest in the political Plato. (71)

Still, Hutton concludes, “the single most influential aspect of Ficino’s Neoplatonism was his development of the doctrine of Platonic love,” which reached England via the *trattati d’amore* and especially Castiglione’s *Il cortegiano* (71-2).

Several problems attend this view of Plato’s influence in Renaissance England. It often leads scholars to overstate Ficino’s influence in England, when in fact this influence came largely at second or even third hand until the seventeenth century.⁵ It does not, as will be shown more fully below, accord with what we know about the transmission of

⁵ For a full account of Ficino’s influence, or lack thereof, in Renaissance England, see Sears Jayne, “Ficino” (esp. 215-6, 219-22).

texts in England. Above all, it does not account for the considerable variety and complexity of Platonism and Platonic thought in either the Renaissance in general or in England in particular.⁶ Hutton's observation about Erasmus and More indicates the problem: one cannot explain the Platonic influence on Thomas More's *Utopia* or Thomas Elyot's *Of the Knowledge which Maketh a Wise Man*, to say nothing of writers like Francis Bacon or the later Milton, by referring solely to the philosophy of Ficino or Pico della Mirandola.

We need an account of Platonism in Renaissance England which addresses these problems. To that end, I have found it useful to begin with an idea first advanced by Sears Jayne in his essay on Ficino's influence in Renaissance England. Jayne concludes that "Cosmological Platonism," such as we find in John Colet, is for the most part a mere extension of medieval views ("Ficino" 223-4); on the other hand, "Political Platonism," such as we find in More, derives largely from More's reading of Plato himself (238). Jayne attributes this approach to More's society-oriented humanism and contrasts his interest in Plato's ethical theories with Ficino's interest in imaginative metaphysics. He includes writers such as Elyot, Thomas Starkey, Thomas Lupset, and Robert Ascham in a list of those "for whom Plato's own version of his political and educational ideas were what mattered" (224).

Jayne does not develop this concept of "Political Platonism," but in his later full-length study *Plato in Renaissance England* it seems still to inform his understanding of the early English enthusiasm for Plato.⁷ That Jayne does not further explore the concept

⁶ On the extremely variable character of Renaissance Platonism, see P.O. Kristeller ("Renaissance Platonism" 109) and Jayne (PRE xiii).

⁷ This is particularly apparent in his introduction, xiv-xvi.

is unsurprising, since he does not regard the philosophic influence of Plato in Renaissance England as particularly significant (he characterizes 1485-1603 as a “long period of stagnation” for Plato studies). Such exploration is beyond the scope of his major study, since it is “not a history of Plato’s influence, but only of his reputation,” and rather than a history of philosophy it is “merely a history of allusions to Plato in England during the 180 years between 1423 and 1603” (xvi).

My approach begins by developing and extending Jayne’s concept of “Political Platonism.” Where Jayne distinguished it from the “Cosmological Platonism” of Colet, however, I wish to distinguish it also from the Platonism of Ficino, Pico, and others—that is, from what Renaissance scholars usually think of as “Renaissance Platonism.” I then extend the concept to the study of Plato’s influence, in a way making my work a complement to Jayne’s study. By these means I hope to demonstrate the existence and importance of a largely coherent and critical approach to Plato and his works in Renaissance England. With due respect to Jayne, it will be readily apparent that the period from 1485-1603 was not stagnant with respect to Plato studies.

The Platonic Revival(s) in Italy

Jayne speaks of two revivals of Plato studies in Renaissance Italy, which he refers to as the “Chrysoloras Revival” and the “Pletho Revival.” Following Eugenio Garin, Jayne argues that the new translations of Plato, which lie at the heart of the revival of Platonic thought, occur in two bursts. These overlap slightly in chronology, but have different origins and involve translators with markedly different interests. The first appears in scattered intervals between 1402-1456 and begins with the teaching and translating of Manuel Chrysoloras, the first important teacher of Greek in Renaissance

Italy. The second runs from 1446-1476 and culminates in Ficino's translation of the complete works of Plato. The inspirational figure for the second revival is Gemisthus Pletho, who in 1439 brought a new (to the Latin world, at least) conception of Plato's meaning and importance with him to Italy (Jayne, PRE xiv-xv).

The idea of two revivals is useful, but it may be more accurate to speak of two distinct impulses behind the Plato revival. The first impulse is humanist and involves the desire to revive classical authors in general; the development of humane studies—particularly those involved with language such as grammar and rhetoric; the interest in moral and political philosophy; the spur to intellectual, moral, and political reform; and the rejection of speculative philosophy carried on in the Scholastic manner. The second impulse is syncretic and multifarious. Broadly speaking, it involves a desire to harmonize Christian religion, theology, and culture with philosophy (notably, but not exclusively, Platonic philosophy), an “ancient theology,” mystical experience, and even various philosophical and pseudo-philosophical systems.

The first impulse can be traced back at least to Petrarch and his hope of finding in Plato an eloquent philosopher of humane studies (cf Garin, *Italian Humanism* 24-5; Klibansky 32). Petrarch was able to obtain a Greek manuscript containing thirteen dialogues—including both *Republic* and *Laws*, two dialogues almost entirely unknown in the Latin west during the Middle Ages—but never acquired enough Greek to read much in it. The advocacy of those such as Petrarch and Boccaccio for improvement in Greek and classical studies, however, would bear fruit after their deaths during Coluccio Salutati's career as Chancellor of Florence.

Like Petrarch, Salutati placed higher dignity on the study of human things than on the study of nature. Though Salutati was eclectic in his use of philosophical authorities and had little or no direct acquaintance with Plato himself, he considered greater familiarity with Greek language and literature—and particularly with Plato—an important step in improving the study of the human things (cf Garin, *Italian Humanism* 28; Hankins 35; Oliver 323-5). When Manuel Chrysoloras visited Italy in 1390 as a teacher of Greek,⁸ Salutati saw an opportunity to enhance Greek studies and Florentine prestige together. He sent an envoy to Chrysoloras inviting him to come to Florence to teach. Chrysoloras accepted, and became the first important teacher of Greek in the Italian Renaissance. He and his students would produce the first Renaissance translations of Plato's dialogues.

The interests of Salutati and Chrysoloras' early students were well served by Chrysoloras' manner of teaching. Following Byzantine convention, where texts such as Plato's were prized above all for their literary and rhetorical merits, he used selections from the dialogues—particularly *Republic*—as teaching texts. In 1402, together with one of his students, Uberto Decembrio, Chrysoloras produced the first Renaissance translation of Plato: a rough version of the *Republic*. For his part, Uberto used the translation to support the local politics of the Visconti as well as a program of humanist education (cf Hankins 108-10, 113-5; Garin, *Science and Civic Life* 39-40). Guarion of Verona, another of Chrysoloras' students and also a translator,⁹ became an eminent

⁸ The motivation behind Chrysoloras' visit was largely political. In 1389 the Ottoman Turks began a military campaign against Constantinople. The Greek emperor sent Chrysoloras to Italy to feel out western support for his struggle against the Turks. Chrysoloras used the teaching of Greek as a cover for his diplomatic mission (see Jayne, PRE 4-5).

⁹ Though of Plutarch rather than Plato. Nevertheless, as the example of Thomas Elyot will show in the next chapter, Plutarch could be a valuable source of humanist-friendly information about Plato and Platonism.

advocate of humanistic studies of the classics. His son, Battista Guarino, composed a little treatise on teaching and reading the classics—likely following the practice of his father’s school at Ferrara—in which he advocates the reading of Plato’s dialogues as valuable for promoting better understanding of Cicero (Woodward 172). Antonio Cassarino, perhaps the best of the early humanist translators, is notable for his refined understanding of Plato’s style, his appreciation of Plato’s moral doctrine, and his determination to present Plato as he was regardless of his accord with Christianity (Hankins 159-60). Pier Candido Decembrio, son of Uberto, also produced a translation of *Republic* and used it in part to argue for further study of the philosopher on account of his wisdom and utility (Hankins 163).

The most important of Chrysoloras’ students, and also a protégé of Salutati’s who would follow in his footsteps as Chancellor of Florence, is probably Leonardo Bruni. Bruni’s approach to the classics derives from the approach advocated by Petrarch and Salutati before him. He argues that only studies referring to man’s existence (by which he means rhetoric and language study) deserve our attention (Dresden 89-90). He stresses the utility rather than the similarity of pagan culture for Christians (Hankins 51). Bruni’s dedicatory epistle to his 1437 translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics* reveals his humanist bent as clearly as could be hoped. He notes approvingly that the “whole science of government is contained in these books,” and assures the reader that Aristotle’s paganism should be no obstacle since the philosophers on certain moral matters teach the same thing as Christians (Bruni 157). As support for the latter assertion, he refers to Socrates in *Gorgias* saying it is worse to inflict than to suffer an injury (158). In summing up his view of the two kinds of life, the active and contemplative, he asserts that “those

philosophers who were the best held many principles in both of these that are in agreement with our faith and most useful to us for our discipline and knowledge, and which therefore ought to be accepted and turned to our use” (158-9). Above all, Bruni seems particularly to admire Plato’s eloquence and mastery of language: he uses examples from *Phaedrus* to illustrate how a translator must pay attention to both style and content (220-2); he assures his friend Niccoli Niccoli in a 1403 letter that if he manages to translate all of Plato’s works into Latin Niccoli will despise all he has read before in comparison with the majesty, elegance, subtlety, and elevated manner of debate found in Plato (260).

The humanist impulse carried with it certain limitations. Salutati does not combine his enthusiasm with critical understanding of Plato’s philosophy (Oliver 327). None of the early humanist translators, as Hankins shows, sufficiently understand or agree with the basic tenets of Plato’s philosophy to be called Platonists in any meaningful sense. For instance, Cassarino’s appreciation for some aspects of Plato’s philosophy is coupled with frank confusion over many others (Hankins 159-60), while Pier Candido’s advocacy of Plato’s wisdom and utility fell, for the most part, on deaf ears (163). Bruni is particularly noteworthy not for his Platonism but for his Aristotelianism. After his initial enthusiasm, Bruni became increasingly skeptical about Plato’s utility for the humanist studies he championed, and later refused a friend’s request that he translate *Republic* because it contained much that was abhorrent to Christian culture. It is better for Plato’s honor, he writes in response to the request, to be silent about these matters rather than to publicize them (Bruni 288-9; Hankins 74).

The origins of the second impulse are difficult, perhaps impossible, to pinpoint, but Gemisthus Pletho may well be the one who first gave it direction and form. Pletho came to Italy in 1439 as a delegate to the Church Council convened in Florence that year to reconcile the Eastern and Western branches of the Church and resolve certain doctrinal matters. The Greek delegation, since they had little or no Italian, spent their leisure time debating amongst themselves an issue popular in Greek circles: the relative superiority of Plato and Aristotle. Though Pletho did not initiate this debate, with respect to the Italian audience he set its terms in a series of lectures delivered originally in Greek and later condensed into a tract now known by its Latin title, *De differentiis Platonis et Aristotelis* (Jayne, PRE 63). Pletho compared Plato and Aristotle on twenty specific metaphysical and theological issues, with an eye towards their agreement with what he called the “universal theology.”¹⁰ Pletho’s universal theology was a supposedly unified, coherent tradition of religious thought contained in the writings of inspired pagans following an unbroken line of descent from Zoroaster down to Plato and his followers.¹¹ According to Pletho, Plato’s position on each of the twenty issues was in line with the universal theology, while Aristotle’s was deviant and eccentric—thus, Plato was the superior theologian (Jayne, PRE 64).

Pletho’s contribution to this old debate had two significant effects on the revival of Plato studies in the west. First, it stimulated a series of tracts and counter-tracts in which Plato’s philosophical thought entered into intellectual conversation, including a

¹⁰ Jayne lists the most significant of these in *Plato in Renaissance England* (64). The list includes issues such as the nature of God’s creation of the world, the distinction between genus and species, the immortality of the soul, the nature of virtue, the essence of the heavens, and the question of free will versus determinism.

¹¹ Pletho himself is not the origin of this view, but he is likely to one who gave it currency in Renaissance Italy (cf Kristeller, *Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* 15; Walker 1-2, *et passim*).

number of new translations of his works. Second, it led, ultimately, to Ficino's translation of the complete *Works* under the sponsorship of the Medici. The tract war, which would involve scholars such as Bessarion, Theodore of Gaza, George of Trebizond, and Nicholas Cusanus, did not resolve the question of which philosopher was better or superior for Christian culture, but it did provide philosophical support for the old claim that Aristotle was better in physical studies while Plato was superior in divine studies. Bessarion could refer to passages in Plato (chiefly *Parmenides*, but he refers also to *Laws*, *Phaedrus*, and *Phaedo*) to support his assertion that Plato, while certainly a "pagan...and foreign to our religion," nevertheless was "more in harmony with our religion" than Aristotle (Kraye 136-7).¹² In reaction to the disagreement stirred up by Pletho, scholars began to take an interest in Plato's philosophy: Gaza would translate and lecture on *Gorgias* at Ferrara in 1446, while John Argyropoulos would write a new commentary on *Meno* in 1458.

Interest in the debate led to a number of new translations of Plato's works as well. In addition to Gaza's *Gorgias* in 1446, Trebizond produced translations of *Laws* and *Epinomis* (in 1451 at the request of Pope Nicholas V), as well as *Parmenides* (in 1459, at the request of Cusanus); Perotti, a clerk of Bessarion's, translated *Alcibiades II* in 1467. The interest in Plato also provoked interest in guides to understanding Plato. Pietro Balbi translated *Theologica Platonica* for Cusanus in 1462; Fernando Cordova wrote two works, *De duabus philosophiis* (1463) and *De laudibus* (1467), showing the harmony of

¹² This quotation may seem to be misleading, since in context Bessarion says only that *if* one of the two had better beliefs and was more in harmony it would be worth saying so. I think it is clear, however, that Bessarion believes Plato to be more in harmony, since throughout his work he cautions the reader that his praise of Plato's greater affinity on certain matters should not be taken as a blanket condemnation of Aristotle. Bessarion seems to have been almost as much a politician as a scholar in this debate, since he is so careful to insist that he does not mean to disparage Aristotle or his followers and advocates.

Platonism with earlier scholastic philosophy. In 1469, editions of Apuleius' *De deo Socratis* and *De dogmate* were published at Rome, along with Albinus' introduction to Plato.

According to Ficino, Pletho's most significant contribution to Plato studies came in persuading Cosimo de' Medici in 1439 to become a major sponsor of Platonic theology. While Ficino might exaggerate Pletho's powers of persuasion (see Jayne, PRE 70 for a skeptical account of Ficino's story), it is certain that Pletho gave Cosimo a Greek manuscript containing Plato's complete works at this time. When, twenty years later, Cosimo got around to commissioning a translation, he dictated the terms under which that translation was made. The terms turned out to be "in accord with Pletho's conception of why Plato's *Works* were important in the first place, namely, that Plato was an important link in a long chain of authorities who espoused a universal religion, a religion that was the ancestor of Christianity, and had followers in every major pre-Christian culture" (Jayne, PRE 70). Though Plato was only one in a long chain of "ancient theologians," since his works were the most voluminous Pletho called his universal religion the "Platonic Theology." This in turn became the title of Ficino's major philosophical work. Ficino's translating activities remained in keeping with Pletho's vision: in addition to Plato's *Works* he would also produce Latin versions of the *Hermetica*, the *Orphica*, and the *Enneads* of Plotinus.

For the most part, it is the second impulse which is most characteristic of Renaissance Platonism. The case of Leonardo Bruni is an excellent example of why. Early in his career, Bruni was clearly impressed with the possibilities Plato offered a civic-minded, faithful humanist. In the 1403 letter to Niccoli he says Plato's sentiments,

“divine and fruitful, are expressed with a marvelous pleasantness...and with an incredible command of language” (Bruni 260). The joining of “divine and fruitful” suggests Bruni’s interest in both Plato’s harmony with the faith (the syncretic impulse is not without its effects on humanists as well) as well as the utility of his ideas. The praise of Plato’s style suggests admiration of his combination of learning and eloquence, a combination humanists prized. As late as 1510, in the preface to his translation of *Gorgias*, Bruni continues to avow Plato’s usefulness for confirming the true faith: “on moral matters, so sound and healthy are [Plato’s] teachings that whenever I read his works, I could suppose myself hearing Peter and Paul handing down the precepts of life” (260-1). Bruni again asserts the harmony between Plato and Christian teaching—though not, it should be noted, in theology or metaphysics but in “moral matters.”

When Bruni later develops serious doubts about Plato, he does so not because his reading of him changes, but because as he confronted the actual works of the actual Plato he was confused and disappointed by how little use he found in Plato for his own aims. The brief account Bruni adds to the preface of his life of Aristotle is revealing. After somewhat halfheartedly asserting that on major points of doctrine Plato and Aristotle are in agreement, he admits that there are some “minor” points of divergence and proceeds to note several difficulties he finds with Plato’s doctrines. At times, he says, they seem to depend upon the acceptance of a well-disposed mind rather than on necessary proofs. Too much of his teaching is “more akin to revelation than to demonstration.” In establishing his ideal state, he “expressed some opinions utterly abhorrent to our customs and ways of

living.”¹³ In the end, Bruni suggests, Plato’s works “are more suitable for men who are already ripe and finished scholars; tender wits will not be able to find sufficient instruction in them” (288-9). As the first, dominant impulse which led him to study Plato became frustrated by what he found in Plato, Bruni turned instead to Aristotle—and became one of the premiere Aristotelians of the Italian Renaissance.

Given Plato’s hard words about rhetoric, poetry, and even the very principles behind the educational program the humanists advocated, it is not hard to see why humanists who turned to Plato studies might have turned away disappointed or confused by what they found. Some of Plato’s most serious objections to rhetoric and poetry come in *Gorgias* and *Republic*, two dialogues to which Bruni and the other early humanist translators turned more than once to make Latin versions. For those impelled primarily by the hope of finding a theological philosophy, on the other hand, there was a wealth of hermeneutic tools and secondary material available to sustain that impulse. Neoplatonic allegorical interpretation was a useful and well-labored tool, and the work of philosophers such as Proclus and Plotinus had already gone a long way toward making Platonism into a coherent, rational theology. Furthermore, a wealthy and powerful family—the Medici—was already sufficiently convinced of the value of Plato studies for their regime to subsidize the monumental efforts needed to translate and interpret Platonic philosophy for a Renaissance audience. It is hardly surprising, then, that Kristeller would insist on a distinction between humanism and Renaissance Platonism, asserting that Platonism was nourished by other springs than humanism (cf Kristeller’s

¹³ One such opinion is the matter of wives being held in common. In such a situation, Bruni complains, no man could tell his own children from a stranger’s. Bruni likely gathered this objection from Aristotle, who comes to a similar conclusion about the community of wives and children in his *Politics*.

Eight Philosophers 37-8; *Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* 13-5; *Renaissance Thought and its Sources* 57-8; and his essay, “Renaissance Platonism” 105-7).

Political Platonism and Theological Platonism

The approach to Plato studies which first appears in Renaissance England, which, following Jayne, I refer to as “Political Platonism,” is an approach in which the first impulse, the humanist, is predominant. If one turns to Plato and other classical authorities for social and political wisdom or philosophic eloquence, one will read Plato differently from those who read him as the supreme example of an ancient theological wisdom. This is not to suggest that Ficino was unaware of or uninterested in Plato’s political ideas, or that Bruni was unaware of Plato’s possible theological significance—both these assertions, in fact, are false. Nor is it to suggest that English readers who took an interest in Political Platonism were unaware of or uninterested in the possible religious dimensions of Plato’s thought. Political and moral thought was so tied to religious and theological thought in Renaissance England that one can hardly find, say, a political idea without religious implications. The tendency in England, however, was to approach Plato more as a “natural” rather than an inspired writer. And in the relative absence of teaching or commentary traditions on Platonic dialogues, aside from *Timaeus*, any preconceived notions about Plato or expectations regarding the content of his works exerted a tremendous influence on those who read him.

For practical purposes, I think we can make a distinction between Political Platonism, in which the humanist impulse is predominant, and Theological Platonism, in

which the dominant impulse is syncretic.¹⁴ First, in terms of the traditional scholarly division of Renaissance philosophy—logic, natural philosophy, metaphysics, and moral philosophy—Political Platonism is an approach focused on the latter, on Plato’s political, ethical, and educational ideas.¹⁵ Theological Platonism, though certainly aware of Plato’s significance in natural and moral philosophy, focuses primarily on metaphysics. In practical terms, Political Platonism examines dialogues such as *Republic* or *Laws* in which political and ethical ideas such as the best regime or the nature of justice or law are primary. Theological Platonism prefers dialogues such as *Parmenides*, which on Neoplatonic authority was believed to contain the sublimest part of Plato’s theology, or *Timaeus*, which was prized as a rational account of the divine fact of the creation of the world. Even when two writers use the same dialogue, such as the *Laws*, the impulses behind their readings of it are often shown in which ideas from the dialogue receive attention—the difficulty of legislating customary matters, for instance, versus the proof of the immortality of the soul. Finally, readers impelled by humanist interests tend to read Plato’s own works, and to read them in the context of other philosophers—Aristotle and Cicero, for example—rather than in that of religious or mystical authorities such as Dionysius the Areopagite or the Hermetic treatises. Neoplatonic philosophers such as Plotinus and Proclus, since they provided arguments and hermeneutic tools useful for understanding Plato’s work as a whole, and specifically as a *religious* whole, are of far

¹⁴ This is a problematic term here since humanists can be no less syncretic in their approach to classical authorities. With philosophers such as Ficino and Pico, however, I believe the impulse is to assimilate wholes to wholes—for example, Platonic thought with Christian theology (in the case of Ficino). With most humanists the tendency is eclectic, assimilating parts with other parts (a useful idea in Seneca with an idea in Quintilian, for example). Their aim was not reconciliation of one philosophy with another but a reconciliation of classical authorities with contemporary Christian culture.

¹⁵ My account of this division of philosophy derives from Skinner’s introduction to *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*: “within the Renaissance textbook tradition [philosophy] was in general divided into four main fields: logic, natural philosophy, metaphysics, and moral philosophy” (4).

greater importance for Theological Platonism. Since in the following chapters I will examine Political Platonism in practice in England, I think it would be helpful to provide some specific illustrations of the differences between Political and Theological Platonism as outlined here.

Writers inspired by the syncretic impulse, which sees Plato as a link in a chain of ancient theologians, naturally emphasize Platonic metaphysics—his study of the divine, rather than the human things. This emphasis is distinctive in Ficino, the most influential and important Platonic philosopher of the Renaissance. He begins his major work, the *Platonic Theology*, by declaring that his intent is to let us explore the divinity of our created minds so that those who find it hard to yield to divine law alone can at least give assent to what Platonic reason teaches (149). In his letters he is even more effusive. The letter to Cavalcanti (I.41) defending his interest in Plato argues that only divine things truly exist: physical bodies are constantly changing and are only images of what is true, while the divine is always the same. Plato, unlike most philosophers, attended not to natural studies but to the divine—that is, to metaphysics. Thus, he was the only philosopher truly awake, or at least he was more awake than anyone else (83-4). The letter to Agli on the “divine frenzy” (I.7) refers to Plato’s opinion about the soul in *Phaedrus*. Before descending into the body it dwelt in the abodes of heaven, where it rejoiced in contemplation of the truth. Unfortunately, in this life the soul is weighed down through contemplation of earthly things. Through philosophy, the study of eternal things, however, the soul may grow the wings wherewith to fly back to heaven (42-3). In an extensive letter in which he expounds on the nature of Platonic philosophy (III.18), Ficino defines philosophy as the love of wisdom, and wisdom in turn as contemplation of

the divine. He urges the philosophically-minded to scorn what is subject to corruption and direct their minds instead to what remains always the same (28-9).

The same emphasis on the divine and scorn for merely human studies can also be found in Pico della Mirandola, the second major figure in Renaissance Platonism. When his friend Ermoalo Barbaro wrote to him complaining of the barbarism and ineloquence of the Scholastics and praising humanist studies, Pico replied in 1485, defending Scholastic philosophy by contrasting the lies of the orator with the philosopher who aims only at truth and the communication thereof. The tricks of the orators—the very eloquence Barbaro had praised—are fine in law-courts, Pico concludes, “but not when one is discussing the great problems of Nature and the things beyond” (OBU 5). *Of Being and Unity*, a treatise which aims at showing the agreement of Plato and Aristotle on the first principles of things (cf 12-3), is concerned almost exclusively with metaphysics. Pico’s *Commentary on Bienvieni* uses an explicitly Platonic metaphysics (cf 4-8) to expound on the nature and meaning of Platonic love. Particularly of note is Pico’s insistence that “Celestial Love,” which he identifies with theology or metaphysics, directs human beings towards spiritual things—the only things truly real. “Vulgar Love,” on the other hand, which he identifies with natural or moral philosophy, may put the soul’s desire for the higher things to sleep (63, 68-70).

Ficino and Pico were both aware, of course, of Plato’s political and moral philosophy, but they accorded it a decidedly secondary place. According to Ficino, Plato presents his moral philosophy in *Republic*, his natural philosophy in *Timaeus*, and his theology in *Parmenides* (see MJB Allen 49-50); but though Plato outdoes other philosophers in the first two works, in the latter he outdoes “even himself.” In his letter to

Angiolieri (III.26) addressing the fundamental disagreement between philosophers and politicians, he summons Plato as arbiter on this question on the grounds that he was apt at both divine and human matters (55). He presents Plato's position on this question through an interpretation of the cave allegory in *Republic*. Philosophers and men of affairs, Ficino asserts, may each serve equally well in divine or human matters, so long as men do not move too suddenly from one study to the other. Otherwise their eyes, trained to look at objects in the cave or in the sunlight, will not have time to adjust. Ficino goes on to warn his readers, though, that we should not be surprised if those who study divine matters become so taken with the world above that they no longer wish to deal with the human world (58).

Those impelled to Plato by humanist interests, on the other hand, look to him for his value in humane studies. Salutati refers approvingly to Plato when declaring that the governance of men is the proper function of the philosopher.¹⁶ Bruni uses Plato's account of the guardian class in *Republic* to defend his own concept of the *militia* (Bruni 129-30, 132). In the preface to his translation of Aristotle's *Politics* he accords an eminent place to moral and political philosophy, even to the point of considering a person ignorant of the nature of civil society and the causes of its excellence or destruction foolish or even impious. This is why, he asserts, Plato "devoted his major effort to expounding and teaching this subject" (162-3). Even after he had developed serious doubts about Plato's utility for his own political thought, Bruni continued to praise him as a master of eloquence. In his little essay, "On the Correct Way to Translate," he calls "Aristotle himself and Plato...the very greatest masters of literature [who] practiced a most elegant

¹⁶ "Platonicum immo ipsius philosophiae oraculum est, sapientibus necessarium causam esse capassendae reipublicae" (quoted in Oliver 331).

kind of writing filled with the sayings and maxims of the old poets and orators and historians” (218). The same essay warns the translator to capture both the meaning and the manner of writers like this because good writers like Plato always combine learning and style (220).¹⁷

Ficino’s view of wisdom mentioned above could be fairly contrasted with Erasmus’ view in *Education of a Christian Prince*. In that work, Erasmus directs the reader toward Aristotle, Xenophon, and Proverbs as teaching a wisdom by which “princes rule and nobles dispense justice.” In praising this wisdom, he brings in the authority of Plato. Plato is so meticulous in the education of his guardians, Erasmus says, that he would have them surpass the common people not in riches or ancestry but in wisdom only. This emphasis on wisdom is what led Plato to claim that no commonwealth could be happy unless philosophers were given the rule or those who ruled seriously took up philosophy. But, he warns us, Plato did not mean natural philosophy or metaphysical speculation (“arguing about elements and primal matter, motion or the infinite”), but studies which “free...the mind from the false opinions of the multitude and from wrong desires and demonstrate...the principles of right government by reference to the example set by the eternal powers” (2). Where Ficino looked to Plato as a guide to vision of the divine good, Erasmus seems content with his authority in describing the human good.

Those who read Plato as primarily a theologian gravitated towards those dialogues in which Plato’s religious views were supposedly promulgated. When Cardinal Bessarion defended Plato from George of Trebizond’s attacks, he did so on the grounds that Plato’s teaching on divine matters was in fundamental accord with Christian

¹⁷ Bruni uses an extensive passage from his own translation of *Phaedrus* to demonstrate his principles. See Bruni 222-3 (and translator Hankins’ comments on both pages).

teaching. When he refers to Plato's works to prove this point, he turns primarily to the *Parmenides* (Kraye 137). When he refers to other dialogues, it is their religious teaching which interests him. Thus, he discussed book 10 of *Laws*, but only concerning its teaching about the existence and essence of the soul (143).

The importance of *Parmenides* to theological thought had been known since the Middle Ages (when the dialogue itself was unavailable). Chalcidius' famous commentary on the *Timaeus* asserts that that dialogue focuses on physics and must therefore be content with a probable account, while the teaching of *Parmenides* "flows from the source of true knowledge" (quoted in Klibansky 282). Chalcidius' view originates in the Neoplatonic tradition of Iamblichus and Proclus—particularly the latter, who considered *Parmenides* the culmination of Plato's teaching and the peak of his metaphysics (Klibansky 283-4). Ficino clearly accepts this view.

Ficino understands Plato's canon in terms of his theology. He links *Philebus* and *Sophist*, again on Neoplatonic authority, with *Parmenides* as together containing the core of Plato's metaphysical teaching. According to this view, *Parmenides* presents Plato's teaching on the One, the transcendent and ineffable principle of the Ideas. *Philebus* then discusses the next step in metaphysical descent, the emergence from the One of the two ultimate principles, the limited and the unlimited. Finally, *Sophist* presents the second step in the descent, the emergence or emanation of Being (MJB Allen 49-50). In the case of *Sophist* Ficino must engage in considerable interpretive maneuvering since the declared theme of that dialogue, the character of the sophist, scarcely seems adequate to what the Neoplatonists held its real theme to be: the emanation of Being from the One. Ficino gets around this difficulty by asserting that the "sophist" the dialogue really

discusses is the mysterious demiurge introduced in *Timaeus* (MJB Allen 205-6). These dialogues—*Philebus*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Timaeus*—together with *Phaedrus* are the ones Ficino spent the last decade of his life expounding; his commentaries on them are in large part responsible for his philosophical stature as a Platonist (MJB Allen 209-10).

When Ficino makes use of secondary “Platonic” sources he does so with an eye towards uncovering or developing the Platonic theology. His understanding of the *Corpus Hermeticum*,¹⁸ for instance, subordinates those treatises to Plato’s *Timaeus*, in keeping with the view he expresses in *The Christian Religion* that “the whole of ancient theology is contained [and perfected] in the volumes of Plato” (quoted in MJB Allen 43). Ficino’s references to Neoplatonic philosophers demonstrate his belief that their philosophy not only accords with Plato’s but is valuable, if not essential, in understanding Plato’s. This view is most clearly expressed in a letter to Bessarion (I.13) on the interpreters of Plato. He speaks of God giving to Plato the “precious gold” of wisdom which we may find in his words and writings. But this wisdom is hard to find without help:

The treasure became enveloped by darkness in the mind and difficult to see, as if covered with a cloak of earth. It lay hidden from any man who did not have eyes like a lynx. For this reason some men of narrow learning were once deceived by the outer crust and, since they could not penetrate to the core, they despised the hidden treasure. But when that gold was put into the workshop first of Plotinus then of Porphyry, Iamblichus and eventually of Proclus, the earth was removed by the searching test of fire, and the gold so shone that it filled the whole world again with marvelous splendor. (52-3)

The metaphor suggests that the Neoplatonists helped Ficino get through potentially confusing features of Plato’s writing, such as the myths or the vagaries of the dialogue

¹⁸ A collection of treatises now understood as loosely related at best. In Ficino’s time they were commonly believed to be works by one “Hermes Trismegistus,” a curious figure and ancient theologian, expressing a unified and coherent theology (see MJB Allen 42-3; Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought* 52-3; Walker 1-2).

form, to reach the inspired core of what Plato “really meant.” Following his translation of Plato’s *Works*, Ficino went on to translate Plotinus’ *Enneads*. Frequent references to other Neoplatonists, notably Proclus and his *Platonic Theology*, attest to the influence these philosophers held on his understanding of Plato.

Other Renaissance Platonists may disagree with Ficino, and with one another, on the particulars of Plato’s “hidden treasure,” but they tend to agree about the nature of that treasure. Pico is perhaps the best example of this, since his knowledge of Plato and familiarity with a wide variety of philosophical and religious traditions was at least equal to Ficino’s own, while his disagreements with certain of Ficino’s interpretations attest to an independence of spirit. Pico’s reading of *Parmenides* is probably the most well-known disagreement. He believed he could reconcile not only Plato and Christianity, as Ficino did, but also Plato and Aristotle (see MJB Allen 1-2, 39-47), if not any number of disparate wisdom traditions. The Neoplatonic reading of *Parmenides* advanced by Ficino made the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle difficult, since it held that Plato possessed a mystery unknown to Aristotle: knowledge of the One beyond Being. Ficino identified this One with the Christian God, and because of Plato’s knowledge of it asserted his superiority to Aristotle (see Klibansky 319). Pico attacks the Neoplatonic reading by arguing that the theme of *Parmenides* is actually the dialectic method itself.¹⁹ His argument is that Plato’s true teaching on the One and Being is found in *Sophist* alone. To preserve the harmony between Plato and Aristotle he argues that in that dialogue Plato

¹⁹ Unlike the Neoplatonists Pico insists upon the hypothetical character of most of this dialogue’s assertions (cf *Of Being* 14-5). Most Neoplatonic interpretations take the dialogue “straight.”

does not, as Ficino and others Platonists claimed, assert that the One is above Being, but instead views them as equal (cf MJB Allen 40-2, 46).²⁰

Pico is not a Platonist in the same sense as Ficino since his interests are more eclectic and his intentions much broader. Still, his use of Plato's texts and secondary sources by other putatively Platonic writers shows that, like Ficino, he reads Plato as primarily and essentially a theologian. In the *Commentary on Beinviene* he refers to and uses *Philebus*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus* to ground his metaphysical understanding of Platonic love (cf 10, 31, 65), as well as to explain the different names Platonists and other ancient theologians use for the same "mysteries" (8-9). Like Ficino, he views Love as a phenomenon that directs the soul towards the divine things—that is, towards the metaphysical world. Love is the "cause of the Mind's conversion to God, and of the Soul's to the Mind," and through Celestial Love the Mind turns towards the spiritual things which are the only things true and real (67-8). Unlike Ficino, however, Pico harbors considerable doubt that the object of love is attainable in this life. And he flatly denies that love and beauty have existence separate from matter (76).

The most crucial difference between Theological Platonism and Political Platonism with regard to texts arises from this: the humanist reader of Plato is rarely or never a Platonist. His use of Platonic texts is eclectic, particular (that is, focused on each dialogue largely in isolation from the rest), and mingled freely with other sources. Where Ficino, Pico and others show awareness of and concern for the interrelationship of Plato's texts as well as their connection with other works in the same field of study, the humanist approach is to turn to specific dialogues of interest and mine them for useful ideas.

²⁰ In order to sustain his reading, however, Pico is forced to overlook or ignore the passage at 244c in *Sophist* where the Stranger points out that using two names, 'being' and 'the one', for the same thing is absurd.

Uberto Decembrio is an excellent early example of just such an approach. He advances his translation of *Republic* as justification for the rule of the wise and an extensive program of humanist education for those naturally fit for such studies (Hankins 113-5). The education he recommends is quite different from the one found in *Republic*, though he cites it as an authority. Decembrio admires the polity Plato presents in books 2-7, but is skeptical about its practical application since it demands too much “holiness” from its citizens. Still, it retains value for him as an ideal along the lines of Cicero’s *De oratore*, exhibiting the character of an ideally just man (Hankins 115-7).

With Bruni we can see both the humanist appreciation and enthusiasm for Plato and the development of doubts about his ultimate utility. His decision to translate *Gorgias* may have been prompted by Cicero, who traced to that dialogue the traditional philosophical opposition to the ideal of the broadly educated citizen-orator—an ideal Bruni himself was developing or recovering for contemporary Italy (Hankins 31-2). In the preface to his 1510 translation he points specifically to the moral doctrine contained in that work as the source of its primary value (Bruni 260-1). His account of the *militia* links Plato’s discussion of the guardian class in *Republic* to the political work of Hippodamus of Miletus and his discussion of the need for a warrior class (Bruni 129-32). In his preface to the translation of Aristotle’s *Politics* he associates Plato’s books on *Republic* with Cicero’s on “the same subject” and Aristotle’s own work which also “embrace[s] this problem” (162-3).

Bruni’s use of Plato’s political ideas is typical of the eclectic, piecemeal borrowing used by later humanists. In his *Laudatio* of Florence, his wish that architectural planning correspond to social and political structures leads him to present a

rational model “substantially identical with that drawn in the sixth book of Plato’s *Laws*” (Garin, *Science and Civic Life* 30-1). In the same work Bruni also invokes the authority of Plato, “by far the prince of all the philosophers,” when he considers the best place to build a city. After noting that some consider Florence defective because it is not located next to the sea, Bruni points to Plato in *Laws*, where he argues that it is better that a city not be too close to the sea. As Mansfield points out in his essay comparing Bruni with Machiavelli on the issue of “civic humanism,” Bruni invokes Plato’s argument and authority here in order gently to criticize—in a place where overt criticism would have been inappropriate—Florence’s excessive concern with commercial affairs (Mansfield 235-6). In the passage in *Laws* where Plato argues that a city is better off not being close to the sea, the Stranger argues that a city too close to the sea will find the acquisition of virtue difficult because it tempts people to engage in commerce and money-making. Bruni mentions the argument but omits Plato’s main point, instead leaving the reader to raise it for himself.

Even when Bruni emphasizes, as Pico and Ficino did, the contemplative and religious teaching of Plato, he places it in a civic context. Thus in the dedicatory epistle to his translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*, which he addressed to Pope Eugenius IV, he argues that the pagan philosophers taught many things similar to Christian teaching. The examples Bruni cites, however, are not theological but matters of moral virtue (see Bruni 157). When he cites specific examples of this harmony he refers to passages in *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, and Plato’s *Letters*. He concludes that there are two kinds of life: one busy, civil, and devoted to action (the life ruled by the moral virtues) and the other devoted to contemplation, wisdom, intuition, and knowledge (the life ruled by the intellectual

virtues). Though he has just referred to Plato in *Phaedrus* speaking of a man being elevated by contemplation of the divine things and leaving aside the cares of men, he now adds that “those philosophers who were the best held many principles in both of these that are in agreement with our faith and most useful to us for our discipline and knowledge, and which therefore ought to be accepted and turned to our use” (158-9). The suggestion of “many principles” being of value, as opposed to an entire doctrine or system of values, suggests a selective reading in the philosophers for useful *sententiae*.

Bruni was above all appreciative of Plato as a model of philosophical writing. His little treatise “On the Correct Way to Translate” demonstrates this. He argues that Aristotle and Plato were the very greatest masters of literature and practiced an elegant way of writing and employed many “tropes and figures of speech that have acquired idiomatic meanings far different from their literal meanings,” and therefore the translator must pay attention in order to preserve both the learning and the literary style of such authors (218, 220). As evidence of this, he refers extensively to his own translation of *Phaedrus*, pointing to the rhythm of the words and the use of figures prominent in the original, which his translation attempts to preserve. The examples he uses are little snippets of moral teachings: the figure of the seditious soul which may give in to the tyranny of drink, or the antithesis between an innate desire for pleasure and an acquired judgment which aims at the best (222).

When Bruni turns from Plato to Aristotle, he does so because of the difficulty he had in accepting certain teachings, which he regarded as immoral, of the former and the superiority as a teacher which he found in the latter. In his “Life of Aristotle” he points to several places where Plato “expressed some opinions utterly abhorrent to our customs

and ways of living” (specifically, wives being held in common and the implication of incest arising therefrom). He concludes that Aristotle’s works are excellent for providing instruction to the young, nourishment to those of middling ability, and exercise and polish to the mature. Plato’s works are fit only for the last group (288-9).

What I call Political Platonism is the approach of those who continue to be driven to Plato by the same impulse which directed the early humanists towards him. This approach assumes that Plato is above all, or most significantly, a moral and political philosopher. His writings are understood in the context of philosophers such as Aristotle, Cicero, or even Plutarch rather than the context of Neoplatonists like Plotinus or religious mystics like Dionysius. Political Platonism as an approach does not lead to or require a comprehensive understanding of Plato’s complete works or fundamental tenet. Instead, eclectic and occasional use of Platonic thought—usually in a social or political context—is typical. The following chapters of my study will explore how Political Platonism appears in practice in the works of several English Renaissance writers.

Political Platonism, England, and the Transmission of Texts

As I mention above, the usual understanding of Platonism in Renaissance England does not accord well with what we know of the early transmission of Platonic texts. In my view, Political Platonism does a better job with these facts. I assume that writers impelled to the study of Plato by humanist interests, the interest in recovering ancient culture for a modern world, read and understood Plato differently from those who looked to him for religious or theological guidance. The earliest acquisition of Platonic texts by English collectors seems to have been motivated by the humanist interest in its most

material form—the desire at least to possess artifacts of the ancient world, if not exactly to understand them.

The interest in collecting in England begins in earnest in the early fifteenth century, as Englishmen become involved in the revival of learning and Greek studies already taking place on the Continent. Their interest led them primarily to the revival which was begun or given life by Manuel Chrysoloras and his students. Thus, when early English collectors begin to acquire books and manuscripts containing works of Plato, either in Greek or in Latin translation, it is medieval works or the works of Chrysoloras' humanist successors which they acquire. At its outset, the revival of Platonic thought in Renaissance England is informed either by simple augmentation of medieval conceptions or by the humanist impulse toward revival.²¹

The earliest figure in the revival of Greek studies in England is Thomas Arundel. In 1390 he traveled to Florence where he met, and later kept in contact, with Salutati. Through Salutati he learned of Chrysoloras' teaching in Italy. After Arundel became Archbishop of Canterbury, Chrysoloras even visited England at his invitation in 1409. Following Arundel, it became common practice for English student travelers to go to Italy to continue or finish their education. Chrysoloras' student, the humanist Guarino da Verona, was a popular teacher for many of these students. He attracted many of the best, including: William Grey (in 1444), Robert Flemmyng (1447), John Free (1456), and John Tiptoft and John Gunthorpe (1459). Other early or proto-humanists such as Selling, Grocyn, Linacre, and Thomas Chaundler also made the journey to Italian centers of learning to further their education in classical studies.

²¹ For examples of English thought being informed by this conception see Jayne, "Ficino" 221-5, where he contrasts it with the "new political and educational Platonism."

These travelers brought two things back with them to England: awareness of the new studies of the classics taking place on the continent, and new translations of classical works—including Plato’s dialogues. Chaundler in letters from his 1479 tour of Italy specifically notes the fashion of studying Plato and refers particularly to Italian interest in *Apology* and *Republic* (Jayne, PRE 15-6). Gunthorpe brought back a new translation of *Axiochus* by Cencio, one of Chrysoloras’ students, as well as Bruni’s translations of *Apology* and *Crito* and Chalcidius’ medieval translation of *Timaeus*. Grey acquired translations of *Axiochus*, *Euthyphro*, and *Crito* (the latter by Chrysoloras’ student, Rinuccio), as well as Pier Candido Decembrio’s *Republic* and *Letters* and Bruni’s preface to *Phaedo*. The presence of these new texts, however, did not yet change the old medieval conceptions of Plato (see Jayne, PRE 21-22).

Abbot Whethamstede (c1400-1465) is one of the most important figures from this period for his acquisition of texts. He is the first English traveler known to have brought back new translations of Plato, following his journey to Padua in 1423-4.²² During his journey, Whethamstede met with, and was much impressed by, a young Leonardo Bruni. He even encouraged Duke Humphrey to employ Bruni as his personal secretary—a post Bruni would politely decline. Whethamstede is also the first Englishman to quote Bruni in his writings, and his enthusiastic advertising made Bruni and his works well known about Englishmen. Grey, Gunthorpe, Flemmyng, Richard Bole, and John Doget, among others, made a point of obtaining copies of Bruni’s works and translations for themselves. Whethamstede was impressed by Bruni’s knowledge of Plato, and though he was unable on his journey to obtain copies of his translations, he did get, as a gift for Humphrey,

²² Ostensibly, Wethamstede went to attend the Council there. But his real interest was in seeing the classical revival taking place there, and acquiring books for the library he wanted to build at his monastery (Jayne, PRE 17).

copies of the medieval translations (Aristippus' *Phaedo* and *Meno* and Chalcidius' *Timaeus*). More important, he encouraged the Duke to make further acquisitions in this vein. The most significant result of this encouragement was the correspondence Humphrey opened up with Pier Candido Decembrio (son of Uberto). In his letters Humphrey gave indication of his interest in sponsoring a new translation of *Republic*; P.C. Decembrio would finish such a translation, one heavily cribbed from his father's earlier version, in the 1640's, but when Humphrey failed to provide payment he was discouraged from further efforts.

From his notebooks it is clear that Whethamstede himself retained a largely medieval conception of Plato. The sources he refers to in his notebook entry on Plato are all pre-Renaissance, and he himself seems to know very little of Plato's actual writings. Still, the entry also shows the humanist impulse towards the study of Plato at work. The section in which it appears is essentially an alphabetical dictionary of moral philosophy. The entry itself begins by observing that Plato was the philosopher who said a state would be best off either when its kings were wise men or its wise men were rulers—probably the most well-known of Plato's sayings in Renaissance England. He singles Plato out for distinction as the first philosopher to discuss politics, though his information is clearly all from report since he only claims that Plato wrote several excellent “short books” on the subject. He refers to Plato as more distinguished in ethics than any other philosopher, but using examples which indicate he is thinking of Plato being “distinguished” in terms of his moral character rather than his philosophical beliefs. Whethamstede ultimately shows the state of Plato studies in early Renaissance England:

medieval in scope but inclining towards the humanist impulse which took root in Italy during the Chrysoloras revival (Jayne, PRE 21-5).

The fate of this initial interest in Plato and Greek studies may be illustrated by the story of the four Greek refugees who came to London in 1455. After Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, many Greek scholars fled to the west. The English Royal Council, which at this time included four influential members who had taken special interest in Greek studies while students (Grey, Tiptoft, William Waynfleet and Andrew Holes), appropriated funds to bring four refugee-scholars to England. The Council hoped to establish Greek studies on firmer footing with this move. Unfortunately, the Wars of the Roses broke out soon after the men arrived. As their noble sponsors became preoccupied with the war, three of the men returned to Italy, while one stayed on in the employ of Neville, later Archbishop of York. The development of Greek studies, and the nascent interest in Plato, would have to wait until the resolution of the wars and the establishment of the Tudor dynasty to take off. At that time, the early seeds of the Chrysoloras revival would combine with the political pressures facing the new regime to produce the first fruits of Political Platonism in England.

In the following three chapters I will examine the character and persistence of Political Platonism as an approach to reading and understanding Plato and his works. The second chapter examines its initial appearance with the early Tudors, where the political pressures of the new regime and the cultural interests of the humanists gave it form. In the third chapter I consider the persistence of the approach with Francis Bacon, whose own cultural interests—specifically his interest in establishing and obtaining support for the new science—produce not so much a new way of reading Plato as a different

estimation of his value. In the fourth chapter, I consider the persistence of Political Platonism in John Milton (who, with Bacon, may be the most well-read in Plato's actual works of Renaissance Englishmen). In Milton's case, the approach is modified by a combination of religious conviction and republican political hopes.

CHAPTER 2

POLITICAL PLATONISM AND THE EARLY TUDORS

The early infusion of Platonic texts produced little in terms of Platonic scholarship in England, but with the early Tudors the availability of texts, combined with the humanist impulse towards classical studies and the political needs of the new regime, began to exert significant influence on several English writers. Like the early humanist translators of Plato, the Tudors were more interested in a political brand of Platonism than in Plato the divinely inspired theologian. Unlike in Italy, however, where increased familiarity with Plato's actual works brought such difficulties to light that many—such as Bruni—turned to other sources, in England Plato remained firmly in the cache of classical authorities used by civic-minded humanist authors.

The Tudor regime had two primary political needs early on which English intellectuals were able to address: an easily intelligible, religious, and popular assertion of subjects' duty of obedience, as well as the wickedness of rebellion, and an educated and active country gentry.²³ Rebellion had long been an endemic problem in England, but after years of devastating civil conflict the early Tudors, and particularly Henry VIII at the time of his break with Rome, found it particularly pressing. Following the Wars of the Roses the Tudors had nearly to remake the English government as well as to restore stability to the realm.

²³ My account of these issues is based on several works: JW Allen's *History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, Caspari's *Humanism and the Social Order*, and Ferguson's *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance*.

Their needs tended to encourage the growth of a conservative humanism for which ethical problems were primary (cf JW Allen 124, Caspari 13, Ferguson 166-7). One result of this tendency was the application of the medieval idea of the “very and true commonweal”—a view of English society as a cooperative association largely for economic purposes—in which the duty of each member to the whole was primary, and each citizen worked in his own way for the common good (JW Allen 137, Ferguson 20). Another result was acceptance of or compromise with the status quo. Even those who argued, for instance, that true nobility derived from virtue and merit rather than from inherited wealth still accepted the customary hierarchy of the English nobility. They found it more successful to argue for better education of the noble class rather than, say, for the elevation of educated commoners to the gentry or nobility (cf Ferguson 186-8).

The need for an educated country gentry arose directly from the nobility’s weakness and disarray following the Wars of the Roses. The Tudors often used the country gentry as local governors to avoid reliance on a nobility they distrusted. Through the gentry they tried to keep the people, whom they feared, in check. To achieve their ends, Tudor monarchs raised a number of men from gentry to the peerage and placed in their hands—that is, in the hands of men who owed their status to Tudor power—the bulk of local government. This approach made necessary a new and improved education: one which combined the traditional medieval knightly education in martial virtues and physical activities with the scholarly education formerly exclusive to the clergy.

In serving the latter need English humanists were of particular use. The Ciceronian ideal of an educated, moral, active citizen proved quite adaptable to the needs of the new regime. A careful and comprehensive education was needed to produce such

men, and broadly classical humane studies formed a large part of that education. Most of the efforts of the early Tudor humanists thus tend to have a broadly pedagogical bent, where the value of the classics is commonly set by their perceived educational value.

The emphasis on education led to a problem which we refer to as the problem of counsel. In essence, this problem arises when one accepts the principle that wisdom or knowledge should rule yet rule is determined ultimately by birth. Thus, when English authors involved in classical studies strive to develop an educated gentleman class they tend to prefer that political decisions be made by men of experience and knowledge. Yet obviously experience and knowledge were not requisite for obtaining political power. Next best, then, was for those in power to listen to men of political experience who were also learned. In order to make the powerful attend to the learned, the art of rhetoric was particularly necessary—in addition to being necessary for a cultivated and learned man in general.

When Tudor writers begin to take an interest in Plato beyond collection of texts or continuation of medieval speculation, it is the impulse of Political Platonism which drives that interest. With writers such as Thomas Elyot, Thomas Starkey, and Thomas More, we can see this impulse behind their approach not only to Plato but to classical works in general. In their writings we can see how the political needs of the Tudor regime influenced and guided their interests—and also how their interest in Plato let them both address and even wrestle with the needs of the regime.

The Platonic Humanism of Sir Thomas Elyot

Perhaps the most well-known “Platonist” among Tudor writers, Elyot is commonly remembered as a champion of classical learning and humanist education. In

his letters and prologues Elyot emerges as a predominantly practical and moral humanist who prizes the classics for their utility. His 1533 letter to Cromwell, for instance, which accompanies a “little treatise” (probably the *Castle of Health*), speaks of that treatise as containing “that little portion of knowledge which I have received of God by the mean of study and some experience, which I suppose might be profitable to them which shall read or hear it” (Wilson 22-3).

This combination of learning and practice, study and experience, is typical in Elyot. By ‘study’ he means not theology or metaphysics but humane studies and ethics. This is apparent from a later letter to Cromwell (1536) where he describes his studies:

You know I have been ever desirous to read many books,
especially concerning humanity and moral philosophy...
and for such studies I have a competent number. But I have
few books concerning holy scripture because I never
never delighted in questionists. (Wilson 26)²⁴

Elyot is writing here in regard to a recent prohibition of Catholic books in order to request more time to go over his library and discard any illegal or prohibited books. Of course, in such a context he downplays any interest in controversial religious subjects, but given his other interests there seems little reason entirely to doubt his sincerity in describing his library and its contents.

Elyot presents the majority of his works as efforts of what we might call practical civic humanism. The note to the reader at the beginning of his *Doctrinal of Princes* insists that this work, a translation of a work by the orator Isocrates, stands up to any excepting Scripture for its good counsel and brevity.²⁵ He offers his translation to fellow

²⁴ The term ‘questionists’ refers either to Schoolmen or to university students engaged in logical disputation. Elyot is disavowing interest in speculative or metaphysical issues.

Englishmen who have no Greek so that they “will not lack the commodity or pleasure” of reading it (Wilson 42-3). The epistle to the nobility at the beginning of *The Image of Governance* likewise suggests that that work intends to the wise reader’s pleasure and profit. He dedicates it to those nobles, gentlemen, and others “most ready to be advanced to governance under their prince” in the hope that it will make “their virtues correspondent to their fortunes” (Wilson 71). Elyot tacitly acknowledges the problem presented at the outset of this chapter: princes did not always or often advance the learned to governance, thus the learned had to reach out to the governors—or, in this case, to those likely to become governors.

The many references to Plato scattered throughout Elyot’s writings make it clear that his approach to the philosopher is substantially the approach of Political Platonism.²⁶ Most references to Plato imply that Elyot reads him as a moral and political philosopher above all. In his educational system in *Governor*, for instance, he has boys at 17 years of age, “in order that [their] courage may be bridled with reason” begin reading “works of philosophy; specially that part of philosophy [which] is called moral” (39). In addition to the faint echo of the charioteer myth of *Phaedrus*, Elyot’s picture may also owe something to *Republic II*, 375-6, where Socrates discusses the need for a guardian class to be, like good watchdogs, very high-spirited. The problem Socrates notes is that this quality must also be matched with gentleness towards fellow citizens, lest the guardians instead turn on the city itself. In discussing how these qualities of gentleness and bravery

²⁵ This qualification seems worthy of note. Even in a matter of practical, moral or political advice, Elyot clearly finds it necessary or at least advantageous to remind his readers that Scripture or revelation too provides “good counsel.” Of course, his qualification raises the question of why we need Isocrates, but Elyot does not address this question here.

²⁶ My understanding of Elyot’s debt to Plato is informed in part by Major’s *Sir Thomas Elyot and Renaissance Humanism*. For an extended discussion of the extent of Elyot’s direct knowledge of Plato see Major 188-9, *et passim*; for an assessment of the political ideas Elyot borrowed from Plato see 205-7.

may coincide, Socrates points out that a watchdog has something of philosophy in his nature (375e). This can in principle be applied also to the guardian, which implies what Elyot is describing—bravery or spirit being bridled by reason.

More telling are the books Elyot lists as appropriate for “bridling” youthful courage: Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Cicero’s *De officiis*, and above all “the works of Plato are to be studiously read.” He goes so far as to suggest that reading Plato and Cicero alone is nearly sufficient to make one a good governor. The high position Plato holds here seems due to his combination—one he shares with Cicero—of “gravity with delectation, excellent wisdom with divine eloquence, absolute virtue with pleasure incredible, and every place...enforced with profitable counsel joined with honesty” (39).

Elyot frequently uses Plato as a personal example in similar fashion. To illustrate the importance of avoiding flatterers in the *Governor*, he claims that the flatterers of Dionysius were the ones most endangered by the coming of Plato’s doctrine and wisdom. They thus incited the tyrant against Plato so they could return to their voluptuous way of living (155). He uses Plato’s response to Dionysius, “God defend there should be in my school so much vacant time from the study of wisdom that there might be any place left once to remember thee,” as an example of “noble courage” or magnanimity (197). In the same work Elyot also holds up Plato’s style as an example:

The end of all doctrine and study is good counsel...as it shall appear to them that will read the books of the noble Plato, where he shall find that the wise Socrates, in every investigation, which is in form of a consultation, useth his persuasions and demonstrations by the certain rules and examples of sundry sciences, proving thereby that the conclusion and (as I might say) the perfection of them is in good counsel, wherein virtue may be found...where her power only appeareth concerning governance, either of one person only, and then it is called moral, or of a

multitude, which for a diversity may be called politic. (238)

Plato is useful for Elyot not only for his doctrines but his example. He can demonstrate how one should act or how one should read or write. In the passage just above Elyot uses Plato's example to confirm his own beliefs about counsel, particularly "moral" and "politic" counsel.

Above all, Elyot's use of Plato is eclectic. He often borrows specific ideas out of context, adapting what he considers the basic idea to his own purposes. Two excellent examples of this can be found in *Governor*. In III.22, in his chapter on "Sobriety in Diet," Elyot informs the reader that Plato (or rather Socrates, as reported by Plato) in the second book of his public weal prefers that the inhabitants of his ideal city eat barley bread and wheat cakes, with the rest of their diet consisting of such things as salt, olives, and cheese. Elyot knows that some readers will scorn this diet and call Socrates a fool, but if adapted or qualified to 1500s England he thinks it is not so foolish at all. Plato's essential argument, he suggests, is that one should observe moderation in one's diet—not that one should eat exactly what Socrates recommends (265).

Elyot is referring in this passage to *Republic* 372b-e, with the first part of his description, down to "the rest of their diet," coming before and the rest coming after Glaucon's complaint about "relishes." Glaucon's objection in *Republic* is, in part, the one Elyot anticipates in his readers: the diet recommended by Socrates is spare and contrary to custom. Elyot's reading seems to take to heart Socrates' comment about the luxurious or feverish city versus the healthy city at 372e and the subsequent observation that "there are some...who will not be contented with this sort of fare or with this way of life," meaning they will not confine themselves to necessities. But Elyot seems to make

nothing, at least here, of the context in Plato—namely that the city arises out of necessity, as individual men are not self sufficient (369b) but the reluctance or inability of men to be satisfied with what is necessary only leads to the production of a city with a guardian class, in which justice and injustice play a large role (372e).²⁷

The other passage in *Governor* illustrating Elyot's eclectic reading comes in his discussion of the care of infants. Elyot says that if someone objects that his care for very young children is excessive, arguing that no harm can be done to the character at such a young age, he insists that such a view is wrong. He points out that even very young children can indicate what they want, and asserts that the brains and hearts of children contain "little slips of reason" in them which evil custom or vice may yet infect and make the fruit grow wild.

Elyot's idea here, as well as the child-plant metaphor, is likely suggested by the beginning of Plato's *Laws* VII (788-9). There, the Athenian Stranger observes that in every living creature the first shoot makes the largest and longest growth, and when growth occurs rapidly but without suitable exercise the body suffers. Thus he recommends a kind of gymnastic exercise even for infants. When Clinias asks how such an education is even possible for babies, who are incapable of understanding speech, the Stranger notes (as Elyot does) that even small children are capable of responding and indicating what they do or do not want (cf *Governor* 16). The Stranger observes that men overlook a number of things, such as games, in the education of children which are actually very important because they can habituate children to bad customs. Elyot makes

²⁷ It seems likely that Elyot accepted the Platonic dictum that wisdom ought to rule in political matters, but was forced to adapt that message to an aristocratic audience jealous of its inherited privileges. Thus Elyot's rhetorical aims (convincing a skeptical aristocratic audience that learning should be a, or the, primary quality in a good governor) lead him to avoid offending that audience by keeping to convention and tradition where he can (cf Major 195).

the same point in his passage (16-7). As with the passage concerning Socrates' diet, Elyot does not recommend quite the same level of care or supervision which the Stranger advocates for small children, but he does take one of Plato's principles—that the education of small children is quite significant for their later moral life—as well as his supporting observations to heart.

The two works in which Elyot's debt to Plato is most evident, and his references to him most extensive, are *The Book Named the Governor* (1531) and the dialogue *Of The Knowledge which Maketh a Wise Man* (1533). The dedicatory epistle to Henry VIII at the beginning of *Governor* declares his intention of increasing virtue and fulfilling his duties to God, king, and country. He wishes in this work, he says, to present in English “the form of a just public weal” and the best education for those who would govern it. Though the “very and true commonweal” was a concept with currency in England long before the revival of Plato studies, Elyot's references to a “just public weal” calls to mind the Latin title of Plato's work and its theme and subtitle. Further, Elyot himself reminds us in his proem that the good education of governors is something affirmed as most necessary by both Plato and Solomon. This connection allows Elyot both to add a religious justification or support to Plato and to suggest a political reading, as the religious figure he links to Plato here is one famous for “wisdom”—a virtue whose necessity he must argue for, as we shall see later. The epistle also suggests the eclecticism of Elyot's approach, since he claims to have compounded it from “noble authors, Greeks as well as Latins.” He presents *Governor*, the best fruits of his classical learning and political experience, as evidence of his skill in political matters.

Elyot's understanding of the governor is based in part on Plato's account of justice and the state in *Republic*, particularly books II and IV. In *Republic* II Socrates advances a picture of the city, arising out of necessity—since no man is sufficient unto himself—in which the basic rule is “one man, one job.” Socrates offers two reasons for this rule: it is easier for one man to provide one necessity (i.e., food, shelter, or clothing) to all than for each man to provide all necessities for himself; and each man has greater natural aptitude for one job than for another (369b-c). In book IV this principle, expressed as each man performing one social service in the state for which his nature is best adapted, is understood to be justice or the origin of justice (433a). This virtue is distinguished from the other cardinal virtues: wisdom, bravery, and soberness or temperance. The city is called wise because it is well-counseled, thanks to the science of the guardian class (428d-429a). Temperance, unlike wisdom and bravery, is the possession of all classes in the city and consists in concord on the question of who ought to rule both in the state and in the individual man (432b).

In his definition and initial presentation of the governor (4-7) Elyot echoes the reasoning and conclusions of Socrates. The governor's role arises out of man's need for other men, since each man has different gifts of grace or nature and no one has all the virtues or good qualities. The governor rules by virtue of his understanding—which Elyot refers to as the principle part of the soul. The public weal should be ordered, Elyot argues, such that each person has the place and degree to which he is suited. Elyot even restates both of the reasons Socrates offered for the principle which he later takes to be justice: the husbandman feeds both himself and the clothmaker, while the clothmaker apparel himself and the husbandman, and so with the other artisans; and “each man has

his particular excellence.” Elyot uses both these reasons to justify the particular role of the governor, who, like Plato’s guardians, aims at the preservation of the other classes and the benefit not of himself but of all the citizens. Elyot even insists that it is reasonable or “congruent” than men who excel others in understanding should have their estates advanced to the profit of all.²⁸

Even part of Elyot’s justification of monarchy is not without basis in Plato. Elyot asserts that the estate of a person should be advanced in degree or place so that the understanding of one may come to profit many by directing them to the way of virtue and commodious living (4). In *Republic* IV Socrates asserts that as the mob of appetites, pleasures, and pains which are found in the many are ruled by the few, whose simple and moderate appetites are guided by reason and right opinion, so might their city be called truly sober and master of itself (431-2).

Given these parallels, Elyot’s divergences from Plato’s original are worth noting. He retains the upward mobility in Plato’s scheme in his elevation of men of understanding to be governors, but remains silent about the corollary—the demotion or reduction of “degenerate” members of the upper classes. The former argument was congruent with the interests of the Tudor regime, which elevated persons to positions of command in the hope that such persons, who owed their positions to Tudor power, would remain loyal. The omitted corollary likely suggests rhetorical discretion on Elyot’s part. Aside from the obvious consideration that English society was rigidly hierarchical and its peers jealous of their position therein, Elyot himself refers in the proem to this work to

²⁸ Compare *Republic* 415b, where it is asserted that guardians should send degenerate offspring of the upper classes to the lower and enroll superior offspring from the lower classes among the guardians.

the “malice of others” against him and his work and may have wished to avoid causing offense whenever possible.

Even more significant is Elyot’s change from soberness or temperance to “order.” In *Republic*, soberness is both a public and a private virtue, arising from concord of parts—particularly the agreement of ruler and ruled in the city, and the obedience of appetite to reason in the soul. Elyot retains the connection between city and soul in his definition of a public weal as a living body made of the different degrees of men (3), but where soberness and justice were the virtues which united the body politic in *Republic*, in *Governor* the public weal is held together by the “order of equity.” Order in Elyot’s public weal comes from due observance of the different degrees among men; this is not much different from the understanding of temperance in *Republic* 432b. But Elyot’s chief concern seems to be with the ruled accepting the rulers—consider, for instance, his insistence on the need for reverence and obedience from the commons (6-7). Plato’s account of soberness, which saw it in the mutual recognition of rulers and ruled, in Elyot comes in contact with a perpetual problem in English Renaissance political thought: the need for order and obedience from the lower classes.

This importance of order and obedience lies behind the most distinct difference between Elyot’s governor class and Plato’s guardians. Unlike the guardians, Elyot does not imagine a class of governors who share goods in common and lack gold and silver or money. He agrees with Plato that it is right that this class should receive what it needs from the lower classes (cf *Governor* 4). In Elyot, however, it is also right that governors receive more than what is “necessary.” They must not only live, but live well. At first, he presents this as a matter of justice, but later there is a more politic consideration as the

fine life of the governor is said to “[impress] a reverence and due obedience to the vulgar people and commonalty; and without that, it can be no more said that there is a public weal” (5). Elyot’s focus on order obviously reflects the ongoing Tudor concern with obedience in the people, but also suggests that he is thinking more of an actual, working state rather than an ideal.

Perhaps the most significant use Elyot makes of Plato in *Governor* is in his view of the political importance of wisdom. The difficulty confronting Elyot lies in convincing his countrymen—and particularly the powerful—that wisdom, or learning, was necessary for good rule or good education. The traditional, medieval approach to education in England had two separate systems with two distinct modes of training. There was a predominantly physical education for “knights” and a largely intellectual education for churchmen. Most positions of power were hereditary and fell to men brought up in the former system.²⁹ Even in Elyot’s time there was a strong prejudice against intellectual or liberal studies for those who styled themselves gentlemen. Elyot tries to overcome this through a concept of wisdom which he derives in part from Plato.

The account of wisdom in *Governor* III.23 begins with the observations that the virtues he has just finished discussing, of which justice was perhaps the foremost, likely seem to many of his readers to be sufficient for a governor. Elyot replies that political order—a prime interest, as noted above, of the Tudor regime—is not possible without the knowledge which comes from wisdom (218). His immediate definition of wisdom then comes from classical authority: Cicero, grounded or cloaked in the authority of the Bible.

²⁹ See Barker, *The Education of the English Gentleman* (132-3). He also identifies four works as critical for the development of the new ideal combining the two educations: Elyot’s *Governor*, Starkey’s *Dialogue Between Pole and Lupset* (discussed below), Hoby’s translation of *Courtier*, and Ascham’s *The Schoolmaster* (the latter two come a bit late, and Plato plays much less of a role in them for my purposes).

Cicero calls wisdom the science of things divine and human which considers the cause of every thing and follows the divine.³⁰ This definition is confirmed by, or “well agrees” with, the kingships of David and Solomon. David, who ruled with martial prowess (that is, with predominantly physical virtues), had a reign marked by near-constant warfare. Solomon, who asked God for the gift of wisdom to govern his realm, ruled with wisdom and had a reign marked by near-total peace, honor, and riches (218-9).

Plato appears in the midst of this discussion and offers Elyot two crucial things: a justification of wisdom as necessary for aristocratic rule, and a religiously-tinged account of the origin of wisdom. Elyot anticipates an objection to his assertion that degree should exist among men according to the excellence of their understanding, which is the principal part of the soul. Some readers, he knows, will despise this and think that he means to say that no man should govern or be in authority except those who surpass all others in doctrine. To counter this, Elyot implies that while a good education may train or fill the understanding, the understanding itself relies on innate ability. Every Catholic man, he says, is aware that all understanding, from which perfect operation or action proceeds, derives from sapience. But that sapience is trained and brought out, not created, by good education. In defense of this view he refers to three separate passages in Plato.

First, in *Timaeus*, Plato affirms that there is set in the souls of men as they come into this world certain “seeds of things” and rules of the arts and sciences. This suggests not only the existence of what will later be called “innate ideas” but also an innate capacity for science and learning. Next, Socrates in the book of *Science* (by which he

³⁰ This definition in turn may also derive somewhat from Plato—for instance, the account given in *Republic* V of the nature of the true philosophers. For instance, the distinction between those who recognize beautiful things versus those who recognize beauty in itself and can distinguish it from the things that participate in it (476d).

means *Theaetetus*) resembles himself to a midwife and says that in teaching young men he brought forth only the science that was already in them. Finally (in the *Theages*), Socrates tells Theages that no man has learned anything from him, but those in his company may have become wiser through his exhortation and inspiration. Elyot praises this view as something that “may well accord with our catholic faith, and be received in to the commentaries of the most perfect divines” (222-3). But it also opens the door for justification of aristocratic education in letters, on the grounds that the education he recommends only trains well the understanding of men who by nature have superior capacity.³¹

Socrates in books V and VI of the *Republic* identifies whom he means by “the philosophers” and what the knowledge which qualifies them to rule in fact is. It is the vision of the good itself, of the world of being as distinct from the world of becoming (484a ff). Though it is not spelled out as such in this part of *Republic*, an obvious inference is that the merely “political” man, who operates on the basis of political experience alone, is only capable of doing good, politically speaking, as it were accidentally. In the *Governor* Elyot seems to have picked up on the need for a metaphysically grounded political science, since his chapter on wisdom, as we saw above, goes out of its way—as Elyot rarely does elsewhere in this book—to connect classical sources to Christian precedent and authority. This is perhaps the most characteristic feature of Political Platonism in the English Renaissance. Even when

³¹ Of course, as Elyot is well aware, the overlap between the natural aristocracy of the mind and the conventional aristocracy of the English commonwealth is far from absolute. He downplays this point, however, and mitigates it as best he can with the assertion that through selective breeding the conventional aristocracy produces a natural aristocracy (105-6). Still, Elyot finds it necessary to advertise to those who believe that nobility exists only in ancient lineage or great possessions that those things do not always confer nobility. He exhorts the peerage to strive to be equal to their inheritance—with a clear implication that his own guide to education may help them do so.

readers do engage with Plato's metaphysics, they typically do so in a political context or with an eye to its political or moral implications. This is nowhere as clear as in Elyot's second major "Platonic" work, the dialogue *Of the Knowledge which Maketh a Wise Man*.³²

This dialogue is presented as a conversation between the wise Plato and the unwise or worldly-wise Aristippus. In Elyot's prologue, it is clear that he sees the dialogue as of a piece with his other works, as well as an expression of his civic humanism: "to the desire of knowledge whereunto I have hitherto ever of my nature been disposed I have joined a constant intent to profit thereby my natural country" (8). The philosophy of the Greeks and Romans has been of especial interest for him, particularly those of their works "containing any part of philosophy necessary to the institution of a man's life in virtue" (9).

More revealing, for my purposes, is Elyot's discussion of the title of his work. He begins by remarking on the variety of opinions men have about what wisdom is. According to Elyot, there are three common opinions: wisdom consists in much learning and knowledge, wisdom lies in those who conduct the affairs of great princes or countries, and wisdom is meddling least in the affairs of others (10). Dismissing for the moment the latter two, Elyot notes the tremendous disagreement among those who profess the first view. Some extol Scripture, he says, but wrest it to make it agree with their own ambitions and thereby make devout learning full of specious contention. Others prefer the study of law, but the men who have wasted their money on lawsuits consider such study a common detriment rather than a help. Rather than add his own opinion,

³² Though it most likely does not originate with Elyot, the subtitle of this work names it "A Disputacyon Platonike" (cf xvii reproduces the title-page of the Second Edition, which bears this subtitle).

Elyot remarks that in reading Diogenes' account of Plato's response to Dionysius he found something which, when properly examined, proved to be a response "[wherein] appeared that which is best worthy to be called wisdom" (12).

The approach to philosophy and Plato which Elyot takes in this dialogue is much the same as he takes in *Governor*. To begin with, the character of Plato expresses not so much the Platonic position per se so much as an eclectic mix of arguments borrowed from different sources—including Renaissance psychology, the Galenic theory of humors, and Stoicism. Material concerning Plato likewise comes from different sources: *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*, *Alcibiades I*, the *Seventh Letter*, and, most extensively, Diogenes' Life. Elyot presents his dialogue not as a work of Platonic theory but as a work inspired by his reading in Diogenes. Thus, it contains historical elements which may have little or nothing to do with Platonic philosophy.

Even more telling, Elyot presents the characters of his dialogue as opposed moral types more than opposed philosophical positions. As he says in the prologue, "there by Gnathos in Spain as well as in Greece, Pasquils in England as well as in Rome...Aristippus in Scotland as well as Cyrena. Platos be few, and them I doubt where to find" (9). In the dialogue, Plato himself seems to regard the distinction between the two men as moral rather than philosophical: "Where, by the discord of our two doctrines, men doubting which of us two speaketh most truly, I commending the voluptie or perfect dilectation which is in knowledge, thou preferring the voluptie of the body and senses" (32). When Plato praises Aristippus, as on occasion he does, he explains his friend's improvement in understanding as a moral improvement: "Now on my faith Aristippus

thou speakest very well and wisely. Lo, see, how by our long communing thou art drawn from thy wanton affections and fantasies” (93).³³

This opposition of moral types is significant since the view of wisdom and knowledge which emerges in the dialogue holds that in some manner “very wisdom” must issue in action. The following exchange implies exactly this:

Plato: What sayest thou? Doth demeanor and countenance
ratify the opinion of wisdom?

Aris.: Ye, verily, so think I.

Plato: What meanest thou thereby?

Aris.: For according to the profession or quality wherein men
have opinion that wisdom doth rest so ought to be the
form of living, countenance and gesture: which joined
all together maketh one whole and perfect harmony
which sendeth in to the hearts of the beholders and
hearers a voluptie or fervent dilectation.

Plato: I can thee thank Aristippus, thou has now declared to
have been (as I was) the disciple of Socrates. (30-1)

Following Aristippus, Plato insists that when the tyrant desired to see him (Plato), what he wanted to see was if “in my countenance and form of living I did express that thing [wisdom] wherefore he heard me commended” (37). And as wisdom should be expressed in outward form, so too does outward form seem to indicate wisdom. When Plato speaks later of appearing before Dionysius dressed very moderately, he claims that this meant he should then ensure that his teaching also correspond to his manner of living. When Plato has gotten Aristippus to agree that wisdom is knowledge, he includes the caveat that knowledge alone does not make one wise. For, as Plato puts it, “knowledge is secret and bringeth forth no fruit but by operation” (195-6). Since goodness is found in fruit, and

³³ Plato’s reply here comes in response to Aristippus’ realization that man must be like God in some senses but not in others, just as a man’s son may resemble him in certain respects but not others, or, more importantly, just as a son may follow his father in liberality but differ from him, say, in lechery.

since wisdom must be good, knowledge must be in “operation”—that is, it must bear fruit—to be wisdom.

Elyot’s insistence that wisdom be an active virtue illustrates a vital point of both correspondence with and divergence from Plato. On the one hand, Elyot is taking to heart the ideal of the “philosopher-king,” the conjunction of political power and philosophic wisdom, as essential to political success. At the same time, however, he diverges from the idealism found in Plato. The divergence is seen in his Plato’s insistence that goodness is found in “fruit.” The good is in some way more concrete, or must be more concrete, for Elyot. Wisdom seems to be a more active virtue for Elyot, and the philosopher-king an ideal to be looked for, even if only in the form of wise counselors. As will be seen below, the importance of educated men in making that ideal a reality becomes a central issue in this dialogue.

Divergence from idealism does not mean Elyot is ignorant of the metaphysical basis of Plato’s discussions of wisdom, virtue, or knowledge. In fact, Elyot’s dialogue contains a fairly extended discussion of Platonic metaphysics—though the discussion is included as part of a moral discussion of knowledge and ignorance. Ignorance is presented as a dark background against which the lighter color of knowledge can stand forth more clearly (53-4). It is not only a mental but also a moral failing: Plato characterizes it as a lack of self-knowledge, marked by the preeminence of body over soul, the worse part over the better (63-66).

Against the backdrop of ignorance, Plato’s discussion of knowledge begins with a distinction of all beings into intelligible or sensible. The former are understood to be bodiless, steadfast, and permanent, while the latter are embodied, moveable, and

uncertain. Our knowledge of the former is acquired through reason; of the latter, through the senses. Plato further subdivides the intelligible beings into objects of “divinity” and objects of mathematics. Human beings are distinct for their access to the intelligible world, while beasts operate entirely by means of sensation (80).

Though I have claimed that writers such as Elyot tend to read Plato for his political teachings, this discussion of knowledge and ignorance shows that even for such readers the metaphysical or theological dimensions of Plato’s thought remained important. More significantly, the discussion also shows how such writers often applied the metaphysical dimensions to political or moral contexts. Here, Elyot’s Plato goes on to argue that man’s knowledge of good and evil stems from his knowledge of the intelligible things. Further, when the soul rules the bodily affections “with understanding in mind,” those affections become what we call virtues. If the soul could remain always in such a state men might live as gods, but the operation of the body and its humors turn the soul into the mere servant of bodily appetites (119-20). When a man reaches such a low state he becomes ignorant in the truest sense (121). Near the very outset of the discussion Plato uses it to admonish Aristippus’ morals: if he had truly been Socrates’ disciple, he says, and practiced his teachings in his manner of living he would understand already (78-9). Aristippus, though, has difficulty understanding the doctrine of intelligible beings because he is too interested in carnal pleasures (84).

The metaphysical and moral teachings in turn become the basis for Plato’s political teaching about the natures of king and tyrant. The man who has become ignorant of his nature and fallen prey to the bodily affections is an image of the tyrant, who has likewise fallen prey to personal interests (121). When Plato described the true king to

Dionysius, he explains, he described a man “in whom soul had full authority over the senses and kept the affections in due obedience.” Anyone in whom such a state obtains he will call a king even if he should have no other possessions, a man from whom citizens can expect incomparable profit and benefit (206-7). Conversely, he defined the tyrant to Dionysius as one whose soul is governed by the senses and foolish affections, where “soul falls out of order and loses understanding” (210). Ultimately, Plato’s theory of knowledge as Elyot presents it is significant for its moral and political import.

There is a further political dimension to this dialogue created by the combination of the dramatic situation of the work and the historical and political context of its author. In the dialogue, Plato has just arrived back in Greece, still wearing the slave’s apparel in which he was sold, after his failed attempt to teach or provide counsel for Dionysius I. Aristippus wants to hear Plato’s explanation of his dealings with the tyrant, particularly his justification for telling Dionysius to his face that his words “savored of tyranny.”

The historical context, as emphasized by Robert Haynes in his essay “Plato as Protagonist in Sir Thomas Elyot’s *Of the Knowledge which Maketh a Wise Man*,” is twofold. On the one hand, in 1530s England Henry VIII has broken with the Church and is in no mood to tolerate dissent or criticism of his policies and decisions. The safest course for most advisors seemed to be to remain silent or engage in flattery. If, as in Elyot’s case, one wished to provide prudent and judicious advice, the example of More served to show the possible limits to which one could go. A certain subtlety was thus required of those who wished neither to remain silent nor to flatter. Hence, the other hand of the context: Elyot’s publishing two dialogues in 1533 dealing with the proper relation of advisor to monarch. One dialogue, *Pasquil the Playne*, is a conversation between a

flatterer, and advocate of safe silence, and a talking statue who advocates the active involvement of educated men in politics. The other, the *Knowledge* dialogue, uses classical characters and setting to distance Elyot from the views promulgated by his speakers (Haynes 93-5, 101-2).

The situation with Henry VIII presented humanists like Elyot with a critical dilemma. If they wanted wisdom to rule, or at least to counsel those who ruled, what should be done when the ruler seemed increasingly unlikely to listen and some counsel could prove dangerous to the counselor?³⁴ The dramatic and historic contexts of the dialogue come together in its fifth and final part. After their discussion of knowledge and the order of things Plato recalls that their entire conversation arose from Plato's desire to prove himself a wise man in his response to Dionysius (192). Dionysius, as Plato and Aristippus both recognize, was becoming increasingly self-willed and interested only in fulfilling his own desires. Still, he held great promise as a ruler. He was quick and of subtle wit, and certainly was open to the possibility of wisdom since he had taken such an interest in Plato and his philosophy (Plato refers to Dionysius' "gentle desire" to hear his wisdom). But he was also sensual and unstable in his desires, prone to voluptuous pleasures and fits of rage.

The question Plato had to deal with was quite complicated. He had to know how to respond to a ruler with such a nature when he took an interest in wisdom and counsel.

³⁴ Elyot himself alludes to this difficulty in the prologue—ironically enough, right after insisting that only the malice of his critics could interpret his work as a discussion of tyranny and counsel. As his editor Howard observes, Elyot pictures Plato as having suffered indignities and imperiled his life by proclaiming what he considered to be the truth when he might have won praise and favor simply by flattering Dionysius. Immediately after insisting that he doesn't intend his work to mean any particular powerful person, he presents a little anecdote about the emperor Antonine hiring a rude fellow at double wages to criticize him when he deserved it (*Knowledge* 8). This certainly looks like an implicit justification of his criticism of the king (as Howard says in his editor's introduction to *Knowledge*, xxv-xxxi—particularly the observation on xxvii that "although ostensibly writing upon the themes of wisdom and virtue, [Elyot] actually manages to produce a rather telling treatise on the evils of tyranny").

He begins his account of his response by rejecting flattery. When Dionysius asked him to describe the kingly state he did so not as Dionysius wanted to hear but as the truth compelled him. In doing so he bethought himself of his master Socrates, who when unjustly condemned to death approached it with such resolve that his example not only corroborated, but was even a more effective teacher than, his own doctrines (202). Plato then thought of his own case, and how whatever he said would either confirm his past teachings or show him to be a mere prater.

His description of the true king is based on conclusions reached earlier in the dialogue. There, they had agreed that man excelled the beasts and was most made in the image of God in terms of his soul, particularly its capacity to understand. The most significant moral failing consisted in the soul's becoming slave to the desires of the body and devoting its powers to fulfilling them. Plato's political teaching follows this teaching on soul and morality: the king is one whose soul has mastery of the senses and keeps the bodily affections in due check and obedience. Such a person is king even if he had no other possessions to his name, and if he came to govern a state as he governed himself he would be much held in reverence by the people. By his knowledge of himself the king would also know others—particularly how they fell off from the right order of things—and would do all he could to restore them to order (206-7). Plato emphasizes that one with the nature of a king could never be deceived by enemies such as flatterers (208).

Elyot demonstrates the power of indirection by following this description of the king with a description of the tyrant. Plato says he offered it as an attempt to make his meaning more plain. His description paints the tyrant as one in whom soul does not rule by is under the sway of affections. Even if someone pointed out the danger the tyrant was

in he would not credit it because his reason is held captive. The indirection here lies in how well the description matches Dionysius' own character. Plato leaves it to Dionysius to infer—as of course he does, since he has a “quick and subtle wit”—that Plato is talking about him. Plato himself does not accuse Dionysius of anything. Aristippus readily calls him a tyrant, but even in their discussion Plato does not do so—the only time he refers to him in such a way it is in a strictly political, not a moral, sense.³⁵ He offers an account of the king and tyrant which he knows will not be welcomed because the description of the king is not what Dionysius wants to hear. His description of the tyrant, meanwhile, will surely offend Dionysius—though only to the degree that he actually knows himself and what kind of person he is.

The description is displeasing and Dionysius calls Plato's words those of an idle dotard. Plato's response, that Dionysius' words “savored of tyranny,” leads to a series of objections by Aristippus that Plato handled this situation poorly. Since in the prologue Elyot notes that his original impetus behind writing the dialogue was coming to much the same conclusion as Aristippus when he first read this story in Diogenes—a conclusion he later recanted when he came to understand Plato's words better—this scene seems all the more critical. Aristippus makes three objections: Plato spoke too sharply, he should have delayed before saying anything, or he should have known that his words would have changed nothing and kept quiet. Aristippus' advice and concerns here are those of any prudent counselor. But what Elyot, through Plato, indicates is that Aristippus' advice and concerns are based not on principle or wisdom but on concern for the body.

³⁵ That is, Plato says he knew from Dion that Dionysius was a tyrant—meaning he had come into his position through usurpation and violence rather than through lawful succession (203-4). This definition, obviously, does not involve mastery of one's affections or lack thereof.

Plato's reply to the first objection is twofold. First, if Dionysius had not been a tyrant he would not have taken offense at Plato's "sharp" words; second, since Plato had been deemed a wise man he was bound not to lie to or deceive Dionysius simply in order to please him. The reply is disingenuous at best, but through the clear flaw in his argument Elyot suggests something of an approach to counsel which an educated humanist could take.

The first part of his reply holds only if one assumes that Dionysius could recognize himself as a tyrant in Plato's sense. The danger here lies in the closeness of actual man and negative example: Dionysius saw the "tyrant" as simply a description of himself or his life. If one took a different approach, and used distance between the ruler and the negative example meant to teach that ruler then the anger of a tyrant might be kept at bay. The second part of the reply requires that one accept the premise that those deemed wise must never lie or deceive. But the qualification Elyot introduces reminds the reader of another possibility—namely, that one might, in the manner of Plato's own so-called noble lie, lie or deceive Dionysius not to please but to assist him. This conclusion is implied as a corollary to Plato's earlier argument, which took up the bulk of the fourth and longest part of the dialogue, that all things, good and evil, in this life are good as regards their final cause—including, most notably, things generally considered bad or evil. Some deceptions are not necessarily or simply bad.

Plato's reply to the second objection is an assertion of principle. Wisdom is not private, as Elyot himself emphasizes in the prologue, but is proven in operation. Dionysius wanted to see if Plato's actions would match his words, and the silence of delay would have given the lie to his words. Elyot does not produce the full argument

here, but at bottom it is this: silence implies either agreement or fear, and Plato's position could not accept either. First, because he didn't regard his words as idle—as Plato himself points out by saying that silence would have just verified that his words were indeed idly spoken. Fear is implied, though it is clearer later when Plato emphasizes that Dionysius “could not hurt my soul,” by silence as well. Silence suggests that Dionysius' anger is more to be heeded than the argument at hand. Plato does not mention fear but does repeat his argument that Dionysius' words were unseemly for a king to utter and showed that what he said was true—the man lacked knowledge of himself. Needless to say, Aristippus is still unconvinced.

The final objection Aristippus raises is that silence is best when one's words will not be heeded. Plato should have known, he says, that Dionysius would condemn his doctrine and not bothered to tell it to him. Again, Plato's reply is twofold. First, if he professed pleasure rather than knowledge he might well have done as Aristippus advises; second, if he had not replied to the request he would have left wisdom “undeclared.” Silence alone (as opposed to the silence of delay), the refusal to engage in politics, is rejected. If Plato had held his peace not even come to Dionysius' court his silence or inaction would be thought the result of fear or affection—he would condemn his own doctrine by not following it in practice. The second part of his reply implies the humanist principle that it is an educated man's duty to assist in political matters. Whatever Plato might have thought about Dionysius, he says, he cannot deny his “gentle desire” to hear something of wisdom and knowledge. He cannot deny that on some level or to some degree the man needed and even wanted good counsel. He also could not leave wisdom “undeclared” because, again, wisdom is shown in operation.

Aristippus the prudent or worldly-wise counselor is not convinced. This does not necessarily mean that Elyot despaired of his or Plato's position, however. If Plato was unsuccessful in changing the ways of a tyrant in Sicily, his argument at least had some effect on the flatterer of a tyrant (cf Haynes 100), for Aristippus has come to change "some what of mine old opinion" (*Knowledge* 231-2). Whatever Elyot may have thought about the likelihood of moderating Henry VIII's desires, he does seem to retain some hope of convincing other counselors not to "leave wisdom undeclared" but find another prudent mode between silence and flattery.³⁶

One of the central problems in the dialogue is not so much wisdom or knowledge but counsel—knowledge in operation. It is certainly noteworthy that Elyot should use Plato to explore this problem. Haynes suggests that Plato provides Elyot with a certain distance between himself as author and the views of his speaker, but this does not explain the use of Plato and his adventures in Sicily in particular. The use of Plato may demonstrate Elyot's continued commitment to the rule of wisdom and the need for prudent, knowledgeable counsel in the face of serious threats to potential counselors' lives and bodily freedom (he has Aristippus remark that Plato is still in the slave's garb in which he was sold, though Plato continues to hold himself as a free man). Elyot also uses Plato as a spokesman for a kind of determined or uncompromising adherence to principle, even though through the extreme example he also points to a more reserved approach. The character of Plato in the dialogue is certainly not the historical Plato, but the combination of doctrines (Platonic, Stoic, Aristotelian, and others) and historical example

³⁶ Note that Plato insists that he had to go and speak to Dionysius even though he "knew what kind of man he was" because "he could not hurt my soul" and not to do so "would have left wisdom undeclared" (231). This recalls to my mind the assertion in *Governor*, concerning the need for diverse counsel, that it is manifest "how necessary to a public weal it shall be to have in any wise men's opinions declared" (239).

(Plato's travels to Sicily as reported by Dionigenes) which make their way into the dialogue show how ready Elyot was to put his understanding of Plato to work in investigating the political problems of his own time.

Thomas Starkey and the Limitations of Plato

Thomas Starkey retains the essentially civic and eclectic orientation towards classical studies which were characteristic of Elyot. The key difference between them lies in Starkey's greater skepticism about Plato's utility. Elyot was no Platonist, but could be called sympathetic to certain of his ideas. Starkey, on the other hand, has a very qualified acceptance—if it may still be called acceptance—and seems to come closer to the position on Plato taken by the later Bruni.

Starkey's major work, the one of primary importance as regards his view of Plato, is the *Dialogue Between Pole and Lupset*. Unfortunately, there are two serious difficulties one must account for when attempting to determine the importance of Plato in this work. The most immediately obvious difficulty concerns the dialogue's audience. The dedication to Henry VIII and circulation in manuscript form suggests it was intended for an important audience, but when the real Reginald Pole came out in public opposition to Henry, Starkey's choice of him as a speaker—as well as his own close ties to Pole and his circle in Italy—meant the dialogue became a source of trouble for Starkey. The extent to which it ever reached its intended audience is very difficult to determine (cf Burton 1-5, Mayer 9-10). Compared with responses to Elyot's *Governor* or More's *Utopia*, Starkey's dialogue seems to have had negligible impact in its time. Its importance must lie in what he represents or gives voice to.

According to Thomas Mayer, Starkey is the most “Italianate Englishman” of his time. By this, he means that Starkey is the most successful, as a writer, in combining the new political thought of the continent (particularly Italy) with native English traditions (3). The new political thought Starkey was exposed to in his education was primarily “Stoic but roughly civic humanist,” beginning at Magdalen College, Oxford (Mayer 25-6, 30-33). His later education brought him to Italy, where in the circle around Reginald Pole he was exposed directly to Italian humanism—though it was chiefly Aristotle rather than Plato who dominated his attention (Mayer 151-2). Thus, Starkey’s dialogue may be taken as an expression of well-educated English humanism, even if it did not enjoy particularly widespread circulation. Starkey’s dedication of the work to Henry VIII also suggests that he intended it for an audience of educated and influential persons.

The second difficulty involves the direct references to Plato which Starkey makes in his dialogue. They are by and large unfavorable. This difficulty is somewhat remarkable given that in the dialogue it is the character Thomas Lupset who expresses the most serious reservations about the philosopher. The original Thomas Lupset, in a little essay encouraging gentlemen towards studies, “An Exhortation to Yonge Men” (written in 1529 but first printed in 1535), specifically enjoins the reader to apply himself to the moral philosophy of the classics:

I would you read the Ethics of Aristotle, either under some expert philosopher, or else with comment... And let Plato be familiar with you, specially in the books that he writeth *De re publica*. Also you shall find much for your knowledge in the moral philosophy of Cicero, as in his books *De officiis*, *de senectute*, *de fato*, *de finibus* de *Academicis* question. (17)

Later, when encouraging the reader to master the passion of ire, Lupset says he will find it easier to govern if he has Plato and Seneca as physicians for the mind (29-30).

Confronting this second difficulty in Starkey will bring us to the heart of his Political Platonism. When Plato is first mentioned in his dialogue, the context is similar to that of book I of More's *Utopia*. Lupset is attempting to convince his friend Reginald Pole, who has "many years spent in learning," to enter politics. Since Pole is so wise, he asks, why doesn't he offer his friends and his country the benefit of his wisdom? Men forget justice and equity, Lupset asserts, when they keep their gifts to themselves rather than use them to profit others in "perfect civility."³⁷ Then, to defend his position, Lupset marshals the classical examples—presented with rhetorical flourish ("I do not need to rehearse," etc.)—of Plato, Lycurgus and Solon, by whose wisdom and policy many cities, countries, and nations were brought to civil order and politic living.

The inclusion of Plato in this list of examples suggests that Lupset, or Starkey, is thinking of Plato as a law-giver, whether in his travels to Sicily or in his writings (most likely *Republic* or *Laws*), or in some combination of these. Lupset underlines this connection by suggesting that if any of these men, like Pole, had followed only the private pleasure of excessive "contemplation," humanity would have remained in its former rudeness without any laws or rules of honesty.³⁸ Like Lycurgus and Solon, Plato is seen here as a chief civilizer of men, the proponent of a politically useful teaching.

Pole and Lupset, like More and Hythloday, come to disagree over the role of philosophy and counsel. Pole suspects that knowledge of God and nature is superior to knowledge of human things, and notes with approval the practice of "the ancient

³⁷ This section recalls the exhortations made by Peter Giles and Thomas More in *Utopia* I, where Giles wonders why Raphael does not attack himself to a king and offer his learning and experience to furnish the king with good examples and useful counsel. Such an act would serve himself as well as his friends and family. A little later, More adds that it is worthy to apply one's talent and industry to the public interest.

³⁸ A common and popular trope among rhetoricians at least since Isocrates (though probably more familiar to Starkey via Cicero) held that rhetoric was one of the chief civilizing arts, and prior to its discovery men lived much like other animals.

philosophers” who “forsook meddling in commonweal matters.” Lupset’s reply is much like Elyot’s was: wisdom is manifest in practice. The perfection of man, he argues, stands not in “bare” knowledge and learning but in the use and exercise of the virtues, and chiefly in the communication of wisdom for the use of others (6). Lupset presents four examples in defense of his position. In addition to the aforementioned three lawgivers, whom he references at the very outset, he brings in Aristotle, on whose teaching he relies to show that the intellectual life requires the active life (cf 4-7).

The next major issue Pole and Lupset address concerns political conditions and the possibility of reasonable reform. As Pole puts it, “there is another matter which has kept many wise men from commonweal matters”—namely, due regard for time and place (15-6). In times of tyranny or excessive concern for one’s private weal, wise men consider that their labors will be in vain. At such times, he asks, what value could a wise man’s counsel have? He offers three examples of wise men running into problems due to political conditions: Plato in Sicily, Cicero in the Civil War era, and Seneca in the time of Nero. All three men ran into trouble with tyrants. In Plato’s case, Pole suspects that if he had found a noble prince in Sicily he might have shown greater fruits of his wisdom. He even recalls several of the moral objections raised in *Utopia* by Hythloday. In venturing to give counsel in tyrannical times men may become corrupted by the bad opinions of the court, Pole says, for it is hard to be among thieves daily and not become a thief (15-6). The examples Pole chooses suggest that “corruption” is not necessarily the most significant problem, however: Cicero and Seneca were both destroyed, and Plato himself only narrowly escaped a similar fate.

Lupset's reply to Pole's objection also refers to Plato. He grants that wise men are fortunate indeed if they are born in times when they may have authority, and recalls Plato's saying that those countries are happy which have wise men as governors. The problem Lupset finds in Pole's position here is that political action requires one to accept as it were diminished expectations. Many men spend their lives curiously pondering political matters and never find the right time or place to act. Thus they waste their lives in expectation of Plato's commonweal.

It is not exactly clear whether Starkey means that these men waste their time looking for the right conditions to make everything perfect or if they have modest reforms but wait only for the perfect time and place to set them in motion. Whichever he means, "Plato's commonweal" is clearly an ideal to be eschewed because it obstructs useful political action. When Pole accepts Lupset's objections and offers to "search out the true commonweal" and with it before their eyes seek out how the existing commonweal could be improved, Lupset warns him not to devise his ideal according to Plato's example, since his order of commonweal no people on earth these days could attain (18).

Lupset's objection to Plato underscores one of the most enduring and characteristic elements of Political Platonism in England. Those who took an interest in Plato's moral or political thought tended to be interested in action, not theory. Where Elyot seemed willing and able to adapt Platonic ideas for English use, Starkey seems suspicious of learning alluring men to retired lives of contemplation.³⁹ In the second part of his dialogue, Pole manages to overcome Lupset's objections to the Socratic doctrine

³⁹ Cf Ficino's observation, noted in my Introduction, that philosopher may be apt at both divine and human matters but we should not be surprised if the study of the divine proves so alluring that they come to despise and neglect the human.

that vice is ignorance with a few short arguments (see 19-21), but the allure of contemplation taking men away from caring for the human things remains a serious difficulty throughout. This difficulty is most likely inherent to any kind of “civic humanism.”⁴⁰ Plato can be both a guide and a siren for the civic-minded humanist. His writings offer a wealth of material for those interested in civic and moral problems, but his images and ideals can be as alluring as they are impossible of realization. It is not for nothing that in Starkey’s dialogue, as well as Elyot’s and even More’s *Utopia*, intellectual discussion is broken off for food or recreation. Even symbolically, speeches never provide English interlocutors with necessary sustenance.

Starkey’s dialogue as a whole reflects Lupset’s objection to ineffective idealism. The structure of the dialogue—a description of the best attainable commonwealth, followed by the identification of flaws in existing English polity and suggestions for reforms of those flaws—shows that Starkey’s interest lies in what could be accomplished. At the outset of the description of the best commonwealth Lupset is clear that he does not want Pole to follow Plato’s example and produce an ideal which is a “dream and vain imagination.” Instead, he prefers what one might call a natural rather than a rational ideal, one based on the nature of the English state and the English people (cf 35-7). Pole agrees to these stipulations.

Plato emerges again as a negative touchstone when Lupset and Pole come to discuss some important points of moral philosophy. In order to illustrate is ideal

⁴⁰ Mansfield (244-5) presents the problem in this way: only if one’s city (or country) always behaved morally could the civic and the humane truly coincide. We may speak loosely of civic humanism insofar as humanism was aware of and respected the claims of the civic, but as humanists most of those we call “civic humanists” understood the civic as partly instrumental and subordinate but also partly rival to humanism. They did so because they did not make the error of imagining that the common good never derogates from the individual good.

commonwealth, Pole begins by asking what perfect felicity is. He links the Platonic and the Christian view on this question, pointing out that both assert that, as soul is the most important thing, so one can suffer worldly adversity yet still attain the highest felicity if one is still well in soul. Interestingly enough, Plato's similarity to Christian doctrine is not a point in its favor here (as it usually is with Theological Platonism). Instead, Pole explicitly rejects the Platonic/Christian view of felicity in favor of Aristotle's, which holds that a certain amount of worldly prosperity or "equipment" is necessary for the highest felicity. Pole points out that these positions stem from opposing points of view: the Platonic/Christian position is accurate with regard to the life to come, but from the viewpoint of our practical, worldly existence, the Aristotelian position is more accurate (30). The Platonic position is rejected here, as it was before by Bruni, because it is not as useful as Aristotle's.

Several specifically Platonic arguments prove acceptable with some qualification in Starkey's dialogue. A view on law presented in *Republic* and *Laws* is a key example. Pole suggests that despite flaws in the English polity it shouldn't be hard to bring men to true civility with only a handful of laws—just as Plato tells us, he adds, in the *Republic* (Starkey 97). Starkey may well have in mind here the assertion that the weakness of law is that it cannot address individual circumstances as well as a reasonable arbiter can. As Pole says earlier, when the king is "lively reason, which is the only head and ruler of realms by the order of nature," he may then be above the laws. This argument has theoretical appeal but in practice there are clear shortcomings, primarily visible in the loss of political freedom:

When the prince is lively, or rather deadly, affection, he should be subject to his laws. Obedience to the laws in

this situation is true liberty. To give someone power over the laws who is not subject to his reason is to open the gate to tyranny. It is against all politic order and rule. (Starkey 68)

Starkey qualifies the view that few laws would be needed in a perfectly ordered state with the observation that law is necessary not only for its exhortative but also its coercive function, due to the imperfection of human nature. Most men are so controlled by their affections, Pole argues, that law is necessary. Law can act as an external control on those affections, though, by creating desire for reward or fear of punishment (97-8).

It is worthy of note that Starkey's qualifications here forestall some of the more potentially subversive consequences of Plato's understanding of law. If we concede that law must be coercive out of necessity (since some people are unable to control themselves), what are we to say of coercive laws in regard to people who *are* able to master their affections? With regard to such persons, it may well be that law can be positively unjust. By referring to the "imperfection of human nature" and law as an external control Starkey suggests that the greater danger is with uncontrolled persons. One might even consider that Starkey's hopes for what law can accomplish are idealistic since considerable problems arise from his position if one assumes that laws are no better than the men who make them.⁴¹

The objections Starkey raises to Plato's view of law also speak to Starkey's desire to avoid tyranny. In actual practice, Lupset notes, most people, including kings, do not rule themselves and their affections. When the prince is ruled by his affections, "it is against all politic order and rule" to allow him power over the laws. Many English thinkers, as J.W. Allen points out (128-9), looked to law as the only genuine restraint on

⁴¹ For example, if the laws, like the prince, are "deadly affection"—that is, if laws are unjust—one must wonder if obedience to them is still "true liberty."

monarchical authority. Thus, any appreciation Starkey might hold for Plato's view of law he could not entirely accept it without serious reservations.

Plato is most useful to Starkey when he considers matters of education—particularly the education of the governing class. For both Pole and Lupset the chief problem in the body politic is disorder in its “head.”⁴² If this could be cured, they agree, problems in the other parts would soon be resolved. This is why, Pole points out, Plato in his commonwealth chiefly labored to set up good officers and rulers. Lupset does not deny the importance Plato attaches to his guardian class, but does have some doubts about the high character he requires of them. In Lupset's view, Plato assumes that the heads of his commonwealth can be made so good and so wise that almost no law will be needed. But man is so frail and corrupt that not so many wise and good men can be found. This is why Plato's commonweal is justly called nothing more than a dream. Pole offers a qualification for Plato's overly virtuous guardians: he will depict a class of more civil and common men, not such as will never follow their own affections or in whom all affections are drowned, but who will observe a reasonable mean between public and private interests. They will keep their eyes on the commonwealth as much or nearly as much as on their private advantage (108). Lupset is skeptical of finding men of even this level of excellence.

Pole's answer to Lupset is the same as the one Elyot advocated: better education of the youth. Lupset wonders if it is in man's powers to form a prince as he would wish and give to him all wisdom and goodness; Pole grants that while only God can make a man, God also gives to men “sparkles of reason” (cf Elyot's “seeds of things and arts and

⁴² By this, as is obvious from what follows, both refer to the chief persons of the commonwealth—that is, the aristocracy.

sciences”) to which the affections and bodily desires are joined. So long as we take care that the latter two do not overwhelm the former all should be well. Pole says he could easily confirm this “both by the sentence of old philosophy and holy scripture” (110), but his current interest is practical. How can it be accomplished?

The answer is a special education established for the English nobility. It is not for nothing, Pole reminds Lupset, that Plato in his commonweal took so much care for the education of his officers and governors. If we were to establish a good education, Lupset imagines that “in a few years it would bring forth Plato’s commonwealth, or else rather the true institution of Christian doctrine” (126). Whatever Englishmen might have thought of Plato’s ideal commonwealth, when it came to matters of education they were often willing to grant considerable powers to the forming of the soul. In education, idealistic hopes and practical interests could, for a time, coincide. Thus when it came to the education of the noble or governing class, Plato is far more likely to be useful.

For Starkey, Plato comes into play in much the same context as we found in Elyot. Plato is chiefly cited, even when cited disapprovingly, as an authority on moral and political matters. The one time Starkey refers to Plato’s similarity to Christian thought he is critical of his teaching. Plato’s chief appeal seems to lie in the emphasis his philosophy put on education, particularly of the governing class, and on the role of learning in political affairs. Like Elyot, Starkey wants wisdom and learning to play a major role in politics, but Starkey is even more suspicious of the temptations to the contemplative life. He is also more sensitive to difficulties in Plato, perhaps because his immediate goals—persuading the real Pole to join the king’s side and persuading the king to make more use of Starkey himself—are more pressing. Even more telling, Starkey

makes use of the ideal of the functioning English commonweal, and is at pains to distinguish his “realistic” ideal from Plato’s “idealistic” one. As we shall see next, with Thomas More the relationship to Plato, idealism, and the classics becomes even more complex.

Thomas More and the Political Plato

One of the very earliest names associated with Platonism in England, Thomas More offers an excellent glimpse at Political Platonism in practice. More’s approach to classical learning in general is informed above all by its potential utility—especially its mortal utility. In his 1518 epistle to the University of Oxford, More defends secular learning thus: “no one denies that a person can be saved without it, and indeed without learning of any sort. But even secular learning...prepares the soul for virtue” (CW XV, 139). The qualification involving what is necessary for salvation suggests that More recognized great value in the classical teaching about moral virtue, but disagreed with the philosophers over what completed moral virtue.

The same focus on the utility of classical learning is seen also in More’s letter to the tutor of his children, William Gonnell, where he states: “among all the benefits that learning bestows on men, I think there is none more excellent than that by study we are taught to seek in that very study not praise, but utility” (CW I, 104). That More means moral utility is clear since in the same letter he identifies as the “real and genuine fruits of learning” nothing less than piety, charity, modesty, and humility (cf T. White 331).

More’s view of philosophy in particular is of a piece with his view of classical learning. In the polemical 1529 work *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, a character named More speaks with a fervent interlocutor identified as “The Messenger.” In a section

encompassing several chapters of the first book, More attempts to convince the Messenger about the importance of the liberal arts and the possible harmony of reason and faith. In this section the Messenger presents a version of Luther's *sola scriptura* argument, asking More if he would condemn a manner of study which showed such affection for Scripture that it had little room for philosophy, the "mother of heresies" (CW VI, 72-3). After some back-and-forth dialogue, More insists that, contrary to the Messenger's initial assumption that reason and faith are great enemies, reason is actually invaluable if man is to perceive what he should believe. And as reason is strengthened by the study of philosophy, logic, and the liberal arts, as well as by oratory, laws, history, and poetry, so the classics can be of use to us (126).

In More's non-polemical writings we see the same view of philosophy as preparatory for virtue. His 1504 translation of the *Life of Pico* (a biography of the famous philosopher and Platonist Pico della Mirandola) emphasizes its subject as a model of the combination of classical learning and Christian virtue. In so doing, More shows little interest in the studies on which Pico's reputation as a Platonist stands. After describing how Pico, in the manner of Plato and Apollonius, sought out all the famous learned men of his time, More presents, in a section ominously titled "Of his mynde and vainglorious dispicions at Rome," a reduced version of Pico's studies: "secret mysteries of the Hebrews, Caldees, and Arabis, and many things drawn out of the old obscure Philosophy of Pythagoras, Trismegistus, and Orpheus, and many other things strange" (WSTM, I.3). In the original, this list is more extensive and detailed.

As Dominic Baker-Smith points out ("Escape from the Cave" 12), More also edits his original text to alter one of its themes. In the original *Life*, Pico comes down firmly on

the side of Marsilio Ficino concerning the superiority of the contemplative to the active life. More translates and appends an introduction to one of Pico's letters on this subject. In the introduction, More notes that Pico's friend Andrew Corneus had written a letter to him (no longer extant, even in More's time) asking him to "surcease of study, and put himself with some of the great princes of Italy, with whom...he should be much more fruitfully occupied" (WSTM, I.14). According to More, Pico replies only that this would be to make philosophy no more than a mercenary study. More omits mention of the ground on which Pico makes this judgment, likely because Pico's view of philosophy and its relation to politics does not accord with his own:

[philosophers] dwell with them selfe, and be content with the tranquillity of their own mind, they suffice them self... I therefore abiding firmly in this opinion: set more by my little house, my study, the pleasure of my books, the rest and peace of my mind: then by all your king's palaces, all your common business, all your glory, all the advantage that ye hawk after, and all the favor of the court. (WSTM, I.14)

For the most part, More's use of Plato is in line with his use of other classical authors and philosophy in general. In the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, the few times Plato is mentioned More seems interested only in his political teaching. In order to defend the lack of vernacular translations of Scripture, More refers specifically to Plato's teaching in *Laws*. Plato's Athenian Stranger suggests a law against public discussion of legal statutes. According to More, this law is meant to forbid men who were not competent or specially designated for the purpose from "meddling," by reasoning and disputing, with the laws of the city. All the best laws, as Plato understood, are in fact the ones most likely to be misunderstood and disliked by the common people, who long only

to live at liberty from all law. If Plato is so protective of temporal law, he asks, how much more protective ought we to be of Holy Scripture (CW VI, 334-5).⁴³

More's presentation of Plato's law against public discussion of matters of state is actually a conflation of two separate passages. In *Laws* III (689 ff), the Athenian declares, and asks his companions to accept as an axiom, that the government should be entrusted only to men of sense rather than the foolish or ignorant. Folly or ignorance in turn is understood as a want of accord between one's feelings of pleasure and pain and the judgments of one's reason. Ignorance corresponds to the largest part of the human soul, and in turn also with the mass of the people in a state. From this argument More concludes that Plato believed that the common people would not understand certain laws. Though this is not stated directly by Plato, it can be inferred from the description of ignorance in this passage.

The passage from III refers to who should rule—a subject discussed more fully in the twelfth book, where the other passage More is making use of can be found. In *Laws* XII, the Stranger makes a strong case for permitting certain select members of Magnesia to travel abroad and learn what they can. His case is based on another axiom or key assumption: that among the mass of mankind there will always exist, though in small numbers, men who are divinely inspired with wisdom. Conversation with such men is always of the greatest value, so even members of a well-ordered state may go abroad to learn from them (951c-e). At 952b, the Stranger lays down some severe laws concerning those who will travel abroad. When they return, they are to report what they have learned to the ruling part of the state (the nocturnal council or synod), which will determine if the

⁴³ More was sufficiently intrigued by this passage in laws to make use of it again in his *Utopia*, where it is a capital offense for any outside the council or assembly of the whole people to meet and consult concerning the state.

traveler has returned a better man than before he left. If he is better or at least no worse, the traveler receives honors befitting him; if worse, he is forbidden to associate with the young or the old and if convicted in court of being a meddler in education and the laws he is to be put to death. This passage seems to come closest to matching what More calls Plato's law against meddling.

The conflation of these two passages, if not a mere accident of memory, adds further nuance to More's position in *Heresies*. Today we are inclined to read More's argument against vernacular translation as a thoughtless elitism. But this passage involving Plato may suggest some complexity in his view. If the vulgate Scriptures and the Church's interpretations of same are analogous to Magnesia and its laws—that is, they are well-ordained and well-ordered—then vernacular translations represent a danger similar to that presented by travelers who leave Magnesia. Since many people are “ignorant” in the Athenian's sense, and their feelings of pleasure and pain do not accord with their rational judgment, it is possible, even probable, that vernacular translators will allow their own feelings of pain and pleasure to corrupt their translation. Without a “nocturnal council” keeping guard over the laws (say, a Church providing a stable body of interpretation of Scripture), allowing unbridled “travel” in the form of vernacular translations may well lead to disorder of understanding. It is likely that More also agrees with the Stranger's claim that since there are always men inspired with wisdom all over the world, even members of a well-ordered state may travel and speak with them. With More, this would be a justification of classical and liberal studies.

Like Starkey, More seems skeptical of Plato's idealizing imagination; unlike Starkey, More tends to present his skepticism in comic terms. This approach may be

informed by his translations of Lucian's dialogues, made between 1504-6 with Erasmus.⁴⁴ In Lucian's *True History*, for instance, the narrator reaches the Isles of the Blessed and meets the great figures of Greek history—except for Plato, who is absent. It turns out that Plato is in his ideal city and hence invisible. In *Lover of Lies*, a dialogue More himself translated, the character Tychiades speculates that the Platonist Ion must be keen of sight indeed since he can see Plato's Ideas so clearly when they are so indistinct to ordinary men. In both of these dialogues the joke depends upon a perceived disconnect between ideal and actual existence (cf Baker-Smith, *More's Utopia* 41-2; Gordon 195-7; Wegemer 49-50).

More uses the same joke, in largely the same terms, in his later *Response to Luther*. Luther's "Church Militant" on earth, More says, does not seem to exist in a palpable and perceptible Church but must be sought in some vague group of Christians who are "somehow imperceptible and mathematical—like Platonic ideas" (CW V, 166-7). Later, More complains that Luther's reasoning leaves the Gospels and Church matters uncertain and are "conceive[d] in [his] mind like Platonic ideas" (179). In both passages the tone is one of biting sarcasm and withering skepticism towards Luther's conception of the Church as a community of the faithful rather than a concrete and distinct entity. More uses Plato as an example of abstract, idealizing imagination to criticize Luther for applying too great an abstraction to the Church.

With the above established concerning More's attitude toward the classics, philosophy, and Plato in his other works, we can turn to the work which remains crucial for understanding early English Platonism: the *Utopia*. No one, I think, has seriously

⁴⁴ In the preface to his translations of Lucian More makes it clear that he sees serious moral utility in Lucian's comic approach. As More puts it, Lucian "everywhere reprimands and censures...our human frailties...so cleverly and effectively" (CW III, 3).

doubted that Plato is an important influence on this book. What has been debated is the nature and extent of that influence.⁴⁵ Although More certainly engages with Plato's "theology" in *Utopia*, as scholars such as Guegen and Miles have shown, as with More's other works, his primary engagement is with Plato's political and moral thought.⁴⁶ More's biographer Stapleton remarks that More seems to have read Plato and his followers above all "because he considered their teaching most useful in the government of the state and the preservation of civic order" (quoted in Starnes 8-9).

The attendant texts published with the *Utopia* suggest that More's friends, at least, may have read the work with similar assumptions.⁴⁷ It is immediately obvious in reading these texts that the readers wish to emphasize the utility—particularly the political utility—as well as the style of the book. Bude calls it "amusing and profitable" (7); Busleyden compliments More for his delightful description which so well combines his erudition and knowledge (251); Beatus Rhenanus remarks that the keenness of More's judgment in practical affairs comes brilliantly clear (259). Desmarez even encourages widespread publication of *Utopia* on the grounds that one can see in it as in a mirror everything that relates to the proper establishment of a commonwealth (263). Peter Giles,

⁴⁵ Fox (*Utopia: an Elusive Vision*), for instance, considers "the differences between *Utopia* and Plato's *Republic*...just as important as the similarities" (8-9). Baker-Smith ("Escape from the Cave") links More to both Plato and Cicero in his use of dialogue with a more or less real physical setting plus allegorical elements which take us outside the restrictions of political theory (9). Neumann ("On the Platonism of More's *Utopia*") also notes divergences between *Utopia* and *Republic*, and even observes that *Utopia* has been considered both an imitation of *Republic* and the forerunner of ideals opposed to those presented in that dialogue (495).

⁴⁶ Cf Guegen (44-7), particularly his observation that More "admires Plato's moral and educational genius" (47), and Miles (84-7). Hexter's claim that it is a point of "unanimous agreement about *Utopia* [that] it is a work of social comment," however, is a bit strong as well as confusing. I am not entirely sure what "social comment" is, or how it relates to political philosophy or social theory, which he what he seems to have in mind (11).

⁴⁷ All references to *Utopia* and its parerga are taken from the Latin-English edition by Logan, Adams, and Miller.

with whom More seems to have initially developed his idea of the Utopian commonwealth (cf Hexter 26-34), declares his amazement at More's good judgment in tracing the origins of the evils that arise in commonwealths and the blessings that could arise in them (27). While there is not little irony in the praise bestowed by these readers, especially insofar as each maintains the dramatic fiction of Utopia's and Hythloday's physical existence, there is also remarkable similarity in the character of their separate judgments.

When the same writers draw specific connections between *Utopia* and Plato, as they often do, they do so in largely the same terms. Beatus Rhenanus, after praising More's judgment in political affairs, claims that *Utopia* contains principles of a sort not to be found in Plato, Aristotle, or even the Pandects of Julian (259). The list suggests that Rhenanus is thinking of legal, moral, and political philosophy in particular. The advantage *Utopia* has over the other three, he adds, is that its principles are less philosophical but more Christian. Busleyden follows this pattern in praising the Utopian education of rulers. Like Plato, he says, they do well in taking so much care for their education. Plato was wise to realize that without good rulers even the best laws were little more than dead letters. More could not have accomplished his goals in *Utopia*, he concludes, "more effectually and correctly than by setting before rational men this pattern of a commonwealth, this model and perfect image of proper conduct" (253).

Peter Giles makes the most pointed connection between More's work and Plato's. In a letter to Busleyden, in which he makes clear that he himself is also a part of the game

More is playing,⁴⁸ he remarks that *Utopia* is as yet known only to a few but deserves to be known by everyone “as going far beyond Plato’s republic” (25). His remark is echoed in the verses on Utopia written in the “Utopian language,” purportedly by a poet named Anemolius.⁴⁹ These verses claim that Utopia rivals, and may even surpass, Plato’s *Republic* since it makes manifest what Plato merely outlined in words (19).

The grounds for the preference Anemolius has for Utopia comes to light, I think, if we make use of a connection noted by Eva Brann with Sir Philip Sidney’s position on poetry’s superiority to philosophy:

Whatsoever the philosopher sayeth should be done he [the poet] gives a perfect picture of in some one by whom he presupposeth it was done; so as he coupleth the general notion to the particular example. A perfect picture, I say, for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description. (quoted in Brann 2)

Sidney argues here that it is the coupling of general notion to particular example which makes poetry more effective and hence more useful than philosophy as a teacher of virtue. One may see in this the preference for action over theory alone seen before in Elyot and Starkey. Sidney’s argument assumes that poetry and philosophy aim primarily and essentially at the teaching of virtue. Brann suggests that “Anemolius,” and perhaps Giles and the other humanists as well, reads *Utopia* as a kind of “political poetry” which surpasses, as a teacher of virtue, the rational ideal put forward by Plato (Brann 2, 9).

⁴⁸ Giles notes that “I was present at [Hythloday’s] discourse quite as much as More himself” (25), which I take to mean that he was involved in the discussions which More used as inspiration or springboard for his own writing.

⁴⁹ Giles may be the author of the verses, given his comment that “I did see to it that the book contained a quatrain written in the Utopian tongue, which Hythloday showed to me after More had gone away” (27).

The connection between *Utopia* and Plato's political thought is emphasized by More himself as well. The full title of the work, *De optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula Utopia* calls to mind both Plato's *Republic* and its examination of the best state, as well as Cicero's own *Republic*. The second half of the title further implies that More's work may connect with Plato's in much the same way as the "new island" connects with the "best state." At the outset, one is inclined to expect an old abstraction will be replaced by a new actuality.

Specific references to Plato and uses of Platonic arguments further establish the connection with Plato. On Hythloday's fourth voyage to Utopia, he says, he gave them all his books. The first books he mentions are "many of Plato's and some of Aristotle's (181). Context suggests that these works were given primarily because of their perceived usefulness for the study of moral problems, since Hythloday mentions giving them immediately after discussing Utopian views about virtue and pleasure. The other texts he mentions giving them are grammatical, poetic, historical, and scientific works.

In the first book Hythloday and Morus (More's alter ego of a sort) disagree over whether Plato's teaching advocates political activity. Morus argues that it does, reminding Hythloday of Plato's teaching about the philosopher-kings (81-3). Hythloday instead argues that Plato tells the wise not to involve themselves in politics. Outside of the ideal situation the philosopher can do no good and should not risk his life or his virtue, he says, as "Plato himself...[found out] with Dionysius" (83).

Scattered references throughout *Utopia* show parallels with Plato's political and moral thought. In describing Utopian military discipline, Hythloday mentions that on certain days both "men and women carry on a vigorous military training, so they will be

fit to fight should the need arise” (201). Plato advocates the same for his guardians in *Republic*, and in *Laws* VII insists that men and women both train in military discipline so that the women may be of use in cases of extreme necessity (804d-805a). Hythloday’s judgment that Utopia is the only commonwealth deserving of the name, while all others are nothing more than conspiracies of the rich who advance their own interests under the name and title of commonwealth (245), echoes the Stranger’s argument in *Laws* IV that polities where laws are enacted in the interest only of a part of the state rather than the whole are not truly polities but “feudalities” (715b). The Utopians consider maintaining a constant population, with about 10-16 persons of age in each household, crucial for the success of their form of communal living (129-137). To keep the number constant, families are required to shift excess population freely to other families, even to the extent of members of one city moving to other cities to keep the overall population of the island constant. In *Laws* V we see the same connection. In order that the communal property of the whole state remain stable, the Stranger argues, the number of hearths must remain unchanged (740a-b). Later (740c-741c), he suggests that excess and deficiency in families be made up by shifting persons from one family to another as needed. In an interesting parallel, the Stranger mentions two natural obstacles to population control: disease and ruinous war (741a). Hythloday mentions that Utopian population control has only met with two setbacks: two separate outbreaks of disease. War is not as serious an obstacle for the Utopians thanks to their practice of hiring mercenaries to fight wars on their behalf.

Of course, the most well-known connection to Plato is probably Hythloday’s use of his authority to defend his own advocacy of common property as a social panacea.

Hythloday's experience with the Utopians and their political practice makes him "more sympathetic to Plato," he says, and he "wonder[s] the less that he refused to make any laws for people who rejected laws requiring all goods to be shared equally by all" (101). It is not the coincidence of political power and philosophical wisdom which will lead to the elimination of all political ills for Hythloday. Rather, it is by abolishment of private property that fair and just distribution of goods can be accomplished and the "business of mortals...conducted happily" (103). Hythloday partly agrees with Plato concerning the importance of abolishing private property, but the prominence he accords it suggests key disagreement as well.

Following Neumann, Brann, and Steintrager, I believe we learn more from the divergences More's text makes from Plato than from its parallels.⁵⁰ As a prime example, consider the passages in Plato which Hythloday echoes in his advocacy of Utopian communism. *Republic* 422a suggests that the absence of private property would eliminate idleness and luxury—two evils Hythloday is particularly keen to demonstrate that the Utopians have eliminated. A similar passage can also be found in *Laws* 739c-740b, but where the community of property in *Republic* was laid down with specific reference to the guardian class, in the *Laws* passage the Stranger recommends for the entire state a communal division which more closely resembles the Utopian polity. Houses are apportioned by lot to citizens, but citizens are taught to regard them as the common property of the whole state (740a); in Utopia, houses are given to separate families but remain open for entry to anyone and are exchanged every 10 years by lot (119).

⁵⁰ Although he begins from a similar principle, I do not accept Starnes' view that More's primary objections to Plato are to his class divisions or advocacy for the rule of the philosopher-king (see *The New Republic* 22). His assertion in the same place that More saw the politics of the Europe of his time as informed by a "wrongheaded attempt to put Plato's ideal solutions into practice" seems to me absurd.

Now, if Hythloday is indeed echoing *Laws* (even more so than *Republic*) here, several divergences are worth noting. The passage in *Laws* introducing the nature and need for common property presents the situation described in 739c-740b, the situation of Magnesia which is also closest to Utopian practice, as decidedly second in merit. First in merit would be a true communism, where everything considered private—even down to individual judgments of good and evil and the very parts of the body—was truly held in common. The Stranger's ideal is presented as the best possible for the sort of men they are assuming will populate it (739d-e). Hythloday, however, presents his Utopia as the best simply. And where the fiction of *Laws* is that the Stranger and his companions are legislating for a potential colony of Cretans, in *Utopia* the fiction is that Hythloday has in fact visited a real island and seen the very institutions he describes. The difference in the two situations suggests that More may be presenting his Utopia as a secondary and human ideal rather than a rational ideal. In *Laws* the Stranger says they will make use of an arrangement which is second in merit since they will not be legislating for gods or the sons of gods (739d). In other words, the ideal they work from is the closest they can get to the divine ideal. Hythloday's reference is explicitly formed in reference not to the high but to the low: it is better than what other men have accomplished.

We can see a similar divergence in the very outset of the description of the ideal state in both works. In *Laws* IV the Stranger and his companions begin the legislation for their ideal city with a physical description of its location. Clinias describes a place much like Utopia: bordering the sea and furnished with many excellent harbors. The Stranger calls this situation unfortunate and dangerous since it offers too much opportunity for foreign merchandise and retail trade, which can have bad effects on men's souls. He

concludes that the locale is not “altogether bad” for the development of virtue since it is not deficient in many products—but the state will have to take care not to amass great stores of wealth (704b-705b). One of the most basic facts about an ideal but actual city seems to be that its basic conditions will not be perfect.

This is also the situation in Utopia. According to Hythloday, iron is the only product which the Utopians have need of from the outside (147). More revealing is that Utopia, like the city Clinias described, also borders the sea and is furnished with many excellent harbors. Indeed, a vast harbor on the inner side of its crescent is a defining feature of the Utopian landscape. In clear contrast to *Laws*, however, Utopia readily and vigorously engages in retail trade, even to the extent of bringing in the very “immense quantities of silver and gold” which the Athenian warned against. More or Hythloday seem to take the Athenian’s objection to heart, though, since the Utopians take great care to keep citizens from becoming attached to these metals (147-151). Steintrager speculates that to satisfy the Utopians’ interest in pleasure and make possible the extensive education which allows them to properly moderate and control that interest, More had to imagine a city with considerably greater material wealth (371-2). I would add that the material wealth the Utopians amass from retail trade is also what permits them to maintain and even extend their brand of virtue in the midst of other, often hostile, nations.

Even more revealing, though, is what I take to be the primary origin of these divergent approaches to retail trade. The Athenian’s hostility towards it and strict regulations concerning it I believe derive from some assumptions he makes about the soul in *Laws* III, 689a-b. There, he insists that the worst and most extensive kind of ignorance is when a man’s feelings of pleasure and pain do not accord with his rational

judgment about what is noble and good and what is evil and unjust. The bulk of the soul consists of the part which feels pain and pleasure, and that part also corresponds to the mass of the populace in a state. When this part opposes what are by nature the ruling principles—knowledge, opinion, and reason—this is what the Stranger calls folly, both in a state and in an individual. The assumption, though it is not directly stated here, is that not only do desires, or feelings of pleasure and pain, have the potential to usurp reason but that in most people they in fact do so. This is taken as given, and the training of citizens proceeds on the assumption that such usurpation be guarded against most carefully.

In pointed contrast, the Utopians seem to see little danger but much opportunity in retail trade. Their openness to trade and the amassing of wealth suggests that they consider their training sufficient to prevent unreasonable desires for wealth or foreign goods from arising. Hythloday relates a story of a small child asking if the decorated diplomats from foreign lands are actually slaves. Evidently the natural shininess and splendor of gold is not nearly as imposing as Utopian custom. This is in keeping with Hythloday's claim that Utopian views about money have been "picked up partly from their upbringing, since the institutions of their commonwealth are completely opposed to such folly, partly from instruction and good books" (155). Training and reason, as it were, provide the Utopians with their views about money. The reader must assume that their views determine their actions. If we recall Hythloday's objection in book I when his political suggestions at Cardinal Morton's were not accepted on their rational merits alone we can see why he might appreciate such a situation.

There are two key divergences from Plato, however, which seem especially significant because they come so close to the heart of the irony in More's work. The first concerns the Utopian pursuit of pleasure. Even Hythloday, who so rarely objects to Utopian practices, concedes that they seem "rather too much inclined to the view [of happiness] which favors pleasure, in which they conclude that all or the most part of human happiness consists" (159). More himself elsewhere agrees with Pico that "a perfect man should abstain not only from unlawful pleasures but from lawful" (quoted in Brann 4). This seems to be a feature More gave to his Utopians not because he held it as an ideal but because he wanted to emphasize a contrast with Plato.

In *Laws*, the Stranger assumes in book I that pleasure and pain are two "opposed and imprudent counselors" who guide most men. Our inward affections, like strings attached to puppets, drag us along and often pull against one another or drag us towards opposite actions. Being good rather than bad means following the pulling force which one ought to obey (644c-645c). The key to following the "golden" string is a proper education (cf *Laws* I.645, II.653).⁵¹ The problem is that by nature we do not always follow or avoid the pleasures and pains which reason tells us we should. Hence in *Laws* VII, when discussing education in more detail, the Stranger asserts that the right kind of life ought neither to pursue pleasures nor to shun pains entirely, but should instead embrace a middle state of cheerfulness (792c-d). He applies this view to the raising of children and argues against any form of nurture which aims at preventing all fears or

⁵¹ See also Stevens (388-9) and Wegemer (4), who describe this view of the necessity of education for living the good life as eminently classical. In political matters, this view leads to the assertion that governments should be concerned with the right formation of their people (that is, with education). Both Stevens and Wegemer suggest that More agrees in large part with the classical view on this score. Wegemer points out that Logan, Starnes, and others, however, believe More was more modern here and really believed that social institutions and political practices could replace the moral instruction advocated by classical and medieval theorists (see 14-5).

pains while providing many pleasures as the worst possible form of corruption (792d-793a).

What the Stranger considers the worst possible form of corruption is not only integral to Utopian nurture—it is their most commonly held philosophic view about man’s chief happiness. As Hythloday says, “they conclude, after carefully considering and weighing the matter, that all our actions, even the virtues exercised within them, look toward pleasure as their happiness and final goal” (167). Most Utopians inclined toward the view that happiness lies in pleasure, but they are not simple hedonists. Instead, they believe that by nature men are led only to those delights to which both reason and sense carry us. Hence, they accept in principle that all pleasures are not equal or equally good. According to the Utopians, by following the senses and reason we can find what is naturally pleasant. Pleasures which are against nature are called ‘pleasure’ only by an empty fiction (159, 167).

The Utopians’ assumptions about nature and pleasure stand in direct contrast to what is found in Plato—particularly as found in *Laws*.⁵² For the Stranger, pleasures do not always accord naturally with rational judgment. Instead, one of his basic assumptions about human nature is that desire and reason can and do conflict—that the different “strings” of desire lead us in different and opposed directions. He assumes such a conflict at the outset of his legislation, where it is particularly acute and problematic in the problem of *eros*.

In *Laws* VIII the Stranger raises as a critical problem issues which are hard to regulate by law but still vital to be regulated (835c). The chief example of this class of

⁵² And as Thomas White points out, *Laws* is probably the most important dialogue with respect to *Utopia* (see 329-330, 347-9).

political problems is the desire young men and women naturally have for one another. How, he asks, will the youth be made to abstain from those desires which frequently lead so many to ruin—desires from which reason, in its endeavor to become law, enjoins abstinence? The laws they have ordained prior to this point may serve to repress the majority of desires, but *eros* is something else again. The laws and the watchful eyes of magistrates are not enough when it comes to such passions: one must thus be on guard against them or else apply some remedy to escape the dangers arising from them (836b).

Hythloday tells us how the Utopians address this class of political problems in the section on the regulation of marriages. There, we learn that men and women do indeed sometimes run into forbidden embraces with one another. But where the Stranger emphasized the difficulty of regulation, the Utopian way seems curiously successful. Desires are managed after the fashion of a livestock purchase—by means of a pre-marriage viewing of the naked bodies of the betrothed. By means of such viewings, prospective husbands and wives can be satisfied about their bodily desires before proceeding with marriage (189).

More expected and wanted this institution to stand out for the reader. He foregrounds it by having Hythloday admit that when he and his fellow-travelers first heard of the practice, “we laughed at [it], and called it absurd” (189). Given the enthusiasm Hythloday has for Utopian customs and the rarity of his objections to them, this comment is particularly worthy of note. The implication seems to be that the reaction described is a first impression, one More’s readers, with their own assumptions about human nature and customs, would likely share. We see that it is *not* absurd when we

recognize that the Utopians do not experience the same conflict between reason and desire which we, like Plato's Stranger, assume is ordinary.

The naked viewings could only work as Hythloday says they are meant to if we assume two things. One, the viewers must always judge reasonably and not unreasonably due to inflamed desire. If participants made the same mistakes in marriage it is hard to imagine that such an unusual custom would have remained viable. And as anyone could attest, the amorous passion tends to focus on what is at hand, while reason takes thought also of the future. Two, no shame must attach to marriage arrangements broken off after a viewing. The conflict between reason and desire seems at the very least muted in Utopian life. The reasons why More may have done this, however, will become clear only after considering the second major divergence from Plato—on the matter of spiritedness and pride.

On this issue I have found it useful to combine observations by Brann, Wegemer, and Stevens. Brann points out that in *Republic* Socrates sets out to answer the question of what justice is by looking to the relation of the parts of the human soul—and to political communities as magnified expressions of these relations. To that end, he constructs a series of three cities, each arising from the addition of another part of the soul and corresponding to the dominance of that part (Brann 10-11, and cf *Republic* II.369b-376d). The first city is related to the desiring part of the soul. A city of craftsmen arises out of basic human necessity, based on a division of labor for the purpose of satisfying necessity. As desires become more complex and luxurious the city becomes feverish. New arts are needed and the city becomes predatory. A warrior class emerges and we get

the second city, from which the evils which beset cities—but also philosophy—emerge (Brann 12).

The second part of the soul is spiritedness, a kind of will to excel, as well as a kind of self-assertion. The qualities which appear in Plato's second city, consequent to the addition of the second part of the soul, are magnificence, honor, luxury, and spiritedness. In Christian terms, as Brann and Wegemer point out, this part of the soul sounds rather close to the vice of pride. Although problematic for the classics as well, this quality of soul is uniquely problematic from a Christian perspective. As Wegemer puts it (following More in his *Treatise upon the Passion*), God gave man a responsible liberty so that he might do good in a way analogous to God's own free and benevolent way of acting. But with this freedom man could also choose to use his powers for his own pleasure and pride (Wegemer 29-30). The key problem in the soul here is not desires and passions overcoming reason—though that remains a problem—but pride turning reason away from its proper object toward reliance on itself alone (cf Wegemer 36).

The Utopians do not seem to develop pride or the quality or part of soul involved with pride. But if we follow through the connection with Plato we may well ask if the result is indeed a boon. Socrates describes the first city, the city of craftsmen, as the true or healthy city, but a Socrates could have no home in that city. It is only after the addition of spiritedness and its attendant evils that philosophy emerges. With the addition of the second and third parts of the soul comes not only a complete picture of the city but also something which transcends the city. As Stevens puts it, philosophy is that something beyond the polity towards which man is drawn (394).

The key point here is that More recognizes that, in Platonic terms, Christianity is closer to philosophy than to ancient religion. Stevens points out that there is a different tension in antiquity between magistrates and priests. The ancient religion was political and tied to this or that city. The real tension was between the pronouncements of the city and anything beyond the city towards which man was drawn (394-5). Christianity, like philosophy, offers to men an ultimately trans-political allegiance. It claims to offer the truth not for this or that city but for man as such. But if one accepts this schema a question arises: does Christianity, like philosophy, require for its full development the very parts of the soul from which political evils arise? Whether and to what extent the Utopians can be Christian is a constant question in *Utopia*. The absence of priests comes to mind, as well as the exile of the baptized Utopian who preached the faith too zealously. By imagining a people in whom passions and pride do not create the political difficulties we know so well, More invites us to consider whether such gains may come at the expense of a truly good life.

Utopia also invites us to consider another respect in which Christian religion can be like philosophy: in questioning political orthodoxy.⁵³ Through Hythloday's fictions of ideal communities (the Utopians, but also the Polylerites and others whom he discusses in book I), More identifies a number of existing political problems as well as the attitudes which perpetuate them. Like philosophy, religion offers a perspective from which the assumptions made by the city can be seen for what they are (cf Baker-Smith, *More's Utopia* 131-2; Neumann 502-3).

Even as it advances a radical approach to thinking about political problems,

⁵³ But see, for example, Stevens 394-400 on the significant differences between the effects of such questioning. Briefly, philosophy may be said to question orthodoxy but does not seek to replace it with another.

though, *Utopia* also implies a conservative approach to dealing with them. Hythloday's philosophy is unwilling to compromise with orthodoxies, conventions, and customs as it finds them. It cherishes unqualified truth. But in order to obtain the highest human possibilities one must give way to freedom, and thus also to the likelihood that many will cherish not truth but what is their own (cf Neumann 498-9, 507; Wegemer 107; Brann 20-3). This means that, in the absence of philosopher-kings, one must learn to persuade those in power—which can be effective only with recourse to the love of their own which is found in most human beings (cf Baker-Smith, *More's Utopia* 132-3; Neumann 501-3; Skinner 134; Steintrager 365-6; Brann 20). It should be noted in closing that even while Hythloday uses Plato to justify his political independence, Morus insists that Plato also advocates the “more civil” approach to politics and philosophy which he recommends.⁵⁴

Political Platonism in the Elizabethan Era

Platonism and its influence on Elizabethan poetry has been examined before, and it is not my intention to discuss it here. Still, I think a case can be made that Elizabethan poets, particularly Sidney, continue to read Plato for moral and political guidance as much as anything else. Insofar as their reading is also informed by the influence of Ficino and Pico, whether directly or at second or third hand via French poetry or the Italian *trattati d'amore*, one can no longer speak of Political Platonism per se so much as a blending of approaches.

⁵⁴ Because it is a compromise, More's “more civil” approach is necessarily imperfect. Hythloday points out the primary difficulty with the approach—when matters of religious moment are involved. If one adapts oneself to the play at hand one might have to give the lie to Christ's own teachings. More's own case shows that the civil approach he recommended did not ensure success or survival—but then no one denies that politics is a dangerous game.

In several prose works from this period, however, it is clear that the approach of Political Platonism remains as ever—though the familiarity with the actual Plato is not as significant as with More, Elyot, and Starkey. *A Treatise of Morall Philosophie* is an excellent early example of this.⁵⁵ Palfryman’s preface offers it as a collection of sayings of the wise, which he proposes as useful to all but particularly for those who by virtue of their knowledge have the governance of the commonwealth in their hands (3-4). As one might expect from such a collection, the work is epigrammatic and eclectic in its approach to philosophy. Baldwin and Palfryman include the sayings not only of philosophers but of men of political experience such as kings, princes, and generals.

In the first book Baldwin divides philosophy into three parts: physics, ethics, and dialectic. The first and third he considers unproblematic and of little interest to him. The first is “sufficiently found” in Galen, Hippocrates, and Aristotle; the third is revealed by “daily experience” (19-20). Baldwin is primarily interested in moral philosophy—a branch he attributes, following Diogenes, to Socrates and Plato, whom he calls the first to write on the subject (20-1). Though Baldwin includes poets such as Homer in his collection of sayings, he is somewhat apologetic about this since it was Homer’s “indiscrete fabling of Gods and Goddesses” which led to his exclusion from Plato’s commonweal (52). The existence and character of this apology may suggest some awareness of Plato. In *Republic* II it is indeed Homer’s “indiscrete fabling” about the gods which presents difficulties for Socrates, but Baldwin may well have received this information at second hand.

⁵⁵ Originally written and published by William Baldwin in 1547, it was enlarged and redone by Thomas Palfryman, in which form it became quite popular. I treat Baldwin as the author except, as in the case of the preface to the enlarged edition, where Palfryman is clearly responsible.

As Elyot did before him, Baldwin praises Plato above all for his eloquence and for the combination of eloquence and learning found in his writings. Again following Diogenes, he seems to regard Plato as the most successful at combining the approaches of previous philosophers—notably the arguments of Heraclitus on sensible thing with those of Pythagoras on the intellect and those of Socrates on moral matters. Also like Elyot, Baldwin often refers to Plato and Socrates as much for their moral example as for their doctrine. For instance, when he relates that Socrates endured the mockery of others with great patience he remarks, “O that men could now a days so take such matters” (80).

Although Baldwin cites Plato, along with several other philosophers, on topics pertaining to God, the soul, and love, the most extensive references to him are reserved for the topics of governors, counsel, learning, and the virtues. Concerning governors we find many of the same statements as were referenced previously by More, Elyot, and Starkey. In moral matters, Baldwin cites with approval Plato’s belief in innate ideas, which he calls “seeds of things, and rules of Arts and Sciences,” (198). He attributes to Plato the saying that a good ruler should be able to rule himself (254). A number of references suggest that Plato believed that the virtuous man would be able to see God. When he approves of Plato’s teaching for its bearing on Christian doctrine he follows the Pauline practice of correspondence rather than Ficino’s of similarity:

Although...that Philosophy, and the sayings of the Gentiles are not to be compared with Scripture, yet are they not utterly to be rejected and set at naught: for we be (if we will seem to credit the minds of holy Doctors,) exhorted to the reading thereof, as appeareth plainly by the example of S. Augustine in his Booke, *De doctrina Christiana*...when he writeth of Philosophers, and chiefly of Plato his sect, declaring that if they have spoken ought that is true & appertinent to our faith, we ought not only to believe it, but also to challenge and retain it, even as our own. (14)

The anonymous author of *The Philosopher of the Court* (1575) offers an interesting perspective on Platonism. Like Elyot in his dialogue, this author emphasizes the connection between philosophy and moral living. In fact, the topic of the book, according to its dedicatory epistle, is “philosophy and manner how to live.” The author defines philosophy as knowledge of God and man—of who we are, where we are, and how we should govern and guide our lives with others. In other words, he defines it as essentially moral and political philosophy, though a moral and political philosophy which takes its bearings from the divine. In defense of this view of philosophy the author points to Plato’s teaching in *Gorgias* in detail. Plato, he says, calls philosophy useful for the young since their “youthful heat” makes them unprofitable to their country in political affairs. The author knows that many men have a bad opinion about philosophy, but insists that they should know how useful a thing it is and that it provides us knowledge about how to live in the world. What is particularly interesting about the author’s view here is how close it seems to be to the view of Callicles (cf *Gorgias* 485a-c). Whatever their interest in Plato, one is hard-pressed to find many English Renaissance writers who take seriously the possibility that philosophy could be a way of life.

The anonymous author of *The Booke of Wysdome* (1580) proposes to show the great good that comes from Prudence, according to the teachings of the ancient philosophers. Plato is one of the authors most frequently marshaled towards that end. According to the author, Plato considers a man who disregards experience of little worth. Wisdom is demonstrated by moral behavior (a conclusion reminiscent of Elyot’s on the same topic). Plato teaches that one become wise first by learning then by experiencing, by “reading great books” and then by “traveling to countries to hear and see the deeds of

men.” Like Baldwin and Palfryman, and so many others, the author is drawn to Plato’s insistence on self-control as essential to moral life. Supposedly, Plato teaches that a man cannot overcome an enemy if he cannot overcome himself (a more pugnacious version of Baldwin’s saying). As with Baldwin and the author of *Philosopher of the Court*, the author of *The Booke of Wysdome* freely mixes the advice of many philosophers with little or no distinction according to sect or time period. It’s all “wisdom.”

Perhaps the best example of the survival and popular understanding of Political Platonism into the Elizabethan era is a work not originally English: the 1598 translation of Louis le Roy’s *Aristotles Politiques*. The translator’s dedication to Sir Robert Sidney challenges the “barbarous and gothic”—read: medieval—opinion that learning and arms are contrary.⁵⁶ The two, he insists, are complementary, and the most worthy form of learning is political philosophy. Aristotle and Plato are the authors he has chiefly in mind as examples of political philosophers, though the former is of course the more important of the two.

Louis himself begins his work by referring with approval to the restitution of good learning in his time and the new ornamentation of arts and sciences being accomplished by men of skill. Unfortunately, the worthiest science, the science of government, has so far been neglected. This architectonic science—as Louis puts it, “the science which comprehends and rules the others”—has been neglected because those who could have improved upon it “have ignored matters of state to focus entirely on contemplation,” while those involved in matters of state “either have no skill or leisure to write.” The old problem returns: the learned are not interested in practice and the

⁵⁶ I cannot help but think of the formerly separate training of knight and clerk which Elyot and others sought to combine in their versions of a gentleman’s education.

experienced are not interested in study. It is the very reverse of Plato's dictum for the happy state. According to Louis, Aristotle and Plato (the latter in his *Laws*) both teach that human affairs are cyclic, with the sciences being discovered and then lost due to periodic conflagrations. This pattern matches a fact of human nature: men are naturally civil and companionable, and hence apt to develop civilization and the arts and sciences which go along with it, but are also subject to passions and injuries, and thus tend to wipe away the progress they make.

Louis is more philosophically sophisticated than most of the English writers in his time. He can distinguish quite carefully between lawyers such as Sulpicius who expound to men the reasons for laws, historiographers like Herodotus and Tacitus who write about wars and register public doings, orators like Demosthenes and Cicero who govern states and consult on public affairs, and political philosophers who are more given to contemplation than the others. Men of the last group did not apply themselves to "city matters" but sought instead the truth of all things concerning God and man. Their concerns were primary for eternal rather than human things. Still, they did not neglect study of the human things. When they wrote about political matters they compared commonwealths with one another to discover the causes of their continuance and decay, how they came to be, which were well-governed and which not, what a good citizen was, and what a good prince was. Louis identifies these as the key problems of political philosophy, as established by Plato and Aristotle. He is not far off.

Exemplary among the political philosophers for Louis are Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, and Plutarch. According to Louis, though the philosophers were "given to contemplation," many of the most noteworthy did indeed meddle in the affairs of

commonwealths inasmuch as they sought to learn the truth about human affairs. As More, Elyot, and Starkey were aware, philosophers such as Plato were by nature given to consider the divine rather than the human things. Yet the best of them, as the Tudors were also aware, did devote some of their contemplation to human problems.

Louis attributes to Socrates and Plato the dawning of philosophic interest in human affairs. He relates Xenophon's account of Socrates on this point. Socrates showed that the early philosophers were actually fools for gazing at the heavens before they understood the human. But Louis' account of Plato and Socrates also goes into considerable and complex detail—more than was typical in most Tudor writers. He grants, for instance, that Plato tells us that Socrates discourses about the heavenly things and investigated nature like previous philosophers did, but tells us that according to Plato Socrates says he did such things in his youth (likely a reference to *Apology*). Louis attributes to Plato the honor of being the first to write on “commonweal matters,” but is also able to identify several of Plato's key teachings on such matters. Thus he refers to Plato's position on the unreliability of the senses and his assertion that the universal forms of things, the Ideas, are that whereof visible things take their being and are the true and unchanging reality.

Even in his criticisms Louis shows greater sophistication than was typical of most early Tudor writers. When he objects to the community of women and children proposed in *Republic* he can readily produce Aristotle's objection that Plato's community places too high an emphasis on unity, with the matter of women and children a necessary and absurd consequence of that emphasis. He qualifies Plato's teaching by asserting that Plato himself did not think his ideal was possible but only wanted to influence men to assay

themselves to conform unto it. He also draws attention to the political application of the image of the soul which Plato develops in the *Republic*: “in a commonwealth the governors represent reason while the defenders represent stoutness and the craftsmen and merchants represent lust/temperance.” Justice, in Plato’s city, is when each part does its assigned duty.

Louis’ understanding of Aristotle is in part informed by his political reading of Plato. He remarks that Aristotle happily combines the earlier cosmological philosophy with the political philosophy inaugurated by Socrates and Plato. Louis presents a more developed version of the old claim that Plato was better in religion while Aristotle was better in the study of nature; he applies this distinction to politics exclusively. Thus, Plato is superior in political thought because of his awareness of the political importance of religion, while Aristotle’s politics are limited by his comparative neglect of religion.

The Political Platonism of Louis le Roy is noteworthy not only because of the popularity and availability of his works in Elizabethan England but also because it represents the depth of familiarity with primary texts and the philosophical sophistication which we find later in Francis Bacon and John Milton. The following chapters will focus on these two writers and how, despite the availability and accessibility of the speculative thought of Ficino and Pico (among others), each continues to view Plato primarily through the lens of Political Platonism.

CHAPTER 3

FRANCIS BACON'S READING OF PLATO

Francis Bacon differs from his Tudor predecessors more in the degree to which he was familiar with Plato's dialogues, and in the depth of his disagreement with what he considered Plato's philosophy, than in the nature of his reading of Plato. Like More, Elyot, and Starkey, Bacon is acutely aware of the moral and political dimensions of Platonic thought. When he does take note of Plato's theology or metaphysics his words are highly critical. His understanding of and approach to Plato can be difficult to determine, however, due to his often adversarial and polemical position regarding the ancients—Plato and Aristotle in particular—and the fact that most of his references to Plato are scattered here and there throughout his works. Nevertheless, it is possible to obtain a fairly detailed picture of Bacon's reading of Plato.

Bacon's access to Plato most likely came through Latin translations. When Francis and his brother Anthony left home to attend Cambridge, their tutor and caretaker John Whitgift purchased a number of books for them, including a volume of Plato (most likely Serranus' *Opera*, according to Gaskell 61). He also appears to have donated a fine edition of the Serranus Plato to Cambridge. Bacon was familiar with Aristotle via Latin translations and likely became familiar with Plato in the same fashion. Though we have no dramatic anecdote of his reading or response to Plato, such as the one about young Francis putting his Aristotle aside in disgust, the evidence of his writings suggests that he must have read widely in the dialogues.

I have attempted below to depict with what detail I could the way Bacon read and used the works of Plato. My picture is based primarily on direct references to Plato, his works, and his ideas—particularly where the ideas seem to have been drawn at first-hand. With some of the references, though, where the Platonic basis is more speculative, I have attempted to justify the connection as probable and reasonable. More often than in the previous chapter I compare the context not only of Bacon's reference but also of its Platonic original. I believe that such comparisons will bring to light just how careful and nuanced Bacon's agreements and disagreements with Plato can be. As will become clear over the course of this chapter, Bacon's own hopes with regard to the new science and his own understanding of the human things lead him not to a new reading of Plato but to a much different assessment of Plato's value.⁵⁷

Incidental and Minor References

Many of the references Bacon makes to Plato are more or less commonplace for the time. What is noteworthy about such references is their predominantly moral or political nature and the extent to which Bacon continues to offer the same objections and qualifications as his Tudor predecessors. For instance, in a letter to the Parliament he advises members not to heap up their grievances against the king in order to make a show by sheer quantity of problems. As grounds for his advice he says men ought not to expect that "all things amiss (like Plato's commonwealth) should be remedied at once" (Spedding VII, 178). As the previous chapter showed, most English writers were

⁵⁷ I take it as read in the following pages that Bacon was not, as Box calls him, simply a herald or "publicist for a new type of knowledge" (3) whose approach was essentially anti-philosophic (4-5). Rather, I take the view of Gaukroger, that Bacon is part of a transformation of philosophy into something very different (1, 4-5), and Weinberger (in *Science, Faith and Politics*), that Bacon was more than just an enthusiast or partisan for his program but also understood its potential limits and problems (19).

uncomfortable with the political expectations arising from an ideal like “Plato’s commonwealth.” Bacon again uses Plato to illustrate the fault of looking for too much perfection in *Advancement of Learning*. He cites Cicero’s saying that Cato did harm to the state by talking as if he lived in Plato’s republic and not in the dregs of Romulus (17). On the very same page, however, he also gives an example out of Plato’s *Seventh Letter* illustrating how one *ought* to interact with the state. After praising Solon’s saying that he gave his countrymen the best laws “of such as they would receive,” Bacon praises Plato for not involving himself in the corrupt manners of his country. According to Bacon, Plato believes that a man ought to treat his country as he does his parents—with humble persuasions rather than with contradiction and violence.⁵⁸

From a number of incidental references to Plato and “his school” it is easy to gather that Bacon knew something not only of Plato but also of the history and place of Platonic thought—an awareness not typical in his predecessors. In *Novum Organum* (I.71) he asserts that the very philosophers who wrote against the sophists were sophists themselves. As examples, he names “Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Epicurus, Theophrastus; and their successors, Chrysippus, Carneades, and so on” (113). In the same work (I.96), he refers to “Plato’s second school—that of Proclus and others” (155) focusing on mathematics rather than theology.⁵⁹ Bacon is familiar enough with the differences between the Old and the New Academy to distinguish between *acatalepsia* as understood by Plato, who introduced it “at first as a witticism and irony, and from antipathy towards

⁵⁸ This reference is likely to *Seventh Letter* 331c-e, where Plato (or whoever the author may be) says it is impious to compel one’s mother or father to follow one’s counsel, and so, too, in a state one ought to speak up if one is likely to be heard but otherwise one should remain silent and in no way use violence to enforce one’s counsel. Note that Bacon’s praise of Plato also touches on a favorite topic in Tudor England: the duty of obedience and the evils of rebellion against the established order.

⁵⁹ The same complaint, in almost identical terms, also appears in *Advancement* (see p 30 and the editor’s note on 231).

the ancient sophists,” and as understood by the New Academy which “elevated [it] to dogmatic status and openly maintained it” (*Novum Organum* I.67, 109).

It is worth noting here that despite the distinction between Socratic irony and outright skepticism, Bacon still criticizes both as hindrances to learning. In *Advancement* he distinguishes the dogmatism of Velleius, a man who never wished to seem in doubt about anything, from Socrates’ “ironical doubting of all things.”⁶⁰ Bacon admits that the difficulties inherent in language make it unsurprising that “so many excellent Philosophers became Skeptics and Academics, and [deny] any certainty of Knowledge or Comprehension” (110). He also grants that with Socrates this approach “was supposed to be but a form of Irony (*Scientiam dissimulando simulavit*): For he used to disable his knowledge, to the end to enhance his Knowledge” (110). Such pretense, however, is still a hindrance to scientific thought, if only because it tends more to persuasion than to examination of truth. As will be seen below, this objection may point towards Bacon’s objections to Plato on the subject of rhetoric.⁶¹

From minor and incidental references it is clear that Bacon was familiar with a broad range of dialogues. The introduction to *Advancement* praises King James as an example of Plato’s claim that all knowledge was but remembrance. By this, he explains, Plato means that original notions “by the strangeness and darkness of this Tabernacle of the body are sequestered” but are “again revived and restored” when we learn (3). This version of Plato’s conception of knowledge as remembrance seems most likely to derive

⁶⁰ *Advancement* 31; see also the note on 233, which sees a Ciceronian origin for the statements about both Velleius (*De natura deorum* I.viii.18) and Socrates (*De oratore* II.lxxvii).

⁶¹ Here I will only point out that Bacon does not object to persuasion as such but to the time and place in which persuasion is to be used. It is not such much in the “examination of truth” that persuasion is permissible for Bacon.

from *Meno*.⁶² Also in *Advancement* Bacon challenges the view that inquiry into “mechanical” matters is dishonorable by suggesting that this view is “justly derided” by Plato. In *Greater Hippias*, and though he does not name the dialogue Bacon’s description matches it, Plato brings in Hippias, a “vaunting sophist” who is offended at the baseness of the examples Socrates uses in their discussion of beauty. Hippias’ folly is exposed by Socrates’ ironic praise (64). In his essay “On Seeming Wise,” he illustrates a particular type of person, one who tries to amuse others with verbal subtleties and displays of linguistic skill, by referring us to Plato’s *Protagoras*. In that dialogue, Plato brings in just that sort of person, in the form of Prodicus, for scorn by having him make a ridiculous speech consisting of distinctions from beginning to end. More extensive references, discussed more fully below, introduce ideas from dialogues as diverse as *Theaetetus*, *Phaedrus*, *Gorgias*, *Critias*, *Timaeus*, *Apology*, *Republic*, and *Laws*.

Plato, Politics and Morals

Between 1603-1609 Bacon began nine different works, completing four and publishing two, in an effort to find fit literary expression for his philosophical views (cf Farrington 10-11). Although the two published works from this period, *Advancement of Learning* and *Wisdom of the Ancients*, are rightly held in fairly high esteem, the false starts or abortive efforts of at least two of the other works are quite valuable for the light they shed on Bacon’s reading of Plato.

The introductory narrative of *Refutation of Philosophies* begins with what could almost be a note Bacon wrote to himself: “I am preparing a refutation of philosophies but know not how to begin” (Farrington 103). He identifies several problems facing his

⁶² But consider also *Phaedo* 75e as a possible source for the same idea.

attempt: there are too many errors to engage each one singly, he can't engage the ancients in debate since he disagrees with them over first principles, and he doesn't accept the validity of their proofs and demonstrations. Instead, he must find an approach which answers to his purpose—though he does not yet tell us what that purpose is. For the present work, he says, his approach is to adduce certain “signs” which will put us in position to pass judgment on the philosophies he wishes to refute. After a somewhat lengthy attack on Aristotle he presents his case against Plato:

About Plato my opinion is this. Though he avoided a political career and declined to seek public office on account of the disturbed conditions of his time, yet by natural inclination he was drawn towards political questions and devoted to them his main strength. He was not much interested in natural philosophy except in so far as it might secure his right to the noble title of philosopher and add a veneer of majesty to his ethical and political opinions. Consequently, what he wrote about nature has no foundation in fact. Rather he infected and corrupted natural studies by his theology as much as Aristotle did by his dialectic. There are excellent “signs” in his case, if only the rest had conformed with them. He strove to win knowledge of Forms and he made use of Induction throughout, not only to establish first principles but also middle propositions. These two parts of his method, the quest for Forms and the use of Induction, are truly divine, and on their account he deserved, if he did not win, the name of divine. But he corrupted them and made them fruitless by aiming only at abstract Forms and taking the material for his Inductions only from superficial and vulgar experience. instances of this kind, being known to everybody, are suited to discussions but not to research. Accordingly, since he did not practice serious study and observation of natural phenomena, which are the only basis of philosophy, it is no matter for wonder that neither his lofty genius nor his happy method accomplished much. (Farrington 115-6)

In this one passage many of the same notes which Bacon will later sound against Plato and the ancients can be found in one place together. The objection to Plato's infecting natural philosophy with theology, the promising use of induction and the Forms,

the subsequent losing of the fruit of these same ideas, the contrast between Plato's lofty genius and lack of "accomplishment"—all these points are repeated later, many of them more than once. What is especially to be noted here is Bacon's insistence that, despite his avoidance of political office, Plato's true interest lay in moral and political studies. His reference to Plato being interested in natural philosophy only to add majesty to his ethical and political opinions even has a certain basis in fact, since the introductory business of *Timaeus* presents that dialogue, and thus also the "natural philosophy" embodied in the speech of Timaeus himself, as a first step towards Socrates hearing the ideal polity which has "just been described" put into action (19e).⁶³ Bacon's belief that that dialogue implies that natural philosophy is inferior to moral or political philosophy may even be justified by the observation that *Timaeus* attempts to present as a "likely story" what in the *Republic* was presented as a "noble lie"—i.e., that the inhabitants of the "ideal city" are autochthonous (cf *Republic* 414b-415d).

Bacon repeats many of these same objections in *Thoughts and Conclusions*. After a discussion of natural philosophy's "troublesome and intractable enemy," blind and immoderate religious zeal" (cf Farrington 77-9), Bacon observes that Plato's "deeper understanding" grasped the importance of both Forms and Induction. Unfortunately, Plato failed with both of these because his inductions were too loosed and the forms he was content with were too abstract. Upon closer inspection, he concludes, it is clear that Plato was not seriously interested in natural philosophy but sought only to add "an appearance of majesty to his moral and political teaching" by using it. He corrupted

⁶³ It has "just been described" because *Timaeus* begins with several characters mentioning a discussion Socrates and others had held just the day before. The discussion described in *Timaeus* sounds very similar to *Republic* since it apparently involved an ideal regime and the nature of justice, but several of the major points raised in *Republic* are not mentioned, making an absolute identification impossible.

man's view of nature as much by his theology as Aristotle did by his logic (Farrington 83).

Though this passage repeats several of the same objections found in *Refutation of Philosophies*, the context here is particularly revealing. Bacon's objection to Plato corrupting or infecting the study of nature with his theology follows a discussion of the problem of religious zeal. Part of Bacon's answer to the problem of immoderate zeal is a strict separation between the study of nature and the study of the divine. Plato's "corruption" of natural philosophy is not necessarily the introduction of pagan religion into the study of nature but the very confounding of the two studies. We might well wonder if Plato's moral and political thought is open to a similar objection.

Bacon develops this complaint about corruption of studies in *Advancement* in his discussion of the true use of knowledge. The learned have made a crucial error, he says, in not recognizing that knowledge is for use and action.⁶⁴ He does not mean by this that knowledge is for lucre—for profit in the vulgar sense—nor does he mean, "as was spoken of Socrates, to call Philosophy down from heaven to converse upon the earth, that is, to leave natural Philosophy aside, and to apply knowledge only to manners, and policy" (32). He does not want to make learning, as Pico worried about, a "mercenary" study; but he also seems to reject the traditional humanist understanding of the use of learning by rejecting the popular Ciceronian image of calling philosophy down from the heavens to converse with the earth. This passage rejects what are probably the two predominant versions of learning understood as something useful and directed to action. Later, though, Bacon proves a little more sympathetic to the humanist side of the question

⁶⁴ Cf Elyot's understanding of the knowledge wherein wisdom lies in his dialogue, as described above in the second chapter.

in granting some use to the “received” philosophy in “manners and policy.” As Stephens notes, Bacon recognizes value in the traditional humanist understanding when it comes to teaching, cultivating, and even discovering new knowledge (13-4).

That Bacon read Plato with an eye towards manners and policy is implied in his account in *Advancement* of the events of Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*. He reports the accusation of Anytus in that dialogue as an example of the claims made by the “politiques” against learning. According to Bacon, Anytus laid it as a charge against the philosopher that he turned young men away from due reverence for the laws and customs of their country and professed a dangerous science which made the worse matter seem better (10).⁶⁵ Instead of relying on the defense offered in *Apology*, however, Bacon instead says that the charges arose simply from the tyranny of the times. According to Bacon, Socrates was condemned under the Thirty Tyrants, the most base and bloody people who ever lived; Socrates was in fact condemned under the restored democracy. It was only afterwards that the true honor due to Socrates was recognized and his discourse, that is, Plato’s dialogues, became acknowledged as medicines for the mind and manners, as they have been known down to this day (14).⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Bacon here combines the three accusers mentioned in *Apology* into the one example of Anytus. In *Apology*, Anytus is said to have accused Socrates on behalf of the politicians and the artisans. It is entirely possible that Bacon knew what he was doing here, since the two accusations he says Anytus made in a way refer to the two groups that Anytus was said to represent. The first accusation, turning the young away from due reverence to laws and customs, has clear reference to the politicians. The second accusation, though, can be identified with the artisans if we assume that Bacon is himself joining in the accusation on behalf of the “artisans.” In other words, Bacon’s objection, presented elsewhere in *Advancement*, that Socrates’ skeptical science works harm to the advancement of science and the arts can be read into the complaint that Socrates made the “worse matter appear better.” At any rate, Bacon does not here discuss what in *Apology* is the gravest charge against Socrates: that he denied the gods of the city and professed to believe in new gods. This may well be because Bacon has a much different response to the claims made by the religious against learning and philosophy.

⁶⁶ An example of Plato as a physician of manners can be found later in *Advancement* when Bacon warns the reader about the subtlety of certain sophistical arguments—a matter which Aristotle handles well by

Perhaps the most overtly political reading of Plato to be found in Bacon, however, comes in a letter to the prince advocating war with Spain. Bacon attempts to justify such a war partly on the grounds that it would be preventive. He argues, to that end, that clear foresight of imminent danger is admissible as just grounds for war. An example of such imminent danger may be seen with the Turks. As many have argued, “it is a fundamental law in their empire that they may without other provocation make war upon Christendom for propagation of their own law.” Therefore, there is sufficient and perpetual just cause for a preventive war against them.⁶⁷

To illustrate his position, Bacon refers to the opinion Plato presents via the person of Clinias in *Laws*. In that dialogue, Clinias “desperately and wildly” speaks on this very issue, “as if there were no such thing as peace between nations” but instead each country looked always for its advantage to make war upon others. The passage he refers to is found near the beginning of the first book of the *Laws*. In explaining the reasoning behind the Cretan custom of having meals in common, Clinias asserts that the Cretan lawgiver wisely saw that most men were stupid in not noticing that “all are involved ceaselessly in a lifelong war against all states,” that ‘peace’ was nothing more than a name but by instead by the law of nature each state was “engaged perpetually in an informal war with every other state.” Bacon grants that what Clinias says is excessive, but says that there is in this excess a “civil construction”—namely, that each nation should at least be on its guard against others and prevent such injuries from them as it can.

precept but which Plato handles even better “[by] example, not only in the persons of the Sophists, but even in Socrates himself” (115).

⁶⁷ See Spedding VII, 476.

Particularly interesting about Bacon's use of Plato here is the way he proceeds to qualify his interpretation. Following the section cited above, Bacon carefully observes that this passage is "the objection and not the decision" and insists he is aware that "it is after refuted." There is enough truth in it, despite that, to serve his argument. This is one of the few times Bacon acknowledges a difference between his use of a Platonic argument or idea and its use in the original context. I suspect that, knowing he addressed an important and educated person, and that he was making a serious and seriously intended suggestion, he wished to avoid any misconceptions. As will be seen below, Bacon rarely acknowledges such differences even when he continues to use Platonic ideas to serve his own turn.

The Limitations of Platonism

Bacon frequently uses Plato in similar fashion to the passage from the *Laws*—applying an idea from a different context for his own purposes. Such uses seem purposeful, as the change in contexts often alerts the reader to significant but often subtle differences between Bacon's and Plato's thought. Unlike the qualification made in his letter to the prince, though, Bacon does not always alert readers to these differences. Generally, the differences between contexts underscore a limitation Bacon sees in the possible use of Platonism. His use of the cave allegory from *Republic* is an excellent example of this.

In Plato, the experience of the cave is compared to our human nature "in respect of education and its lack" (514a). Light in the cave comes from a fire above and behind the prisoners, while various images pass along before them in a kind of puppet show. In discussing the manner of release and healing from this folly, Socrates emphasizes the

pain of liberation, the uncertainty regarding one's perceptions in the cave and in the world above, and the need for gradual habituation to perceiving the truth. Should a man who became free return to the cave—that is, to ordinary human society—he would provoke laughter and derision due to his inability to “properly” identify the things that world considered real and important. Socrates states that if his interlocutors assume that by the ascent and contemplation of things he means the soul's ascent to the intelligible world they will not miss his meaning (517a). If there is some truth in this, he adds, we must understand the common education to be seriously flawed: the model should not be one of inserting vision into blind eyes, but one of turning the body towards the light. In other words, the student must be turned away from the world of becoming until the soul can endure the contemplation of being (518c).

Bacon refers to Plato's “feigned supposition...of the cave” in his discussion in *Advancement* of the appearances imposed upon our understanding by our individual natures. A child raised in a grotto until maturity and then sent abroad, he says, would have some very strange ideas. Like such a child, all of us live in clear view of heaven, but our spirits are chained to the caves of our own natures and customs. If not examined, these will give us over to serious errors. Aware that his use of this illustration alters the thrust of the original, Bacon adds (in the Latin *Augmentis* only) a parenthesis with the words “missa illa exquisite parabolae subtilitate” (117).

On the surface, this use of Plato serves Bacon's immediate purposes. A child raised in a cave with no experience of the outside world would indeed have some “strange imaginations.” The changes made to the original also speak to Bacon's serious disagreement with Plato. The allegorical dimension in Plato's version, where the cave can

represent the world of becoming as well as the world of social reality, is not much to the purpose if one wishes to develop an empirical science which proceeds from careful collation and examination of evidence obtained through the senses. If what the mind of man needs is conceptual and physical “helps” to do its work (cf *Novum Organum* I, aphorisms 1 and 2), the pain and difficulty of readjusting as one moves from the world of becoming to the world of being will hardly be as intense, if present at all.

Consequently, Bacon calls up the cave image from Plato but removes the cave. The images of enclosure, ascent and descent, and readjustment disappear in Bacon’s version. Instead, he says that our condition is such that, like a child raised in a grotto, we live in “clear view of heaven.” The problem lies in our own nature; we are “chained to the caves of our own complexions and customs” (117). We are not chained to the world of becoming in Bacon’s version of the cave image—we are chained *away* from it.

Bacon uses the theory of recollection in *Advancement* in a similar fashion. In his dedication to the king he refers more or less straightforwardly to this theory. Later, when discussing “invention”—not in the sense of adding to our store of knowledge but in the sense of properly using what we already know⁶⁸—Bacon praises a faculty he calls “suggestion” for its ability to direct us to certain places which may excite our minds to return and produce such knowledge as they had previously collected. Suggestion may even direct our inquiries since, as Plato says, “whosoever seeketh, knoweth that which he seeketh for, in a general notion; else how shall he know it, when he hath found it?” (113)

It is possible that Bacon has *Meno* (82a ff) in mind here, but I think that *Phaedo* (72e ff) is also a candidate. The *Phaedo* passage discusses recollection as a recovery of

⁶⁸ Bacon says that his understanding of invention might rather be called *remembrance* plus application.

what has been forgotten. Before we begin to perceive anything, Socrates claims, we must have had some knowledge of absolute equality—as well as of other absolutes—or we could not have referred to that standard when we judged things. In *Meno*, the most relevant passage begins with the question Meno asks concerning how we can even know what we do not know. To forestall the “tiresome dispute” which Meno introduces through this question, Socrates’ immediate response is an assertion that the soul is immortal and capable of remembering all that it had previously learned in its existence. Earlier in the dialogue, a common notion is understood to be a common nature which unites a number of otherwise disparate particulars, as ‘round’ and ‘square’ can be gathered together under the name of ‘figure’. From these two passages we can see what Bacon may have in mind in his assertion about knowing what we’re looking for in a “general notion.”

What the use of the theory of recollection in *Advancement* shows is Bacon using Plato’s words on recollection to express his own, different version of the concept. Bacon takes Plato’s words out of their original context, however, in that in both *Phaedo* and *Meno* the theory of recollection is part of a discussion touching on the immortality of the soul. Plato’s understanding of the immortality of the soul seems to downplay the possibility of advancement, since if the soul has already learned “all things” in its prior existence how could it truly find something new? At the outset of the passage where Bacon refers to Plato’s theory he insists on a difference between ‘invention’ in the narrow rhetorical sense—which recollection is useful for—and ‘invention’ in the sense of discovering new arts and axioms. Plato’s basic idea of “recollection” seems to have been

useful for Bacon, but only when stripped of its metaphysical and epistemological baggage, and only when understood in a properly limited sense.⁶⁹

Bacon retains from the Plato passages the hortatory function of the theory of recollection. In *Phaedo* Socrates is trying to convince his listeners that the soul is immortal; in *Meno* he is trying to encourage Meno not to give up on the inquiry into the nature of virtue. Bacon is encouraging his readers to develop the art of suggestion beyond its current limits. As he says, suggestion can not only help us recall things previously learned, it can also direct our inquiries (112-3).

One final example will show how extensive disagreement can be packed into just a few words. In Bacon's unfinished work on the first principles of matter, *Of Principles and Origins*, we find the complaint that Plato "made over the world to thoughts," while Aristotle "made over thoughts to words" (PWFB 650-1). By this he means that Plato abandoned the "real" world—the world of things, or, in Platonic terms, the world of becoming—for the world of the mind. This same complaint, I think, lies behind his more famous objection in *Advancement* that Plato did well to "descry, that forms were the true object of knowledge," but lost the fruit of this opinion by considering forms "as absolutely abstracted from Matter, & not confined and determined by Matter" (83).

Given the context, a discussion of physical first principles, I think Bacon's complaint refers specifically to *Timaeus* 28a-c. This passage is the very beginning of Timaeus' long speech, and opens with a fundamental distinction between what is always being and never becoming and what is always becoming and never being. The former he calls apprehensible by thought with the aid of reasoning, the latter an object of opinion

⁶⁹ Here the limited sense is 'invention' as understood by rhetoric as opposed to 'invention' in the more exalted sense of discovering new arts and sciences, which Bacon wants to encourage. Cf pages 127-133 below.

with the aid of unreasoning sensation. His conclusion at 28c is that the whole must have come to be because it is visible and tangible, all such things are sensible, and sensible things are apprehensible only by opinion together with unreasoning sensation. This conclusion is only necessarily true if one assumes the division is absolute: nothing apprehensible by sensation is apprehensible by thought, and vice versa.

In *Of Principles and Origins* Bacon is using an interpretation of the myths of Cupid and Coelum (only part of the interpretation of the myth of Cupid was written) to reveal the doctrine presumably revealed in these myths. Supposedly, that doctrine “concern[ed] the principles of things and the origins of the world” (PWFB, 647).⁷⁰ Bacon interprets Cupid as a symbol of first matter, the “beginning of all beings.” Cupid having no parents indicates that matter has no cause—though he adds “we except always God”—and must be taken absolutely as it is found in nature. He goes on to claim that saying Cupid is without a cause is an observation which might well be “the greatest thing of all” in significance. Nothing has corrupted philosophy so much, he says, as seeking for the parents of Cupid—which means not taking the principles of things from the way they are found in nature and accepting these as positive doctrine (648-9). If we do not agree about all the qualities of the first being, we should at least agree that it is matter, is active has form, and has some principle of motion within itself. No one can think otherwise, Bacon insists, unless he deserts experience—that is, sense perception (650).

⁷⁰ This is in keeping with Bacon’s observation in his preface to *Wisdom of the Ancients* that even if we suppose that ancient fables were written purely for pleasure with no definite purpose in mind one still cannot deny the value of the device for teaching things new, abstruse, and remote from vulgar opinion (PWFB 823-4). In *Of Principles* when Bacon first examines Cupid as a symbol of primary matter and its properties he begins by stating his awareness that “opinions of this kind sound harsh and almost incredible to the senses and thoughts of men” (PWFB 649).

Timaeus' account of the physical origin of the universe will not do for Bacon.⁷¹ This is not because Bacon completely rejects the distinction between being and becoming with which Timaeus begins his speech, but because the investigation of nature cannot begin and rest on such a distinction. Timaeus can only present a "likely story"—one which Bacon probably did not consider all that likely—and a likely story can hardly be productive of new works for the relief of man's estate, or contribute much to the advancement of learning.⁷² Furthermore, based on Bacon's defense of learning in *Advancement*, it seems that nature is the only thing we can have knowledge of without divine assistance guiding us. It is also less clear in Bacon that the divine, or the world of being, provides us with any certain guidance in our understanding of nature, or the world of becoming.⁷³ Timaeus' distinction itself can also be suspect, since Bacon emphasizes the need for both the senses and the mind to be supplied with "helps." Turning our study from the world to thoughts is suspect not only because our true focus should be on the world—in the terms of *Of Principles and Origins*, on the parentless Cupid—but because thoughts themselves are no sure guide.

⁷¹ *Timaeus* was one of only a handful of dialogues known to the Latin world during the Middle Ages, and was particularly prized for its rational account of the divine creation of the universe. Though the account did not match the Christian, it had the advantages of offering a supposedly rational justification for creation while avoiding Aristotle's pagan insistence that the universe was eternal and uncreated. Interestingly enough, Bacon does not object to *Timaeus* on Christian/religious grounds but on the grounds that it does not take the physical nature of the universe seriously enough.

⁷² Consider what Bacon in *Advancement* presents as the third limitation to human knowledge. Contemplation of God's creatures and works produces knowledge, he says, but contemplation of God produces wonder, which is broken knowledge. He adds here that it was aptly said by "one of Plato's school" that the senses resemble the sun in revealing the terrestrial globe but concealing the stars and the heavens (8). Bacon accepts that the senses discover the natural but darken the divine—but for Bacon this is no argument against the value of the senses.

⁷³ Consider, for example, the assertion in *Advancement* that while it may be true that the cure of men's minds belongs to Divinity, "yet Moral Philosophy may serve as her handmaid, though many things be left to the handmaid to determine of her mistress's will" (141-2).

From these largely minor and incidental references to Plato we can gather signs of how Bacon read and used him. These signs can in turn guide us through the more detailed and involved uses of Plato. As with the Tudors before him, Bacon turns to Plato when he considers concepts such as the role of reason or learning in political affairs and the relationship between knowledge and virtue. With Bacon, however, we find both more detail in the Platonic ideas he references and more nuance in his objections to Plato—even as the general character of Plato as Bacon reads him remains largely the same. This is particularly evident when Bacon develops his position on rhetoric and on the affections. It is above all evident in his most extensive response to Plato, the *New Atlantis*.

Bacon and the Philosopher-King

Bacon makes use of this idea in *Advancement* but, ironically enough, not in his dedicatory epistle to Kings James. Instead, it appears following his discussion of the errors made by those who dispraise learning. In countering their errors Bacon proposes to consider the “human proofs in favor of knowledge,” the most manifest of which is this: the happiest times for states have always been when kings or governors were endowed with learning. Though the one who claimed this “might have been partial to his own profession,” Bacon asserts that “people and estates [should] be happy, when either kings were philosophers, or philosophers kings” (39).

Bacon does what he can to detach this idea from the authority of Plato. He doesn’t name the originator, though it is likely that an educated audience would know it very well. He implies that Plato may have held the view out of a kind of partisanship, being “partial to his own profession,” rather than because it was true. Then he insists that the

saying is confirmed not by authority but by experience. The best political times, historically, have come under learned princes and governors. Though kings have various imperfections due to particular passions or customs, if they are illuminated by learning they will have notions of religion, policy, and morality to preserve them from “ruinous errors.” As proof, he points to the succession of six emperors of Rome between Domitian and Commodus. All, he says, were learned or else singular favorers and advancers of learning—and this period was the happiest and most flourishing of the Roman Empire (39-40).

In order to see how Bacon has changed the idea of the philosopher-king to suit his own purposes we need to consider the Platonic original. The idea appears several times in Plato, including the *Seventh Letter*, where it appears as part of the author’s discussion of Plato’s ambitions in Sicily, and *Statesman*, where it is implied in the discussion of true government. The most well-known appearance of the idea, though, is in the *Republic*. Following 473c, Socrates introduces a change which could make their ideal city a reality as far as is possible. The change, which he repeatedly refers to as a paradox and presents only with the greatest reluctance, is for philosophers to become kings or those now called kings and rulers to begin to genuinely and adequately philosophize. Until this happens, there will be no end of ills in political life and the constitution they have been discussing will never be put into practice.

The idea is then complicated at 498d when Socrates remarks how difficult it would be to persuade the multitude about even a shred of their description of the philosophic life. Because the many have never seen a man well attuned to virtue at the same time holding rule in the city, and because they have never seriously inclined to

discussions whose sole endeavor was to search out the truth, they will hardly listen to such a description. Hence, Socrates says, neither city, polity, nor individual man will ever be perfected unless some chance compels the philosophers to take charge of the state and constrains the citizens to obey them. Or, perhaps by divine inspiration, a passion for philosophy may take hold of the sons of the men currently in power. Socrates says that we should not be too harsh towards the many on this point, adding that if one approached them soothingly, in an endeavor to do away with dispraises of learning, and pointed out whom one meant by ‘philosopher’ and defined him and his pursuits as they have just done, the many will not judge so harshly. The dispraise of philosophy in their time, he says, comes from “that riotous crew who have burst in where they do not belong, wrangling with one another, filled with spite” (500b).

Both passages from *Republic* seem to inform Bacon’s own presentation of the idea. The context in Bacon is remarkably similar to the one suggested by Socrates in the passage beginning at 498d. He is trying to do away with the dispraise of learning by offering the “human proofs” in defense of it. He seems to have taken to heart Socrates’ suggestion that the many will not listen to a description of the philosophic life because they have no experience of it—either in the form of a virtuous ruler or in the form of a genuine philosophic discussion. Rather than rely on theory Bacon insists that experience confirms Plato’s saying. Where Socrates complained that the many have never seen one ruler virtuous in the philosophic sense, Bacon proposes six specific examples.

The appearance of these examples should alert us to the differences between Bacon’s and Plato’s ideals here. Socrates speaks of a man well attuned to virtue and at the same time holding rule in the city. Bacon, though, grants that kings have

imperfections but says these will not lead to ruin if they are “illuminated” by learning.⁷⁴ Political felicity, as he imagines it here, is not so much an end of ills as it is an avoidance of errors. Even the need for kings to “genuinely and adequately philosophize” is reduced to the requirement that the king only be learned or, as Bacon hoped James to be, a singular favorer and advancer of learning. The first two emperors he adduces as examples, Nerva and Trajan, were in fact not so much learned as they were favorably disposed towards learning—as Bacon himself points out in his discussion of them. By reducing the requirements for the “philosopher-king” Bacon suggests that his own ideal, unlike Plato’s, will be attainable. With but a little argument he can depict an emperor like Adrian, whose “virtue” seems to consist primarily in not persecuting Christians, as an example of this ideal. As a political ideal, the advancement of learning is much more likely of attainment than Plato’s commonwealth.⁷⁵

What Knowledge is For

There is considerable and visible disagreement between Bacon and Plato concerning the identification of knowledge and virtue. Like the Tudors before him, Bacon harbors serious doubts concerning this. With Bacon, though, the doubts have less to do with the Christian concept of sin than with his own ideas about what knowledge is for. Bacon’s disagreement with Plato about knowledge arises instead from a more general disagreement with the ancients about the end or goal of knowledge.

⁷⁴ I cannot help but think here of Machiavelli’s claim in *Prince* that if a hereditary king keeps to the established order and is not too hopeless he will at least not come to ruin.

⁷⁵ Starkey, at least, would approve, since his Lupset insists on this very thing in his discussion of the ideal commonwealth with Pole.

This disagreement comes prominently to light in *Advancement* when he discusses the “greatest Error” of all made by the learned. They have mistaken or misplaced the end of knowledge. Seldom have the learned given “a true account of their gift of reason, to the benefit and use of men.” They have used it instead for contemplation, or rest, not knowing that it is “a rich Store-house for the glory of the Creator, and the relief of Mans estate” (31-2). It is for use and action, he says, but he does not mean by this that it is for mere profit nor does he mean, like Socrates, to call philosophy down from the heaven to converse with earth, “which means to leave natural philosophy and apply knowledge only to manners and policy” (32). Bacon seems to accept the reading of Political Platonism, that Plato’s works are directly concerned with ethics and politics—“manners and policy”—and at the same time to reject this philosophy as of little value for his own project.

This view must be modified somewhat by the distinction Bacon offers in *Novum Organum* between the new science and the old. After announcing his intention to “open a new way for the understanding,” he insists that he will not interfere with the “philosophy, the arts and the sciences now in use.” These he finds useful in supplying disputations and discourse and strengthening “the sinews of civil life,” whereas his own science “will not be much use in these affairs, since my proposals cannot at all be made available to vulgar capacities save by their effects and works alone” (191-3). The role Bacon envisions for the philosophy “now in use” is not much different from the role of classical education hoped for by the humanists—indeed, what Bacon describes sounds rather like the “other philosophy” described by Morus in *Utopia*. What we should note, however, is that Bacon

implies the new philosophy he has in mind—which is neither “scholastic” nor theological—will be superior to the philosophy now in use.⁷⁶

Bacon’s understanding of the difference between the old science and the new can be usefully linked to at least two of Plato’s dialogues. First, in *Statesman* the Stranger divides all sciences into two classes, one characterized as “pure sciences” (i.e., arithmetic) with no regard for application, and the other (i.e. handicrafts) whose very being is inherent in application and which is directly concerned with bringing things into being.⁷⁷ On the basis of this distinction the stranger proposes a corresponding distinction of the sciences themselves into practical and intellectual (258e). Of the intellectual arts, some are concerned with judgment, while others are concerned with command. The kingly art, the subject of this dialogue’s conversation, is identified as an art of command. The kingly art emerges as the one which knows how to “weave” the other arts, and the different characters of human beings, together (311c).

Bacon retains this distinction but does not use it to divide the sciences. In *Advancement* the distinction is expressed, in what Bacon calls more familiar and scholastic terms, as “Inquisition of Cases” and “Production of Effects,” or speculative and operative” (80).⁷⁸ The emphasis, though, lies on the mutual intercourse between the two, which Bacon expresses in the figure of a “double ladder between them, ascending

⁷⁶ The implication lies in the vaguely frivolous sound of “matter for disputation” and “ornaments for discourse”—the suggestion here is that the received philosophy has nothing to do with truth, which is superior to “mere business.” If one thinks of the competing claims of the physical sciences and the humanities at the modern university one will see my meaning.

⁷⁷ A distinction identical to the one made by Aristotle in *Posterior Analytics* between science and art (II.19).

⁷⁸ may be another glance at *Statesman* here when Bacon says that as there is a wisdom of discourse and a wisdom of direction—which sounds like the Stranger’s intellectual arts of judgment and command—in civil matters, so there is a similar situation in natural matters (80).

from experiments to invention of causes and descending from causes to invention of new experiments.” In the first book of *Novum Organum*, particularly aphorisms 99-103, Bacon offers further details about this operation. When he says (I.99) that the mechanic is not interested in truth but confines his attention to things that bear upon his own particular work, this is not essentially different from Socrates’ depiction of the artisans in *Apology*.⁷⁹ Bacon’s science will follow the artisans more closely than Socrates’ philosophy, though, because in addition to *experimental lucifera*, experiments made not for an effect but to discover the natural cause of an effect, they will be concerned also with *experimenta fructifera* (experiments of fruit). As he puts it in I.103, when experiments have been made literate and available and are collected together, great things may be looked for: “For this route is not laid on the flat but goes up and down—ascending first to axioms, and then descending to works” (161).⁸⁰

For more on the connection between knowledge and utility in Plato we should consider *Euthydemus* 288-9, where Socrates’ interlocutor, Clinias, wants to find a clear connection between them. In the course of their discussion Socrates raises the possibility that pursuit of wisdom could be an acquiring of more and more knowledge. If this truly characterizes the pursuit of knowledge, Socrates asks, what sort of knowledge should they seek? Must they not seek knowledge which profits them? (288e) Clinias readily

⁷⁹ Socrates grants that the artisans did indeed have wisdom and knew many fine things, but each knew only what lay within the narrow confines of the art he practiced. The error of the artisans, like that of the poets, was in imagining themselves wise in other more important matters on account of their mechanical expertise.

⁸⁰ Still, Peltonen’s characterization of Bacon as replacing contemplative science with an active science (2) may be a little excessive. Consider *Novum Organum* I.129: after imagining the extension of man’s power over the universe, Bacon adds, “And yet (to tell the whole truth) just as we love light...and yet actually [see] the light is still more excellent and beautiful than all its various uses, so surely is the very contemplation of things as they are without superstition or imposture, error, or confusion, intrinsically more worthy than all the fruits of discoveries” (197).

agrees, but in the subsequent argument Socrates shows that no knowledge can be profitable if we don't know how to use it. At the climax of the passage Socrates claims that even if there were a knowledge "enabling one to make men immortal," if we lacked the knowledge of how to use this immortality it would bring us no advantage (289b). Merely acquiring useful knowledge is impossible without an understanding of the good—or, in other words, a teaching about virtue is primary. Crucial to an understanding of Bacon, I think, is understanding that he does agree with Plato on this point. His teaching about the new science rests on a moral belief that the acquisition of more and more useful knowledge is good for man: "Let the human race only be given the chance to regain its God-given authority over nature, then indeed will right reason and true religion govern the way we exert it" (*Novum Organum* I.129, p. 197).

Bacon and Rhetoric

With the subject of rhetoric Bacon's use of Plato becomes even more detailed and complex, since his understanding of rhetoric is fraught with almost as much tension as Plato's own.⁸¹ While Aristotle's conception of rhetoric was certainly more significant for Bacon (see Vickers 1, *et passim*; H. White 23-4), a number of Bacon's key statements about rhetoric are presented with explicit reference to Plato. The use philosophy can make of rhetoric also seems dramatically and pointedly different in Plato and in Bacon. For both reasons, I think it worthwhile to look at how Bacon uses Plato in his discussions of rhetoric.

⁸¹ Farrington's contrast between Plato's supposed view of rhetoric as a voluptuary art and Bacon's belief that "the function of rhetoric was to minister in one way or another to reason" (46) is, I think, too simplistic a reading of both philosophers. As will be seen below, Bacon was also aware of the rhetorical complexities of *Phaedrus*, which to some degree rehabilitates rhetoric from the "voluptuary art" implications of *Gorgias*.

What Plato thought about rhetoric is, of course, a matter of considerable debate. With respect to Bacon, though, I think White's presentation in *Peace Among the Willows* (23 ff) is a useful beginning point. White argues that if ancient philosophy wished for philosophy to guide the polis rather than the other way around, a just and reliable rhetoric would have to be subordinated, both in theory and in practice, to philosophy. Philosophy might use the passions to lead men to virtue, as Aristotle concedes is necessary with some men (cf *Rhetoric* 1355a), but in order for it to guide rhetoric, rhetoric would have to become something more than just a kindling or a subduing of passions. It would have to concern itself with the good and thus be subordinate to philosophy, *the* inquirer into the nature of the good.

The notion of rhetoric subordinated to philosophy appears or is implied in a number of passages in Plato. In *Gorgias* Socrates classifies oratory as a part of flattery.⁸² He divides man into body and soul, each with a corresponding state of fitness and apparent (but not actual) state of fitness. One art cares for body, another cares for soul. Each has two parts: for body, gymnastic and medicine; for soul, legislation and justice. All parts provide care with a view to what is best. Flattery, on the other hand, does not know the good but makes guesses about what will be pleasant. Each part has a corresponding kind of flattery, a knack which masks itself as the art to which it corresponds. Thus, pastry-baking or cookery pretends to care for the body as medicine does, while cosmetic wears the mask of gymnastic. As body and soul are analogous, with

⁸² Though I must add that he does not necessarily include all of oratory in this. He hesitates "for Gorgias' sake" because he isn't sure if the art Gorgias professes is truly the same as the shameful thing which he will describe or if it is instead something admirable (462e-463a and ff). Socrates' ironic deference to Gorgias in this dialogue is palpable, but we must still note that, in principle, Socrates remains open to the possibility that there is a rhetoric which is not shameful but is indeed something admirable—though he almost certainly doubts that Gorgias practices the admirable art.

gymnastic corresponding to legislation and medicine corresponding with justice, so oratory as the flattery which wears the mask of justice is to the soul as pastry-baking is to the body. Polus challenges Socrates' low opinion of oratory on empirical grounds.

Orators have the greatest power in the city, he claims, since like tyrants they put to death whom they will, confiscate property without recourse, and even banish those who annoy them. Socrates flatly refuses to accept this as a challenge and denies that orators or tyrants can do what they want. Lacking knowledge of the good, they can only do what seems best to them.

In *Phaedrus*, following the story of the Cicadas, Socrates proposes that he and Phaedrus discuss the rules of writing and speech. Phaedrus has heard arguments, similar to the ones put forward in *Gorgias*, that the orator is not concerned with truth or justice but only with what is likely to be approved by the many—not with good but only with opinion since it is from opinion, not truth, that persuasion comes. Socrates takes a gentler approach to rhetoric here, even presenting Pericles as an example of an accomplished rhetorician due to his learning something of the truths of nature and the “higher philosophy” from Anaxagoras and then applying these to his art of speaking. To explain this example, Socrates observes that rhetoric is like medicine: as medicine must first define the nature of the body, so rhetoric must first define the nature of the soul. Rhetoric is essentially addressed to the soul and to be effective it must learn the differences between souls, as well as the different kinds of speeches, before it can know what kinds of souls will be affected and in what way by the different kinds of speeches. Such principles form the basis for what Socrates regards as a true art of rhetoric (269d ff).

Bacon's discussion of rhetoric in *Advancement* likewise subordinates it to science: he calls it inferior to wisdom but mightier with the people.⁸³ In *Gorgias*, Socrates contrasted the kinds of flattery, which do not know the good, with the genuine arts; Bacon discusses disturbances of reason which can come "in Negotiation with ourselves" (128). But the same powers which can disturb reason, he says, also have power to establish and advance it. Rhetoric can "fill the Imagination to second Reason." Therefore, he concludes, it was great injustice on Plato's part to deem it a "voluptuary Art, resembling it to Cookery." Interestingly enough, Bacon goes on to cite Plato for examples of the good possibilities for rhetoric. Here, he refers to the passage in *Phaedrus* where Socrates says that if virtue ("wisdom" in the original) could be seen it would move great love and affection. The next best thing to seeing virtue, Bacon says, is having her shown to the imagination in a lively representation.⁸⁴

In *Advancement* Bacon also includes rhetoric with the intellectual arts in a four-part scheme that resembles Socrates' in *Gorgias*. Socrates identified two arts and two sham arts concerned with the good of the body: medicine and gymnastic, pastry-baking and cosmetic. These were connected by analogy to the two arts and two sham arts concerned with the good of the soul: legislation and justice, oratory and sophistry. Bacon divides the goods of the body into four, but two of them are morally questionable—similar to the sham arts which were concerned not with good but with pleasure. Medicine and athletics are essentially the same as the two arts of the body in *Gorgias* (96). To

⁸³ "Subordinates" may be a little too strong, since in the same work Bacon warns us against too great a separation of knowledges. His illustration of this warning is Cicero's complaint that Socrates' separation of philosophy and rhetoric hurt rhetoric by making it an empty and verbal art.

⁸⁴ Consider the distinction Sidney makes between the philosopher and the poet, or the supposed superiority of Utopia to the commonwealth of the *Republic*. As with the Tudors before him, Bacon seems to see value in rhetoric's ability to bring the abstract closer to the world of action.

these, Bacon adds cosmetic, which he calls partly civil and partly effeminate and hardly discusses at all (102), and the voluptuary art or “Arts of pleasure sensual.” The chief deficiency he notes in the latter art is in laws to suppress them—but he will later modify this judgment (103).

These studies are then linked to studies of the mind, much like the arts in *Gorgias* concerning body and soul. At first Bacon takes a different tack, noting that Christianity has altered the way we think about knowledge of the soul, but at the end, when Bacon announces that his discussion of human philosophy as it pertains to man composed of body and spirit is at an end, he observes a conformity between the good of the mind and the good of the body. The goods of the body were divided into four, and the goods of the mind are largely the same: health, beauty, and strength. He excepts pleasure, however, observing that we have determined that the mind “ought not to be reduced to stupidity, but [should] retain pleasure: Confined rather in the subject of it, than in the strength and vigor of it” (156).

Bacon’s handling of the goods of mind and body seems to be a direct revision of the schema used in *Gorgias*. He recalls the four-part organization of *Gorgias*, isolates the main principle form which his own schema differs—his position on pleasure—and points precisely to the way in which his position differs from Plato’s. Pleasure will no longer be “confined,” he says; but in Plato it was the difference between the pleasant and the good which distinguished the arts from the sham arts. There was a two-fold division in Plato: between mind and body, and between pleasure and the good. Bacon blurs both divisions by making the goods of mind and body the same and by enlisting pleasure as one of the “goods.” By making the goods of the mind equivalent to those of the body Bacon

changes the *Gorgias* schema where the goods of the soul had a decidedly political tone (legislation and justice). As if pointing out this difference, immediately after announcing the end to discussion of the goods of mind and body Bacon proceeds to a discussion of “Civil Knowledge” (156).⁸⁵

Socrates’ schema in *Gorgias* placed rhetoric as a sham political art. Bacon, however, is less interested in rhetoric for political purposes than he is in its possibilities (and limitations) for science. Perhaps as a consequence of this interest he criticizes the views promulgated in *Gorgias* but praises and uses several put forward in *Phaedrus*. Bacon’s project required the use of instruments and machinery so that the strength of each could be exerted more and so that the strength of all could be exerted together. This entailed that scientific style concern itself with discovery and communication, research and teaching. Bacon speaks of one rhetorical method for use in teaching, which he calls “literary,” and another for use with colleagues, which he calls “philosophical” (cf Stephens 13-4). He thus speaks of two modes of discourse and two theories of style or method of delivery. These depend upon the audience addressed, not just occasion or purpose (Stephens 18).

Bacon’s need to address different audiences in different ways leads him, wittingly or no, to adopt several of the points addressed by Socrates in *Phaedrus* as part of a true art of rhetoric. Bacon reports that the application of different kinds of proof to different kinds of subject is a deficient study (*Advancement* 120), praises the ability of the

⁸⁵ This discussion also pointedly differs from Plato and Aristotle since at the outset he insists that the difference between moral philosophy and civil knowledge is that moral philosophy aims at internal goodness while civil knowledge requires only external goodness, which is sufficient for human society (156). At this point, it seems that the more significant distinction for Bacon is not the one between mind and body or between the pleasant and the good, but the one between inner and outer good, or moral and civil knowledge.

acroamatic style to address itself to a select audience (124-5), laments the lack of collections which might be handmaids to rhetoric (127), and asserts that the proofs of rhetoric should differ according to the listener such that a man in speaking of the same things to several persons might speak to each in his own way (129). These abilities sound remarkably similar to Socrates' assertions about what a true rhetoric should be able to accomplish.

Still, the limitation of the art of rhetoric which Socrates depicts in *Phaedrus* is evident in his discussion of its aims: one must know the truth about what one is going to speak before one can know how to handle things according to the rules of any art, either to teach or to persuade others. Teaching and persuading, though, only cover half of what Bacon needs rhetoric to do.⁸⁶ Ancient rhetoric provides no guidance for invention, in the sense of finding out new knowledge or new arts and sciences. Hence his objection, noted above, to using this word in traditional rhetoric (he prefers to call it "remembrance"). This is in part why the existing philosophy retains a certain value for Bacon while still being insufficient and inadequate for the new science: it knows how to talk about what it knows and does not know, but does not know the rhetoric to be used to find out new things (cf Stephens 2-3 *et passim*, Clucas 150).

Affections and Appetites

With the issue of the affections and morality Bacon's use of and response to Plato are again complex and detailed. Though Bacon's moral teaching is sometimes considered Christian and Aristotelian, differing from the latter only for the sake of the former, this view is made problematic by Bacon's insistence that Aristotle's ethics are flawed by his

⁸⁶ I say half because Bacon identifies two kinds of invention: one for arts and sciences and one for speeches and arguments (*Advancement* 111-2).

failure to introduce the passions.⁸⁷ Bacon's understanding of the passions is a crucial reason for the difference between his own moral thought and that of both Aristotle and Plato. How the passions or "affections" changes in Bacon can be seen, in part, by considering his view of them in relation to Plato's.

There are two passages in Plato which seem particularly useful in this context. First, in *Protagoras* 352-7 Socrates asks his interlocutor if he shares the opinion "generally held about knowledge"—namely, that it does not guide or govern our actions. In the view of most men, one may have knowledge but be governed instead by other things: passions, pains, love, or fear, for example. Socrates asks if his friend accepts this view or if he takes the view that knowledge is something noble and able to govern, and that whoever learns what is good and bad can never be persuaded to act other than as knowledge bids.⁸⁸

Second, in *Gorgias* Socrates' argument about the happy life provokes a testy response from Callicles, who disagrees strenuously with his depiction. Key to their disagreement is the question of whether or not the happy man should "rule himself"—that is, whether being master of oneself and moderate in one's pleasures and appetites is best or, as Callicles insists, if the man who lives correctly should allow his appetites to grow as large as possible without restraint. According to Callicles, the happy man will have bravery and intelligence necessary to devote himself to a life of pleasure, filling and expanding his desires with whatever he may happen to like. Socrates tries to persuade

⁸⁷ For the view that Bacon is largely Christian/Aristotelian see Gaukroger (52 ff); for a criticism of this view on the grounds mentioned here, see H. White (23 ff).

⁸⁸ This formulation is closely related to the idea, expressed elsewhere in Plato, that knowledge is virtue. Since in this dialogue the idea is closely related to rhetoric or persuasion it seems particularly apt given the equivalent passage in Bacon, examined below.

him otherwise, notably through two myths comparing the life Callicles praises to the folly of attempting to fill a leaky jar. Callicles is not convinced by either story and calls the life Socrates describes no better than that of a stone. Socrates in turn characterizes Callicles' ideal life as, among other things, no more than the constant scratching of an itch.

The view Socrates in *Protagoras* calls common is the one Bacon describes in *Advancement* when discussing the need for rhetoric. If the affections were pliant and obedient to reason, he says, there would be no great use of persuasion and insinuation. But given the continual mutinies and seditions of the affections, which see and approve the better course but follow the worse, reason would become captive and servile if eloquence did not make a confederacy between reason and imagination to manage the affections (128-9). In *Protagoras*, the implication was that persuasion could not shake the effect of true knowledge; Bacon insists on the need for persuasion to manage the affections lest knowledge be made no more than an instrument or slave. Bacon seems to give greater scope and power to the passions.

This greater scope is evident in Bacon's discussion in *Advancement* of morality and the highest good. Though he professes not to know exactly what the highest good is, what he says implies that he knows something about it—namely, that it is related to natural desires to preserve and multiply one's form (139; cf H. White 27). These two desires then become three when Bacon observes that there are two kinds of conservation or preservation: a fruition of what is agreeable to our natures and an advancement and perfection of our natures. The question of which is the greater good, and whether man's

nature is capable of both, arises. Bacon goes out of his way to refer us to the passage in *Gorgias* described above.⁸⁹

As Bacon describes it, this question was debated between Socrates and a Sophist. Socrates placed felicity in equal and constant peace of mind, while the Sophist placed it in much desiring and enjoying. They fell from argument to ill words, with the Sophist calling Socrates' happiness that of a block or stone, and Socrates calling the Sophist's that of a constant scratching of an itch. Socrates' opinion, Bacon says, is the one upheld by common judgment (curious, since in *Protagoras* Socrates suggests the opposite). The Sophist's opinion, though, is favored by the assertion that advancement is better than preservation, since every obtaining of a desire has a show of advancement in it (141). Given the general drift of this work, which advocates the advancement of learning, the reader is certainly encouraged to wonder if Bacon's advocacy involves a conception of philosophy and happiness which comes closer to Callicles'.

Bacon elevates Callicles' opinion here, indicating a key disagreement with Plato on the nature of appetite or pleasure. Socrates' stories about the leaky jars imply a view of pleasure and the filling thereof as an endless and as it were infinite procession. The "jars" of our senses or desires can never be filled. There is no "show of advancement" in the obtaining of desires in Socrates' version any more than the fluid level in a leaky jar could rise. Callicles, for his part, accepted the image but denied the conclusion Socrates drew from it. Happiness, for him, consists in being a jar of ever-increasing size—he characterizes it as having as much as possible flow in. For the obtaining of desires to

⁸⁹ I say he goes out of his way to do this since after a long discussion of this issue following his reference to Plato Bacon notes that the whole question is discharged anyway by the other question (presumably whether man's nature is capable of both).

have a “show of advancement” Bacon must be thinking of them not as leaky jars but as rather like a balloon, which on being filled swells to greater size.⁹⁰

As can be seen in the previous chapter, many early Tudor writers found Plato’s moral thought congenial and adaptable to their own needs. Plato’s preference for moderation and self-control well suited their own tastes, and as Elyot’s *Governor* and *Knowledge* dialogue show, that preference could be given a decidedly political cast.⁹¹ By referring to and altering Plato in his account of human appetite Bacon shows that he continues to read Plato as a chief authority on these matters. His alterations, however, show that his disagreements with Plato are more extensive than his predecessors’ were. Though like Plato, and countless moralists after him, Bacon is suspicious of appetite, he is also willing to grant it a greater role in human life. In Platonic terms, while Socrates could oppose and even silence Calicles, he could not convince him; Bacon, by granting a “show of advancement” to Calicles’ position, seems to rehabilitate him.⁹²

Plato and *The New Atlantis*

Bacon’s relationship with Plato and “Political Platonism” is significantly complicated by the fact that his stated interest is not politics but a revitalization of the study of nature, a restoration of the “commerce between the mind of man and the nature

⁹⁰ The “show of advancement” in human desire is also more clearly analogous to the advancement of learning in *New Atlantis*, which will be discussed in more detail below. For now, I add only that Plato uses myths which suggest that the development of the arts and sciences is overturned and destroyed by periodic natural conflagrations—and that this is not necessarily a bad thing—not unlike a jar springing a leak and requiring to be filled again. Bacon must reject such an image in favor of one more congenial to his hopes for the advancement of science.

⁹¹ I am thinking here of how Elyot’s Plato defines the true king as a master of his desires and Elyot’s insistence on wisdom as a kind of self-knowledge and self-mastery requisite for rule in *Governor*.

⁹² Consider, too, the “Author’s Preface” to the *Great Instauration*, where Bacon complains that men lack the desire and hope to encourage them to penetrate further into the nature of things. His first step must thus be to some degree rhetorical and directed towards the passions since he must cut off men’s high opinion of and satisfaction with received knowledge (PWFB 243).

of things...[to] its perfect and original condition” (PWFB, 241). But as Weinberger (*New Atlantis and Great Instauration* ix-xiii), H. White (2-3), and others point out, Bacon is well aware that the study of nature is not unrelated to moral and political matters.⁹³ At the very least, the epistles dedicatory to the *Great Instauration* and *Advancement of Learning* show that Bacon looked to political power as a means for establishing the new science. But I believe there is more to the connection, and that Plato is most useful in discovering it.

The fullest account of the relation of the study of nature and the matter of politics is found in *The New Atlantis*. This work also contains Bacon’s most extended reference to Plato. By its title and subject alone he suggests that the work is a response to Plato’s *Critias*—a dialogue Bacon himself refers to elsewhere as the *Atlanticus*. The exact nature of the connection between Bacon’s pseudo-travelogue and Plato’s dialogue has not yet been sufficiently explored, at least in the context of Bacon’s specific relationship to Plato and Platonic thought.

On the surface a connection with Plato is obvious. The title of the work alone is a clue. In the text Plato is one of two authors referred to in detail—though he is not specifically named. The reference occurs in a conversation between the narrator and the Governor of the Stranger’s House. In expounding on the history of the island, the Governor discusses an invasion which came from the Great Atlantis. He grants there is some truth to “the narration and description which is made by a great man with you, that

⁹³ To their observations I add this: in the first book of *Novum Organum*, aphorism 3, Bacon asserts that “Human knowledge and human power meet in one; for where the cause is not known the effect cannot be produced. Nature to be commanded must be obeyed; and that which in contemplation is as the cause is in operation as the rule.” Clearly, Bacon is speaking here of the study of nature—but the terms in which he does so, and the way the first assertion faintly echoes the Platonic image of the philosopher-king, give this aphorism a moral/political cast as well.

the descendents of Neptune planted there [in Atlantis]” (NAGI, 52). This is a fairly accurate representation of the latter half of *Critias*, where Critias calls Atlantis part of the allotment given to Poseidon and describes it in detail (see *Critias* 110a ff).

The Governor’s speech also indicates that Bacon has given some attention to the main thrust of the *Critias*. The Governor leaves it as an open question whether the ancient Athenians had the glory of repelling and resisting the forces from Atlantis. This is in keeping with the plan of Critias’ speech, which is established both in passing in the *Critias* and near the beginning of the *Timaeus* (to which *Critias* is a kind of sequel). The point which the Governor leaves open is also left open at the end of *Critias*, which is either unfinished or at least ends abruptly. The stated intention of Critias’ speech is to glorify the ancient Athenians who defeated the invaders from Atlantis, but the dialogue ends before the two even come to blows. In fact, it ends just as Zeus is about to pronounce his judgment upon the Atlantians, which suggests that perhaps the true glory for vanquishing Atlantis may rest with a divine revenge. *New Atlantis* ends in similar fashion: at a dramatic pause, as if only halfway through.

In order to think through the relation of Plato’s *Critias* (and *Timaeus*, as a companion-dialogue) to Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, I would like first to establish two points as a guide. These points are difficult to establish conclusively—I will have to rely on the interpretation following to show there is sufficient reason to accept them. The first point is the place given in Bacon’s work to *Critias* in what I regard as a progression of conversations. The narrator reports three conversations with significant personages in Bensalem. Each conversation seems also to occupy a different position concerning

Bensalem's place in time, and each conversation refers implicitly to one "real-world" writer who created a feigned island.

The first conversation takes place between the Governor/Priest of the Stranger's House and about ten members of the narrator's crew, including the narrator. The conversation is almost exclusively concerned with Bensalem's past: how it became a Christian land and how it has managed to remain unknown to the rest of the world. The answer to the first question involves the relation of a curious miracle. The answer to the second places Bensalem in the context of *Critias* and corrects *Critias*' account of Atlantis history.

Though much of the narration and description of that "great man with you" is poetical and fabulous, part of it is true. The problem is, Plato's description does not truly match nature. The world of Atlantis is much like the "new world" discovered in Bacon's time. And since Plato lacked the true knowledge of nature he did not know that in fact the Great Atlantis was home to two nations, not one. One nation was the one *Critias* mentions, which invaded Europe; the other is the one which invaded Bensalem in the distant past. While the fate of the Atlantians in Europe is unknown—perhaps because Plato did not finish it—the fate of those in Bensalem is known. The king of Bensalem used not strength of arms or the virtue of soldiers, which *Critias* wanted to show the ancient Athenians had, but cunning strategy to defeat them.

The second conversation takes place between the narrator, no more than a few other members of the crew, and the Jewish merchant Joabin. The narrator seems to hold him in high regard, calling him "a wise man and learned, and of great policy, and excellently seen in the laws and customs of that nation" (NAGI, 64). This conversation

focuses almost entirely on the present state of Bensalem, particularly in terms of marriage and morality. After a significant pause in their conversation Joabin begins to speak of the many “wise and excellent” laws in Bensalem regarding marriage, and notes that he has read “in a book of one of your men, of a Feigned Commonwealth” that married couples there were permitted to see one another naked before contracting marriage (66-7).

This book sounds very much like More’s *Utopia*, though as the Governor before him Joabin does not name names. Also like the Governor, Joabin offers a correction to the account of the *Utopia*—though not on grounds of inaccuracy. Instead, his correction seems to be an enhancement or improvement on the original. The Bensalemites regard it as scornful to reject a suitor after having such familiar knowledge of his or her body. They thus have special pools established where proxies of the male and female parties can observe the betrothed bathing. Joabin calls this a “more civil way” and ascribes the need for it to “many hidden defects in men and women’s bodies” (NAGI, 67).

The third conversation is actually an extensive monologue delivered by the Father of Salomon’s House to the narrator in private conference. Though this conversation seems, like the one with Joabin, to focus on Bensalem’s present, when he is finished the Father makes a point of allowing his auditor to publish everything he has heard “for the good of other nations; for we are here in God’s bosom, a land unknown” (81). Since the publication of this speech would certainly make Bensalem known to the nations of the world, it seems that the speech relates most intimately to Bensalem’s future. And insofar as the descriptions of the developments and inventions match Bacon’s hopes and dreams for the future of scientific endeavor, one could add that the speech also concerns the future of mankind in general.

I suspect that the third conversation also contains a reference to a writer and creator of a feigned island: Bacon himself and his *New Atlantis*. But I think we are also meant to observe a key difference between Bacon's own feigned island and those of Plato and More. All three lands were feigned, but in such a way as to obscure the fact of their origins in the imagination. The time-scheme Bacon applies to each shows the value and limitations of each. Plato's commonwealth exists in a feigned past, More's in a feigned present. Perhaps Bacon's exists in a feigned future. To approach *New Atlantis* in its relation to Plato, I think we need to understand its place in this implied scheme of three works in three times.

The second point I wish to establish concerns more specifically the description the Governor/Priest makes of *Critias*. He calls the narration and description of that dialogue "poetical and fabulous" but with some truth to it. I suggest that the terms the Governor uses here tell us something about how Bacon himself viewed the dialogue, though the Governor's implication—that much of the dialogue is pure imagination and worthy to be ignored—is not necessarily Bacon's own. Rather, I think the epithet "poetical and fabulous" suggests that Bacon read the dialogue as the very kind of philosophizing through fable that he analyzes and engages in in *Wisdom of the Ancients*.

In the introduction to *Wisdom of the Ancients*, Bacon says "some will think [it] a toy" to use the same license in expounding on fables which the poets also used who first wrote them (PWFB, 822). He grants that fables are made of "pliant stuff" and can be made to follow almost any discourse, and that this fact has led to the abuse of fabling in practice as men wishing for the sanction of authority for doctrines of their own twisted the fables of others to agree with their own doctrines. The judgment that interpreting

fables is but a “toy” seems much the same as Governor’s own judgment. Bacon himself in the *Wisdom* suggests that there are hints sometimes that a fable has more going on underneath the surface. As signs of this he lists resemblance of the thing signified to the persons of the fable, and conformity and significance in the names. Further, there are often bits of real history underneath fables or things added for ornament or mixed up which suggest that men sometimes approached fables with natural philosophy or civil affairs in mind. Last, he also notes that an absurd and stupid surface narrative also may have a hidden meaning. A fable which seems quite probable may have been composed only for pleasure, “but when absurd stories are told we must presume it had some farther reach” (822-3).⁹⁴

I believe Bacon may have read *Critias* as a fable in this fashion. As Bacon elsewhere notes, the ancients did not know about the New World, though in imagination they may well have feigned that such a thing existed. Any Platonic dialogue purporting to discuss an ancient island would not have been based on any real knowledge. The Governor demonstrates this fact by pointing to how Plato’s description of the climate and country do not match what we know of the climate and country of the New World. Further, the *Critias* itself indicates that the names it uses have a certain significance. Before beginning his speech Critias asks his listeners not to be surprised if he gives the men of Atlantis Greek names—then he explains carefully that the names he gives them are ultimately what their original names “meant.”⁹⁵ Finally, the Governor’s description of

⁹⁴ I would add that this principle seems all the more applicable in the case of supposedly wise writers. That is, if someone like Plato should compose a seemingly absurd or pointless fable Bacon may have assumed that “it had some farther reach.”

⁹⁵ *Critias* 113a-b, particularly the assertion there that Solon “recovered the original sense of each name and, rendering it into our tongue, wrote it down so.”

the contents of *Critias* as poetic and fabulous suggest that Bacon may have seen something “absurd and stupid” in the surface narrative. One could add to this *Critias*’ own account, since before his speech he asks for indulgence in what follows since men are apt to find stories about mortal things harder to believe than stories about the origin of the universe—because men actually have direct knowledge of mortal things and so are more apt to judge stories about them. While the Governor does not regard *Critias* as serious history, Bacon may have read it as serious fable.

In approaching the *New Atlantis* to discover its relation to *Critias* I think we must keep both these points in mind: the implied three-part scheme and Bacon’s reading the dialogue as a poetic fable with a hidden agenda concerning natural or political philosophy. We should also consider that Bacon knew *Critias* and *Timaeus*, and also the *Republic*, fairly well, and so in using the “Atlantic” material from *Critias* and *Timaeus* may have been aware also of the relation of both those works to *Republic*.⁹⁶

Critias occupies an interesting place in the *New Atlantis*. The Governor grants that the imaginative account holds a certain truth and instead of rejecting it presents a correction. This gesture seems analogous to Bacon’s tendency in his major works towards presenting his philosophy as a sort of correction to the received philosophy. The nature of the Governor’s correction, however, should be our primary interest here. On the one hand, it corrects Plato’s account of nature—for “assuredly, such a thing there was” as the island of Atlantis, but it was not as Plato described. For instance, the island could not have been destroyed by an earthquake because that part of the world is “little subject” to

⁹⁶ For example, at 110c-e, *Critias* claims the ancient Athenians had a class which dwelt apart from the citizens occupied with handicrafts and farming, that this class was supplied by the others with its sustenance and all members thereof held no private property, and that they practiced all those pursuits “which were mentioned yesterday, in the description of our proposed ‘Guardians’.” Cf *Republic* 376c ff.

such. Instead, it is possessed of great mountains and rivers, so a great deluge was the more likely cause of its destruction. The deluge the Governor mentions is much like the one which, in Plato's *Timaeus*, is presented as the reason why modern Athenians had so little knowledge of antiquity.

On the other hand, the Governor's correction has a political dimension as well. This is in keeping with the political dimension present in Plato's *Critias* and *Timaeus*, to which *New Atlantis* is a kind of response. The introductory business of both *Timaeus* and *Critias* establishes those dialogues as taking place after an extended discussion by Socrates on the ideal state. Each dialogue is presented as an attempt to support that political discussion—*Timaeus* through its proposal of a “likely” cosmology and *Critias* by showing a version of the state, ancient Athens, engaged in virtuous activity (the battle versus ancient Atlantis).

Much of Critias' speech is devoted to describing the two adversaries. He makes a point of telling his audience that he will describe not only the geography but the political setup of both Athens and Atlantis. The description of ancient Atlantis is detailed. It has the features of a mixed regime, being a monarchy ruled by the eldest of the ten sons of Poseidon as the chief king, with the others exercising kingly rule each over a respective portion of the island. The eldest king ruled the others, but his rule over them was not absolute: he could not, for instance, put one of them to death without cause or assent from the others. This political arrangement, as Critias presents it, is made possible by a kind of divine favor: the problem of succession endemic to any hereditary monarchy did not arise as such. Each son of Poseidon seems to have had an unfailing line of competent male progeny. The native virtues of the populace kept them from devising schemes against

each other or against other nations. Critias intends to establish the conflict between these Atlantians and the ancient Athenians to show the virtues of ancient Athens, which he claims possessed the virtues of the ideal city which Socrates has described.

The Governor finds fault with this account. He notes quite baldly that he “cannot say” whether ancient Athens had anything to do with the defeat of Atlantis. This is somewhat in keeping with *Critias*, since that dialogue ends before the two sides come to blows, but it also suggests an objection to the Platonic ideal. The objection is one we can find elsewhere in Bacon as well as in Machiavelli: the virtues of the ideal city are nowhere to be seen. This objection is made more interesting by the Governor’s division of Atlantis into two parts. One part leads to Plato and his account and has unknown and perhaps unknowable results. The other, however, leads to Bensalem and Bacon’s own account. Bacon sees *Critias* as a part of Plato’s understanding of the ideal state and directs the reader’s attention here to *New Atlantis* and its Bensalem as his own attempt.

The Governor’s two accounts of Atlantis offer a couple of points for our consideration. First, if the account which is identified with Plato can be characterized as unknown, the one which we may identify with Bacon is known—in the sense that, according to the dramatic fiction of *New Atlantis*, Bensalem is a “real place”—or at least realized. Of course, since both accounts are fragmentary works of the imagination neither is completely known or realized; we must later address in what sense Bacon’s account is fragmentary or incomplete. Second, Bensalem is said to differ from Athens because of the greater clemency of Bensalem’s ruler. The Governor cannot say whether Athens defeated Atlantis or not, but he *can* say that neither man nor ship ever returned from Atlantis’ European expedition. Atlantis’ expedition to Bensalem, though, met with

“enemies of greater clemency” (NAGI, 52-3). The king of Bensalem at the time, Altabin, hemmed in a defeated his enemies through cunning strategy and never came to blows.

The manner of the defeat of each army from Atlantis is different in the two accounts. In the Platonic account the setup implies that Athens’ superior virtue must have been the deciding factor—a virtue created by their superior education, which Socrates wished to see in action. The abrupt ending of the dialogue also suggests a divine origin of the defeat of Atlantis, since it ends just before Zeus pronounces his judgment upon them. Bacon’s version calls the Athenian defeat of Atlantis into question. He doesn’t know if Athens had anything to do with it, and if they did they must have slaughtered the Atlantians to a man and destroyed all their ships. One might well wonder if the latter case is a demonstration of superior “virtue” at all. In Bensalem Altabin “was a wise man and great warrior and knew well the strength of his enemies and himself” (53). Thus, presumably knowing he could not win a straight-up fight, he divided their land forces from the sea and conquered each in turn.

It seems that what enabled Altabin to succeed is virtue and education not in Plato’s sense but in Bacon’s. I cannot help, for instance, hearing in the description of Altabin and his success an echo of the third and fourth aphorisms of Bacon’s *Organum*, particularly the claims that “human knowledge and human power meet in one,” and that man in his works only puts together and takes apart natural bodies, the rest being done “by nature working within” (65).⁹⁷ Leaving aside the question of what Plato’s understanding of virtue and education might have been, we can see in *New Atlantis* two objections to them as Bacon understood it.

⁹⁷ The latter, though more of a stretch, occurs to me due to the taking apart and putting together of Altabin “[cutting] off their land forces from their ships” and then “entail[ing] their navy and their camp with a greater power” until they surrendered of themselves (NAGI 53).

Platonic virtue is, first, nowhere to be seen. In Plato there was a certain connection to the divine, given the possibility that Athenian virtue was an instrument of divine revenge. But the abrupt end of the dialogue, leaving silence in the place of the divine voice, makes such a connection impossible to establish conclusively. Socrates at the beginning of *Timaeus* and *Critias* is eager to hear speeches in support of his political ideas, but the account of nature in *Timaeus* is only a “likely story,” and the picture of virtue in action in *Critias* establishes the character of the participants but never reaches the point of action. Whatever we are left to think of this in Plato, the incompleteness here is a problem in Bacon. To some extent, he seems to have much the same objection to Plato that his Tudor predecessors did: the philosopher’s ideals are too far removed from the world of action. We must temper this objection, though, with the observation that, like More, Bacon voices this objection here through an imaginative work involving a feigned commonwealth. Even as the objection is made the context in which it appears compels the reader not to accept it unthinkingly.

This situation is further complicated by the second significant objection, which is almost entirely Bacon’s own. The second objection arises from the different fates of the Atlantians. In *Critias* we are led to believe that the virtuously educated citizens of ancient Athens, with perhaps the assistance of divine judgment, stopped the invasion. In Bensalem, the invaders are not destroyed but assimilated. The key to why lies not only in Altabin’s “greater clemency” but in the correction Bacon’s governor offered to Plato’s account.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ The struggle with the Atlantians cut off Bensalem’s former connection to the rest of the world, and some years later their king Solamona determined that since their land “might be a thousand ways altered to the worse, but scarce any one way to the better” ordained the fairly harsh interdicts and prohibitions against strangers (NAGI 54-5).

The Governor claims that Plato spoke of earthquakes as one source of the destruction of ancient Atlantis. In *Critias*, this is indeed what is claimed—but the manner of it is quite revealing. At 108, Critias says that Atlantis was destroyed and now lies underwater, sunk by massive earthquakes. Further, the destruction of the island led to a barrier of impassable mud just beyond the Pillars of Hercules which, he adds at 109a, “prevents those who are sailing out from here to the ocean beyond from proceeding further.” It would not be amiss here to recall the image Bacon fancied of a ship sailing beyond the Pillars with the motto *plus ultra*. In denying the earthquakes and the destruction of Atlantis Bacon transforms the image of Atlantis from Plato’s version of a destroyed and unapproachable place—a thing as it were circumscribed and cut off—into something real and attainable.⁹⁹ What Weinberger refers to as the “technically proficient Atlantis” (NAGI, xiii-xiv) is also in a way replaced by the “New” Atlantis of Bensalem, which, unlike the Old, has perfected the science that protects her from external harm and nature’s corruptability (xiv-xv).

The imagery from and references to Plato suggest that Bacon was well aware of an essential difference between his own project and the teachings of the ancients. That difference can be characterized, as it is by Weinberger, as a new horizon—beyond the limits which were formerly assumed to confront any human effort (nature, fortune, God).¹⁰⁰ That Bacon was also aware of the extraordinary moral and political consequences of his project has been less clear to scholars, but may well be the implication of some of the difficulties he presents in *New Atlantis*. To take one example,

⁹⁹ This is largely in agreement with Boesky’s reading of *New Atlantis* as an attempt to “defray the necessity for limit, allowing for the sense of open-ended horizon Bacon wanted science to represent” (145).

¹⁰⁰ He introduces this idea in his introduction to *New Atlantis* (viii-ix), but one can see traces of it here and there in his *Science, Faith and Politics* as well.

and not the least, there is the place of religion in Bensalem. Bacon is careful to show that the island is Christian—though it seems to be a moderate and tolerant brand thereof. Christianity as practiced in Bensalem is not likely to give rise to the kind of zeal or “superstition” which Bacon elsewhere paints as an obstacle to the development of learning. As Peltonen points out, though Bacon insists upon the separation of science and religion, his writings are filled with imagery and overtones borrowed from religion throughout (19). The situation in Bensalem suggests that Bacon was well aware that, even though science and religion were to be kept separate, neither was without influence upon the other.

After Bacon

If Socrates called philosophy down from the heavens and into the city, Bacon in a way returns it to the heavens—or, more precisely, to nature. To the extent that Bacon looks for the advancement of man’s power and the relief of his estate, one could add that Bacon does this not for the sake of the divine so much as for the sake of the city.¹⁰¹ Hence he continues to see value in those who wrote in such a way as to make philosophy useful for the city and civil matters. He himself cites as particularly valuable writers in this vein Cicero, Xenophon, Seneca, Plutarch, and “even Plato” (*Advancement* 23). Though Bacon suspects that logic, ethics, and politics will eventually be carried on by the same method as the natural sciences will use (see *Organon* I.127), it is not exactly clear how this will be carried out. In the meantime, he continues to see value in Plato and

¹⁰¹ Since Bacon is fond of using biblical passages to support the advancement of learning, I find it particularly useful to observe, as evidence for this assertion, the following: if Bacon is right in claiming in *Advancement* that it was not knowledge of nature but the proud knowledge of good and evil which led to man’s fall, the announcement of the fall and man’s punishment suggests that God did not wish for man to gain also the knowledge of immortality (6) Bacon himself suggests with seeming equanimity that such knowledge may be within man’s reach if he comes to know nature sufficiently.

others for politics and ethics—but for Bacon, that value is circumscribed by the greater value and urgency of the new science.

The main lines of Bacon's evaluation of Plato do not remain particular to him. Many later writers who follow Bacon will also follow his general pattern of applauding Plato for his moral and civic value while denying his utility to scientific inquiry. Samuel Parker's *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophy* (first printed in 1666) is an excellent example. Parker considers Platonism adequate and even praiseworthy in matters of morality, and certainly valuable in matters of the "smaller morals" such as the arts of behavior and conversation (27). He even praises the Platonists generally for using their learning rather than simply admiring, according to the maxim "of my Lord Bacon" that crafty men condemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them (28). His objections to Platonism repeat Bacon's in large part. The natural theology of the Platonists is "every where so intimately mingled" with natural philosophy that one can hardly discuss them separately (44); in their speculative thought they fetch principles and notions purely out of the mind of man, when general axioms should instead be the result of a multitude of single experiments (55-6). Generalities are not nearly as convincing as particular observations, "and therefore my Lord Bacon has well noted it as none of the least obstructions to the advancement of knowledge, that Men have sought for Truth in their own little Worlds" (57-8). It is worth adding, however, that Parker seems particularly disturbed by the Platonists' affection for mysterious obscurity and the use of fables, parables, metaphors, allegories, and the like. The obscurity of such forms, he says, makes them completely unfit for expressing a man's thought (68). Parker's Lord Bacon, of course, still found value in these forms and devices.

CHAPTER 4

RETHINKING MILTON AND PLATO

Since the work of Herbert Agar (*Milton and Plato*, 1922) and Irene Samuel (*Plato and Milton*, 1947), no one has seriously doubted that Milton was thoroughly familiar with most, if not all, of Plato's works. Scholars have tended to look for Platonic influence, however, primarily in Milton's early poetry, where the Theological and Cosmological Platonism favored by Ficino and his followers is predominant. Even when Platonic influence on Milton's prose and later poetry is considered, scholars continue to look for essentially the same kind of Platonism.¹⁰² Such an approach neglects the findings of Agar, who presents considerable evidence of Milton's interest in Platonic ideas "foreign to the spirit of Renaissance Platonism, [which] represent an aspect of the philosopher to which that period was indifferent" (30-1).¹⁰³ It also neglects the considerable evidence marshaled by Samuel to argue that Milton's understanding and use of Platonism changed considerably sometime between his graduation from Cambridge in 1631 and his return from Europe in 1639.

I agree with Samuel's conclusion that Milton's understanding of Plato underwent a significant change. In particular, I think we see a change from a somewhat conventional

¹⁰² This is the case in Anna Baldwin's article ("Platonic ascents and descents in Milton"), which argues that Milton discards an early dualist view of nature in favor of "another kind of Platonism...the 'emanationist' view associated with Plotinus" (151). More recently, Clay Daniel's "Milton's Neo-Platonic Angel" advances the argument that Raphael and Adam in *Paradise Lost* participate in a dialogue of love whose generic models are *Symposium* and its Neoplatonic versions produced by Ficino, Ebreo, and Castiglione (173).

¹⁰³ Evidence also supplemented by Levinson in a later essay—see especially 85-7, 90-1.

Theological Platonism, characteristic of *Comus* or the *Il Penseroso*, to what looks like the pattern of Political Platonism. The later Milton is interested in Plato not so much as an inspired theologian or cosmologist but as an asset in his own political and cultural programs. Time after time, we find Milton turning to Plato for principles—not all of which he accepts, or accepts without qualification, of course—or for an example when he is discussing rhetoric and style, articulating his civic hopes, presenting political ideas, or addressing moral issues. And where Bacon’s hopes for the new science and the advancement of learning led him to take issue with Plato on such matters, as we shall see, Milton’s own political hopes as well as his particular understanding of Christianity and its relation to the classics led to a similarly qualified use of Plato.

A change in Milton’s appreciation of Plato can be seen by comparing a work from his student days such as the *Prolusions* with his later works. In the second prolusion, Plato is “that best interpreter of Mother Nature,” who follows the teaching of Pythagoras on the music of the spheres by affirming that sirens sit and sing upon the orbs of the heavens (CPW I, 236). In the seventh he echoes *Timaeus* in affirming that God founded this universe on change and decay but mingled within man a certain divine breath, immortal and imperishable (CPW I, 291). One could also point to a poem such as *Il Penseroso*, which some have observed a strong Platonic element in, where Milton imagines staying up with Melancholy to

...unsphere
The spirit of Plato to unfold
What worlds, or what vast Regions hold
Th’immortal mind that hath forsook
Her mansion in this fleshly nook
And of those Daemons that are found...
Whose power hath a true consent
With Planet or with element. (ll 88-97)

Samuel sees a change in Milton's Platonism implied by such writings as the 1638 letter to Buonmattei. Milton writes in this letter of how he esteems anyone in a state who "knows how to form wisely the manners of men and to rule them at home and in war with excellent institute," and next to such a man he esteems one who "strives to establish in maxims and rules the method and habit of speaking and writing received from a good age of the nation" (CPW I, 329). Most revealing is the justification Milton offers for this view. The excellence of language and the customary propriety in using it is no small matter, he asserts, for "it is Plato's opinion that by a change in the manner and habit of dressing serious commotions and mutations are portended in a commonwealth." Although Samuel reads this as an independent application of Plato's general doctrine that careless and unnecessary change is dangerous to the state (cf Samuel 12, *Laws* VII, 797-799), I would add that he is also making use of the position, advanced at the beginning of book VII, that there are issues which may seem trivial or undignified for one to regulate but which if violated will detract from the authority of the law.

Milton himself seems to allude to such a change in the postscript to his seventh *Elegy* and in the account of his education given in the *Apology for Smectymnus*. The Latin versions Milton added to later publications of *Elegy* VII speak of these poems as "vain trophies of my idleness I once set up in foolish mood and with supine endeavor," until the Academy came and offered him its "Socratic streams" (cf Samuel 7-8). The account in *Smectymnus*, meanwhile, speaks of how in his "riper years" his "ceaseless round of study led [him] to the shady spaces of philosophy; but chiefly to the divine volumes of Plato and his equal Xenophon" (PWJM III, 119). Particularly noteworthy is the context of this claim: Milton is presenting this information in order to show that even

if he had *not* studied Christian goodness, his natural inclination and study of moral philosophy—exemplified by “Plato and his equal Xenophon”—would have kept him from being the dissolute, degenerate person his opponent has accused him of being. In the years after his letter to Buonmattei, this is predominantly the kind of context in which Milton uses Plato.

Plato and Rhetoric

Milton is one of the first English authors I know of even to hint at Plato as a theorist of rhetoric. He does so in *Of Education*, where he speaks of a graceful and ornate rhetoric, “taught out of the rule of Plato, Aristotle, Phalerus, Cicero, Hermogenes, Longinus,” as the crown or culmination of his recommended education (Ainsworth 59-60). Milton most likely has *Phaedrus* in mind here, particularly given his references elsewhere to learning so much about love from Plato, and given Socrates’ proposal at the beginning of the passage following the Cicadas to discuss the rules of writing and speech (cf 265d ff).

Though Milton clearly has no one particular rhetorician in mind in his subsequent discussion, it is worth noting that Socrates at the very outset of the *Phaedrus* discussion insists that a speaker must know the truth of a matter of which he intends to speak. In *Of Education*, as if in answer to this dictum, Milton writes: “those organic arts which enable men to discourse and write clearly, elegantly and according to the fittest style” (Ainsworth 59) must come last, after students have spent evenings “understandingly” in the highest matters of theology and church history and says learning politics (as Milton puts it, the grounds of law and legal justice as well as the beginnings, ends, and reasons of political societies). Milton’s reference to “organic arts” may even owe something to

Socrates' suggestion in *Phaedrus* that a discourse should be like a living creature (275d ff).

Plato was more influential for Milton, however, as an example of rhetorical practice. Even in the early prolusions Milton is particularly sensitive to Plato as a model of style. The sixth *Prolusion*, defending sportive exercises in philosophic studies, notes: "we read that the conversation of the ancient philosophers was always sprinkled with witty sayings and enlivened by a pleasant sparkle" (CPW I, 273), and a little later speaks of philosophers "accustomed to make sport in the Socratic manner." The seventh argues that men of learning best cultivate friendships, and as an example points to the conferences of the learned "such as those which the divine Plato is said often to have held in the shade of that famous plane tree" (CPW I, 295).¹⁰⁴

Much later, in his *Art of Logic*, Milton would use Plato, much as Bruni did, as an example of fine logical and rhetorical practice. To show the use of contradictions in making distinctions where no apt word exists he cites Socrates' speech to Crito: "You seem to have failed conveniently to awaken me" (CPW VIII, 265). To demonstrate the use of what he calls an "adjunct occupied" in argument he presents Plato's conjecture that "those states are wretched which lack a multitude of physicians and judges, since necessarily much intemperance and injustice will be practiced in such a state" (249). Following Fabius, he discusses what he calls the "Socratic parable," which he defines as the asking of many things necessary for an adversary to acknowledge and then inferring about the subject of these questions a conclusion which the adversary would be likely to concede (288).

¹⁰⁴ Though this is reference to an anecdote about Plato rather than to his works, I suspect that Milton's insistence that such conferences were worthy to be heard by the whole human race may owe at least something to the "conferences" Plato did make available which involved his master Socrates.

Milton seems particularly fond in this work of using Plato to discuss “similitudes.” He finds an example of a “contained similitude,” where the first term is related to the second as the second is related to the third and so on, in *Laws* III: “As laws govern the magistrates, so the magistrates govern the people” (286). Plato in *Phaedo* is quoted in support of the argument that similitudes can be used to make things plain rather than to prove: “Discourses which use demonstrations from similar things I have well known to be arranged with a view to display, and unless one is on guard against them they easily deceive.”¹⁰⁵ The aforementioned “Socratic parable” is a case of what Milton calls the “fictitious similitude,” and is an example of how effective it can be in argument (287-8).

The early references of the *Prolusions*, however, are the most characteristic of Milton’s use of Plato as a model in rhetoric. In particular, Milton seems to have picked up on the irony and humor of Plato’s dialogues and taken it to heart as justification for “sprinklings” of wit in serious matters. In *Apology for Smectymnus* (1642) Milton replies to the Remonstrant’s attack on his prose style by pointing to Plato as a model. The Remonstrant, in calling Milton’s work nothing more than a “mime” thrust upon the stage, reveals that he does not understand what a mime is to set its value so low. From Diogenes Laertius, Milton says, we learn that Plato thought well enough of Sophron’s mimes to read them nightly and make them his pillow (PWJM III, 106; cf Diogenes’ *Lives* 293). If mimes are, according to the definition of Scaliger which Milton offers, imitations designed to stir up laughter, then the dialogues of Plato themselves must be called mimes—because there is scarcely one of them, “particularly those wherein some notable

¹⁰⁵ Quoted by Milton on 287, though the reference is found not in *Phaedo* but *Phaedrus* 236a (cf Levinson 86-7).

sophister lies sweating and turmoiling under the inevitable and merciless dilemmas of Socrates, but that one who read it would be robbed of more than a smile” (107-8). Given that Milton and the subjects he treats often seem so serious it is worth noting that he would point to Plato to justify the combination of wit and gravity even in serious matters.

Milton uses Plato to justify precisely this combination in the *Defense of Himself* (1655?), where the precedent of Plato, as well as the Old Comedy and the books of Socratic philosophers, are adduced to prove that decorum is not something to be confined within narrow limits of propriety. In this work, Milton defends his alleged practice of combining grave speeches on the commonwealth and the duties of citizens with “gayeties of loose wassailers.” He refers readers to the judgment of Cicero, who praised Crassus’ speeches as “seasoned with wit and gayety,” and also to the opinion of “Plato and the Socratics” that nothing was more suitable to decorum than the sprinklings of wit on the gravest subjects (CPW IV.2, 771). Milton’s account of Plato’s opinion here echoes his earlier assessment in the *Prolusions* of the “dialogues of the old philosophers” (see above). I would add, too, that Milton refers the reader to Cicero and Plato as authorities on the proper way of writing grave speeches on the commonwealth and the duties of citizens—that is, on matters of political philosophy.

In *Smectymnus* Milton is more direct in his praise of Plato’s manner of writing about “commonweal” matters. He refers there to a

grave and noble invention, which the greatest and sublimest wits in sundry ages, Plato in Critias, and our two famous countrymen, the one in his Utopia, the other in his New Atlantis, chose, I may not say as a field, but as a mighty continent, wherein to display the largeness of their spirits, by teaching this our world better and exacter things than were yet used. (PWJM III, 108)

Of course, the polemical context of these words should not be forgotten. Milton places his opponent's work, "Mundus Alter et Idem," together with these three works in what we might call the genre of utopian fiction, then uses the loftiness of the three to contrast sharply with the "petty prevarication" of the "Mundus." Nevertheless, in this attack we may infer something of the way Milton understood this genre. In particular, he seems to emphasize the poetic quality: namely, that the works are at best a noble "invention" but in his opponent's crude version only a "prevarication." Also, he seems to see the genre as occupied primarily with what we might call "laws" in the Greek sense (*nomoi*)—laws, but also customs, habits, morals—with the broad range of possibilities glanced at by "better and exacter things than were yet used." The language of Milton's description suggests the genre is an invention favored by writers dissatisfied with narrow human actuality—the "greatest and sublimest" have favored it, a field is not big enough but it must be a "mighty continent," and by means of their works the "largeness of their spirits" has been displayed. Milton's qualification of a "mighty continent" is a witty turn of phrase, since each of the authors does indeed create a kind of continent as it were out of thin air. But the qualification also suggests something of the genre itself: it is not a field, like a tourney or a field of battle, to be fought over, but a continent to be discovered and populated.¹⁰⁶

Early enthusiasts for Plato such as Bruni had long recognized him as a master of rhetoric. Even when Bruni developed doubts about Plato's political and moral thought, he still found him useful for illustrating the combination of learning and eloquence which he

¹⁰⁶ There is also a hint, at least, of hesitation in Milton's praise here. For the greatness of the three writings mentioned seems to be entirely personal and human—they display the largeness of their spirits, but not the largeness of *the* Spirit. In the polemical and political context of *Smectymnus* this genre is sublime and easily displays the paucity of spirit in Milton's opponent. But one may well suspect that in a divine context the genre may not be up to the task.

and other humanists prized. It is not surprising, then, that Milton should continue to see in Plato a rhetorical model; it *is* surprising that he should give such credence to Plato as a rhetorical theorist as well. Milton seems to have been more familiar than Bruni with both *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*—or at least with the potential ironies of *Gorgias* in the light of passage in *Phaedrus*. This greater familiarity is most likely why Milton, unlike Bruni, also put his knowledge of Plato to use much more directly and extensively in his civic thought.

Plato and Civic Thought

Bacon's suggestion that the old philosophy may yet have value on civil occasion in a way comes to fruition in Milton. Certainly Plato holds an honored place in Milton's educational system, at least as this can be found in his essay *Of Education*. Elbert Thompson observes that the new regime Milton served had pressing need for well-trained and capable public servants (172-3). To this should be added Walter Berns' observation that in Milton's view, as it developed over a series of political tracts culminating in the *Ready and Easy Way*, a free commonwealth depended for its excellence and durability on the existence of men of good character—and thus the education of such men could not be trusted to chance but had to be assumed as a major public duty (447). Like Elyot before him, Milton found Plato useful in developing a system dedicated to producing such men.¹⁰⁷ In his dedicatory epistle discussing the reform of education, Milton calls this “one of the greatest and noblest designs that can be thought of” and offers his essay as the

¹⁰⁷ Thompson, for example, emphasizes Milton's willingness in his *Education* essay to defer to the authority of the ancients in general as well as his willingness to accept the traditions of Greek and humanist educational thought (163, 169). But see also Bradford (58 ff), who attributes the view of Milton as a sort of monument to classical learning to the Victorian era. Matthew Arnold's characterization of Milton as a “Hebraist” rather than a “Hellenist” may assume a greater distance between the qualities he associates with these categories than Milton would accept.

flowering of long years spent “in the search of religious and civil knowledge” (Ainsworth 51).

Plato appears in *Of Education* at three critical points in the round of studies Milton recommends. At the outset of his program he suggests that, in addition to studies in grammar and pronunciation, students should be “[won]...to the love of virtue and true labor” by reading books of education “whereof the Greeks have store, as Cebes, Plutarch, and other Socratic discourses” (Ainsworth 56). Though Plato is not mentioned directly as the creator of a particular brand of “Socratic discourse” (if Xenophon can be said to have created another), he stands at the head of a tradition which includes both of the other authors Milton does mention. The value these works have lies not so much in their content per se as in the power the reading of such works has to form character.

The second appearance of Plato complements the first. After some years of study and good precepts have prepared them, Milton’s students are ready to start thinking about good and evil. Some “special reinforcement of constant and sound indoctrinating” will be useful here to instruct them “more amply in the knowledge of virtue and the hatred of vice.” Thus, Milton recommends that their

young and pliant affections...[be] led through all the moral works of Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch, Laertius, and the Locrian remnants...[and these in turn] reduced in their nightward studies...under the determinate sentence of David or Solomon or the evangelists and apostolic scriptures. (Ainsworth 58)

Plato, like other of the ancients, is accepted and even encouraged as a teacher of moral virtue and ethical principles. There is also a suggestion that the reading of his works will help form character as well as inculcate principles in his reference to “pliant affections...led.”

The qualification of reducing classical principles under the “determinate sentence” of religious text and authority shows the great care Milton takes here, as elsewhere, to reconcile “religious and civil knowledge.” The need for such reduction implies that the moral teaching of the classics differs in some crucial respect—not here explored—from the Christian teaching. That the reduction occurs during nightward studies, when students are more apt to accept what is taught without question or reservation, may suggest that the moral principles of the classics are something to be morally demonstrated and accepted on principle, while the “determinate sentence” of religion is to be accepted on faith and authority alone.

The third appearance, which comes in the discussion of rhetoric, I have already discussed in the prior section of this chapter. I only want to add here that Milton is more decisive and definitive in accepting the poets as part of his system of education. He characterizes poetry as “less subtle and fine” than logic but “more simple, sensuous, and passionate” (Ainsworth 60). The fact that poetry appeals to the senses and the passions is indicative of its problematic character in Plato. Milton seems to agree with Socrates about what poetry does, but clearly is more enthusiastic about including its effects in education. Still, something of Socrates’ skepticism can be seen in Milton’s insistence on the same page that if poetry is taught properly students will learn “what despicable creatures the common rhymers and playwrights are...and what religious, glorious, and magnificent use might be made of poetry, in divine and human things.”

Milton is aware of poetry which appeals to the senses and passions in a debased manner, and shares Plato’s distrust and dislike of such poetry. This may be why this passage can be so difficult to work through—particularly knotty phrases such as

“[rhetoric] to which poetry would be made subsequent, or indeed rather precedent” (because more simple, sensuous, and passionate). Despite his doubts, Milton still had hopes for a more exalted and religious poetry. In the interest of such poetry, he does not regard appeals to the senses or passions as such as low. By not dismissing such appeals out of hand Milton indicates that he sees a closer relationship between soul and body than Plato did.

Milton hopes that his course of study will be like “those ancient and famous schools of Pythagoras, Plato, Isocrates, Aristotle” and such out of which so many renowned men arose. He also hopes to correct and exceed those schools by supplying a defect “as great as that which Plato noted in the commonwealth of Sparta”—that they bred their children entirely in the arts of war, while Athens trained “all for the gown.” Instead, Milton hopes his institution will be “equally good both for peace and war” (Ainsworth 61). This desire seems to hearken back to the interest of early Tudor educators who wanted to bring the old traditions of knightly and clerkly education together in one.

The reference to Plato and the defect in Sparta may come from book I of *Laws*. The Athenian Stranger faults Spartan and Cretan law for focusing so exclusively on war. He does consider an objection to Athens as well, but it is not its training “for the gown” but rather its practice of convivial gatherings—which his interlocutors take as an example of Athens’ excessive liberty. The ideal implied later in the education proposed in book III is remarkably close to Milton’s own ideal. In *Laws* III the ideal is described as an education in virtue combining an orderly physical training with orderly musical

education. The context in that book, though, also contains a criticism of liberty, which Milton is elsewhere at such pains to defend.

Plato also proves useful to Milton when he discusses matters of public concern. The most well-known example of this is *Areopagitica* (1644). After announcing that the ancients, by not discussing the licensing of books, left us their judgment that they did not approve of this, Milton must address Plato—who did discuss something very like the licensing of books in his *Laws*. His source, as he tells us, is Plato’s “Commonwealth, in the book of his laws,” which we may further identify as book VII, 801c-d. There, Plato enacts that no poet should even read in private what he had written unless it had been seen and allowed by judges and law-keepers (PWJM II, 71-2). After some initial rhetorical flourishes—i.e., Plato “fed his fancy with making many edicts to his airy burgomasters”—Milton directs us to two main concerns: Plato’s example and the context of his licensing (72).¹⁰⁸

Plato’s example, according to Milton, demonstrates that these regulations were meant to apply only to his imagined commonwealth. He would not otherwise have transgressed his own law, both in offering more in his dialogues than he would permit to his citizens—to whom he allowed only “some practical traditions”—and in himself writing wanton epigrams and reading the mimes of Sophron and Aristophanes, “books of grossest infamy” (72). Milton assumes, as Elyot did, that the actions of a wise man must

¹⁰⁸ Though Milton does not directly address the context, it may be put this way: because the poets do not always know what is good and what is bad, and may therefore mislead the people, a law is proposed to keep them under the surveillance of the law-wardens. Milton’s disagreement with Plato on this point may be regarded as quite reasonable if his understanding of poetic inspiration is decisively different from Plato’s. That is, if the divinely inspired poet, for Milton, may indeed be said to know the difference between what is good and what is bad—or if the conscience of the poet is a sure guide to these things—then Plato’s objection to them is discharged or at least of reduced significance.

comport with his words; if they do not, as in this case, we must consider the possibility that the words are not meant in all seriousness or in all cases.

The latter possibility is what Milton insists upon by referring readers to the “reference and dependence [of licensing of poems] to many other provisos there set down in his fancied republic, which in this world could have no place.” Rather, Plato’s licensing is part of a regulation of all manner of recreations and pastimes (72-3). In this Milton is certainly correct, as *Laws* discusses regulation of matters as diverse as music and dancing, the choice of marriage partners, and the proper use of wine-parties. The Athenian repeatedly admits that certain matters which he proposes to regulate by law are difficult to so regulate, or to convince men to follow without difficulty. Such admittance could be read as indicating that Plato was aware of the limitations of his legislation. As Milton reads it, all such regulations are part of a general control over all things likely to corrupt the mind. As will be discussed more fully below, though, Milton does not permit the civil magistrate to touch upon matters of the mind—he reserves that for religious authorities only. In *Areopagitica* he simply draws attention to the practical limitations of this rule: Plato’s licensing implies licensing of so much else, he says, as would make men frustrated and weary (73).

Though Plato’s licensing of books will not help us “ordain wisely in this world of evil,” he does have some ideas which *will* help. Milton points with approval to

those unwritten or unconstraining laws of virtuous education, religious and civil nurture which Plato in his work mentions as the bonds and ligaments of the commonwealth, the pillars and the sustainers of every written statute. (74; cf *Laws* VII, 793b-c)

It is these unwritten laws of education which are of decisive importance. Milton disagrees with Plato but at the same time preserves what he can of his teaching. What he preserves, though, indicates his area of disagreement. In Plato, the fact that licensing was still necessary, even for citizens in a state with excellent education, suggests that however straight the rule human character cannot be absolutely straightened by religious and civil nurture. Milton does not disagree, as we see from his assertion that in this world we know good and evil as grown up together, with the knowledge of the one interwoven with the other (67-8). Hence he offers instead the remarkable assertion that we are purified by trial, and accepts the consequence that the virtuous must know “the utmost that vice promises to her followers.” As if recalling Socrates’ objections to poetry, as soon as Milton has made this assertion and its consequence clear, he tells us that this is why he dares call Spenser a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas—his knights are not sheltered from vice but allowed to experience and overcome it. In order to persuade his audience, however, Milton must remain silent here about the possibility that many may see and know—and fall.

Milton’s objection to Plato in *Areopagitica* is not to his utopian imaginings as such, but to those who would inject utopian thinking into actual legislation. As Brann says in her essay on More’s *Utopia*, utopian fiction allows us to see what is worthy of choice if everything, or nearly everything, in a political situation were malleable.¹⁰⁹

When counselors treat them as road maps to creating ideal political situations—as more modern versions of utopias tend to do—they lose their original value (Brann 21-2, 24-5 *et*

¹⁰⁹ Although Brann does not state this directly, this is perhaps the main reason why the nature of utopias has changed—modern philosophers tend to assume that human being is far more capable of change, recreation, and formation than their predecessors did. More recently, however, this assumption too has been questioned, though few or none offer a return to a pre-modern conception of human nature.

passim). Thus, in *Areopagitica*, Milton emphasizes what will help us “ordain wisely in this world of evil,” and complains that Plato’s licensing cannot be taken out of context. Putting it back in context, he finds that licensing is part of an education and political system designed to remove possible corruptions. But such removal is not choiceworthy for Milton—he hates a “cloistered virtue” and admires Spenser’s depiction of virtuous knights facing and overcoming vice. It is not simply because Milton is more of a “realist” than Plato that he objects to him here—his objection also stems from what he wants a good Christian life to be.

Milton also finds considerable use for Plato in his other educational tracts, most notably in his *Art of Logic* (first published in 1672). Plato appears repeatedly, along with other ancient authorities such as Aristotle and Cicero, as an authority on logic and rhetoric. Milton follows Ramus in defining logic as the art of reasoning well and prefers to use ‘dialectic’ to refer to the art of questioning and answering—an approach he says is supported by Plato in *Cratylus* 390c (CPW VIII, 218).¹¹⁰ He justifies dividing logic into the invention of reasons and arguments and the disposition of the same on the authority of “Plato in *Phaedrus*,” Aristotle, and Cicero (219). When he observes that Form can also be the end of limit of a thing, he turns for support to Aristotle and “Plato in *Philebus*,” where the latter refers to the essence or form of a thing as the end of generation (237). When discussing genus and species, Milton observes that genus may in some way be part of the species, “as Plato indicates in *Politicus*” (302, cf *Statesman* 263b). Milton’s definition of axioms as true when speaking as a thing is and false when they do the opposite is also supported with a reference to *Cratylus* (328).

¹¹⁰ Socrates gets Hermogenes to agree that he calls the man who knows how to ask and answer questions a dialectician. The section is concerned with giving the proper names to things—a methodological concern akin to Milton’s in the early pages of *Art of Logic*.

Milton even goes to modest interpretive lengths to preserve Plato's authority in this work. In his discussion of the Platonic dichotomy, he praises it as most accurate and clear. But, he observes, it can be difficult in practice to gain dichotomy. When this is so, it is better to consider four species under two genera rather than four under only one (298). His distinction of method into analytic and synthetic is similar to Bacon's discussion of the need for a rhetoric designed to teach and another to invent knowledge. Milton's analytic method is for presenting of teaching, while the synthetic method he calls the one proper for inventing. The synthetic method proceeds from particulars which first offer themselves to the senses; by induction, general notions are collected from these observations, in a manner reminiscent of Baconian induction. The method of inventing, however, Milton considers something known by Plato as well, since according to Milton it was Plato who called this method "synthetic," and referred to method in general as a divine gift (390; cf *Philebus* 16c, 54c).

These examples show that Milton turned to Plato often and seriously when considering matters of civic interest. As we should expect from so independent a thinker, Milton does not always agree with Plato, but the grounds of his disagreements seem quite similar to those we saw with the Tudor writers before him. When put in actual practice, Plato sometimes must be qualified or corrected. Thus, in *Of Education*, Plato and the other ancients are permitted to teach moral principles, but are brought under the "determinate sentence" of biblical authority. Thus, in *Areopagitica*, the idealistic context of Plato's *Laws* does not, and should not, always survive into actual legislation. This is much the same pattern we find, too, when Milton uses Plato in his political thought.

Political Principles and Examples

In matters of politics and policy Milton consciously, but not slavishly, accepted the authority of the ancients—including Plato. In the second book of his *Of Reformation* (1641), which is devoted to the “political discourse of episcopacy,” Milton laments the current state of political science. Those who in writing laid down the foundations of this science—one “of greatest importance to the life of man”—were men of great mind and sure excellence, but the science itself has now grown “cankered in its principles” and soiled by pedantry (CPW I, 570-1). Thus we find those among us who will hinder the progress of reformation by arguing that it does not agree with reason of state. Milton is much amazed by this claim, as he is sure that the Bible doesn’t support such a conclusion and neither do Plato and Aristotle.

A similar use of Plato can be found in *Reason of Church-Government* (~1641-2). Milton’s preface notes that in the publishing of human laws Plato did not think it done generously or wisely to offer them to the people without reason or preface, as if they were but lordly commands (CPW I, 746). He refers here to *Laws* IV, where the Athenian observes that two methods are used by doctors: one with slaves, where the doctor simply prescribes what he thinks is right and moves on, and one with free men, where the doctor imparts instruction with the patient’s consent and secures docility by means of persuasion. In the interest of providing such persuasion, the Athenian and his interlocutors agree that the lawgiver must not omit to use preludes as prefaces to the laws. These preludes should come before the whole of the laws and before individual laws as appropriate. Milton adds here that we may learn this same practice of using preludes from “a higher and better authority”—namely, Moses using *Genesis* as a prologue to his own

laws (746-7). By insisting that Plato's teaching has biblical precedent Milton indicates the importance he attaches to the issue of preludes and persuasion. Most likely he has taken to heart the *Laws* passage above, where the use of them is linked to the proper way of treating free men.

Laws also seems to be the origin of Milton's claim elsewhere in *Church-Government* that the ancient lawgivers were either divinely inspired or else had sufficient authority to give out that they were. Plato was certainly not alone in seeing an important relationship between religion and civil law, but the first book of *Laws* seems to conform to Milton's claim. The first book opens with the Athenian asking his companions to whom they ascribed the authorship of their laws—to a god or to some man. Clinias replies that "most rightfully" they ascribe them to a God: the Cretans to Zeus and the Lacedaemonians to Apollo. But it soon appears that the ascription to the gods comes via a human lawgiver, for Clinias confirms that the Cretans also say that Minos used to go to speak with Zeus and was guided by divine oracles when he laid down the laws for their cities. Later, after getting Clinias to agree that any worthy legislator will make his laws with an eye towards the highest good and that alone, the Athenian notes that his companions have mistakenly interpreted the intentions of their lawgivers—but he names them as Lycurgus and Minos, the legendary but human lawgivers, tacitly denying the original claim that Zeus and Apollo were responsible.

Milton's observation in *Church-Government* seems to have been informed by this exchange at the beginning of *Laws*. When he cites examples of men who pretended to be divinely inspired lawgivers, he names Minos, Lycurgus, and Numa. The first two are obviously linked in Plato; the addition of Numa may owe something to Livy's skeptical

account of his supposed encounters with the nymph in his *History*. The *Laws* passage is also suggested by context. In Plato, the discussion of the divinely inspired lawgivers leads to the assertion that a worthy legislator must have his eye on the highest good. In Milton, it is precisely the view of the highest good which distinguished Moses from the other three ancient lawgivers—he was truly inspired and thus had access to the highest good. The ancient lawgivers had purely political and practical wisdom: they knew men would not submit to their laws unless they appeared to have divine sanction (CPW I, 753-4).

A similar pattern of use and qualification, much like Thomas More's "if appropriate for a pagan how much more so for a Christian," appears also in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1644). In order to understand divorce as Moses understood it, Milton insists that marriage is not inseparable by the "first institution; for then no second institution of the same law for so many causes could dissolve it" (PWJM III, 236). His express warrant for this is Plato's judgment in *Laws* IV, 719d, where it is called unworthy for a human lawgiver to write two different decrees on the same thing. If this is unworthy for a human lawgiver, Milton asks, how much more unworthy is it for a divine one? And what would Plato have said if, as some argue, one decree should be called lawful and another unlawful to be done (236).¹¹¹ Whatever he may think about specific laws laid down by Plato, Milton is willing to accept at least some of Plato's principles concerning what law is and what it is for.

On matters of law and nature Milton accepts Platonic authority more overtly. The best example of this is also in *Doctrine and Discipline*, where he insists that divorce should be a matter tried by conscience rather than by law. A large part of his support for

¹¹¹ The decrees he means here are divorce under Moses' law and divorce under Christian law.

this claim lies in his argument that the causes of divorce often lie in “radical and innocent affections of nature.” There are certain natural feelings, he says, which law cannot handle because they are in a sense beyond the reach of law. For a fuller discussion of this issue he directs us to Plato, saying the idea that law could change nature from its course “was an error in Callicles the rhetorician, whom Socrates from high principles confutes in Plato’s *Gorgias*” (PWJM III, 265-6).

In his treatise *Of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* (1659) the true significance and import of distinguishing between matters of religion and matters of civil prudence is suggested by an interesting Platonic echo. Milton’s preface to Parliament praises the members of that body for attempting to reason why and how civil and religious matters ought to be distinguished. Whoever heard them might well be convinced, he says, that

both commonwealth and religion will at length, if ever flourish in Christendom, when either they who govern discern between civil and religious, or they only who so discern shall be admitted to govern. Till then nothing but troubles, persecutions, commotions can be expected. (CPW III, 240)

Perhaps he gives too much credit to Parliament here, speaking more of what he would wish for them to be and do. Nevertheless, the echo of Plato’s formula concerning the conjunction of political power and philosophic mind—particularly as found in *Republic* 473c, which includes the claim that there will be no end of trouble for cities until then—is quite clear.

This echo or allusion underscores Milton’s hopes for England’s new commonwealth. It also suggests what is, in Milton’s view, a more fundamental political problem: determining in which matters reason alone is the best guide and in which divine prescript and the conscience instead should take the lead. Milton may echo the Platonic

idea in expressing the importance of making this distinction, but it is clear from his understanding of religion that neither Plato nor any other pagan philosopher can be of use in drawing it. He defines matters of religion as of two kinds: first, as things belonging chiefly to the knowledge and service of God which lie beyond the light of nature—and thus may be variably understood by reason; second, as things enjoined or forbidden by divine prescript though to reason alone they may seem indifferent (CPW III, 242).

The same link between Plato's political thought and Milton's distinction between civil and religious matters can also be seen in his account of discipline in *Church-Government*. After insisting that nothing is of greater importance throughout the life of man than discipline, Milton observes that even in the guidance of merely civil states with an eye only on worldly happiness discipline is of the greatest importance. In such states, discipline is the work of those who know themselves, who combine contemplation and practice, wit, prudence, fortitude, and eloquence—all to comprehend the hidden causes of things and span in thought all the effects that the passions can work upon man's nature. Those who would frame discipline in matters of purely civil states have their hands guided towards something other than gain and their hearts heroic in all virtues (CPW I, 751-3).¹¹² This is why the ancient lawgivers either were inspired, as Moses was, or had authority to give out that they were.

The *Laws*, I think, provides us valuable insight into Milton's concept of discipline. Near the beginning of book II, the Athenian says that it is through sensations of pleasures and pains that ideas of what is good and bad first come to the soul. Wisdom and opinion come later, and more rarely, to men. The goodness that first comes to

¹¹² Cf the Athenian's assertion in *Law* IV: "But in truth legislation and the settlement of States are tasks that require men perfect above all other men in goodness" (708d).

children is what he calls education, and when pleasures and pains spring up rightly in children—who cannot yet grasp the rational basis for them—and when after grasping the rational account they consent to it, then he says that children have been properly trained or disciplined in fitting practices. He uses choristry as an analogy to education, as part of it is concerned with voice and its rhythms and harmonies, and another part with bodily motions and gestures. The good legislator will arrange for these to be good and in accord with one another.

Milton's reading in *Laws* may lie behind his characterization of discipline as “a kind of visible shape to divine things, and to virtue” (CPW I, 751). He seems to imply a similar division into voice and bodily motion when he distinguishes public preaching as the gift of the Spirit and discipline as the “practic work of preaching directed and applied...to particular duty” (755-6). It may also be implied in his description of those who in household management are unable to regulate the composure of their minds or rightly to order the body so as to make it more pliant to the soul (754). The importance of making the healing or cure of the soul particular to discipline echoes the suggestion at the end of *Laws* I that the discovery of the natures and conditions of men's souls is one of the most important things for any art which proposes to treat men's souls. In *Laws*, though, that art is the art of politics.

Milton seems to engage in a correction or modification of Plato. He identifies two kinds of cure or punishment which Providence has left to man, as opposed to the state or the art of politics alone: the Church and the Magistrate. While in *Laws*, *Republic*, and elsewhere Plato takes for granted that the magistrate is concerned as such with the soul of man, Milton insists that the magistrate deals only with the outward part of man—with the

body and the mind only in its outward acts. In *Laws* II the Athenian presents two cases: a man who can with gesture and voice always represent what he conceives to be good though he feels neither delight in the good nor hatred of the bad, and a man who is unable entirely to represent his conception but is correct in his feelings of pain and pleasure. Clinias notes there is a “vast difference between the two cases...in point of education” (654d).

For Milton, the magistrate will not concern himself with this difference. He examines only the outward man for signs of injustice, cruelty and such, and tries to cure him. His goal is the outward peace and welfare of the commonwealth. He may use force, but the civil magistrate works only on the outer part of man and also only on the outward sores of evil. He does not touch upon the causes thereof (CPW I, 835-6). God adds something to the power of the civil magistrate: the power of censure to purge and clean the inner man, the soul. Interestingly enough, Milton locates this power of censure initially—in historical terms—in the father of the family, then among in the heathen in “wise men and philosophers of the age,” and finally in the Gospel in the straight and clear covenant between God and man. The preservation of the healthy constitution of the inner man passes to the minister of each congregation. The minister, being best acquainted with his flock, is most likely to know the particular diseases of its members and how to cure them (836-7). Milton retains the metaphorical relation, favored by Plato, between the art of the physician and the political art. But Milton also insists upon a separation of powers which cannot be found in Plato (though he does have a notion of the power of cleansing the soul). This separation is matched by a separation in enforcement. Milton accepts the ancients’ view that the governance of man requires both force and persuasion (cf *Laws* IV

718b) but carefully assigns one power each to his two magistrates while denying them access to the other.¹¹³

One more speculative case concerning Plato and politics involves divorce and revolution. The idea that marriage is analogous to political life is commonplace in political philosophy, but it is notable in Plato. And given that Milton himself refers to learning much about love from Plato he is unlikely to have missed this analogy. Marriage is an exclusive contract which demands fidelity. For Plato, loyalty to a regime or state is also contractual. Both marriage and the state have roots in human needs, but though they may begin in need each is continued so that man may live the good life. Eros is the appetite which gives rise to marriage, and if—as seems to be the case in *Republic*—it is also a fit instrument for controlling most men, then it is of no little importance in politics as well. Persuasion is basic to political life, but the statesman has no means of persuasion unless there is gratitude in the citizens and care from the ruler.¹¹⁴

In *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, Milton insists that if marriage is not fit and tolerable it is not inseparable either by nature or by institution. The causes of marriage often reside in radical and innocent affections of nature which law as such cannot handle. Man and woman have an ancient and natural love which seeks only to join itself to what is good and to separate itself from what is disagreeable. To hinder a reasonable soul from such separation is bad enough, but to interpose the power of law on the “inward and irremediable disposition of man” and think to command love is worse still (PWJM III,

¹¹³ This is even clearer in *The Christian Doctrine*, where the civil power is said to have dominion only over the body and external faculties of man, while the ecclesiastical power is exercised exclusively on the faculties of the mind (CPW VI, 436).

¹¹⁴ For a fuller development of these ideas see White, 181-2; for their expression in Plato see *Republic* 369b ff, 420c ff, 458d.

265-6, and see also 246-7). In short, Milton's idea of the marriage contract, as expressed here, is not far different from Plato's.

Next, it is evident that Milton considered loyalty to the regime or state as also contractual. In *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) he insists that all men are naturally born free, but subsequent to Adam's fall they found it necessary to agree "by common league to bind each other from mutual injury and for joint defense." From this agreement towns, cities, and commonwealths arose (CPW III, 199). Covenants are always made according to the state of things at a given time with "the more general laws of nature and reason included in them, though not expressed" (232). The liberty with which men made covenant with one another to found this or that particular political body remains fundamentally with the people (202).

I suspect that, based on his reading of Plato, Milton came to see a similar and analogous relation between marriage and the state. Thus, when he came to champion political liberty and the right of people to dissolve one government and form a new one which better answered their needs, he found a need also to champion the much less popular cause of divorce. If there is an analogy between the two institutions, it is consistent for one who holds the one to be dissolvable should its reason for continuance (the good life) disappear, to hold that the other is for the same reason also dissolvable. In theory, a commitment to divorce implies a commitment also to revolutionary politics, and vice versa.

Plato and Moral Virtue

Remove their swelling epithets, thick-laid
As varnish on a harlot's cheek, the rest,
Thin-sown with aught of profit or delight,

Will be found unworthy to compare
With Sion's songs, to all true tastes excelling,
Where God is praised aright and godlike men...
Unless where moral virtue is expressed
By light of Nature, not in all quite lost.
(*Paradise Regained* IV.343-52)

Jesus' judgment of classical poetry in these lines is not far removed from Milton's judgment of Plato and his worth. Moral virtue is on his mind in *Smectymnus* when he describes how in his later years his "ceaseless round of study led...to the shady spaces of philosophy; but chiefly to the divine volumes of Plato and his equal Xenophon." The context of these words is the argument that even if Milton had learned nothing of Christian goodness his natural inclination and study of moral philosophy—exemplified, among other things, by his reading of Plato and Xenophon—would have kept him from being the dissolute, degenerate man his opponent accuses him of being. Milton is claiming that even his purely secular studies demonstrate his inclination to moral virtue.

As More before him, Milton often uses Plato to establish a high moral baseline which Christians ought to exceed or at least meet. This is the case in *Tetrachordon* (1645). During his examination of the *Genesis* passage on marriage (which presents it as intended for propagation) Milton argues,

we should be no less zealous in our religion than Plato
was in his heathenism when he in the sixth book of his
Laws counts offspring desirable in that we may leave
in our place sons of our sons as continual servants of
God. (PWJM III, 328)

The passage Milton refers to, *Laws* 773e, presents this view of offspring as the kind of exhortation legislators should make to encourage marriages which benefit the state. The implication in Milton's use of it is that if Plato takes such care for an institution which has an eye primarily on worldly advantage—the benefit of the state—why should

Christians not take equal care with an eye on the Kingdom of Heaven. Milton calls Plato's desire here "religious and prudent...if people knew as well what were required to breeding as to begetting" (328). Given his many references to this dialogue Milton was certainly familiar with the extensive account of proper "breeding" made in the earlier books. By including the reference to *Laws* Milton indicates that he considers "propagation" of mankind to mean more than mere increase in numbers.

A similar case occurs in the second book of *Reason of Church-Government*, when Milton considers the manner in which a Minister attends to someone's spiritual cure. The Minister, he insists, does not assault the prosperity of this life but attends to the root causes of ignorance and malice. To this end the Minister has two "divine ingredients of most cleansing power to the soul, Admonition and Reproof." A man who will not let these two ingredients pass into him, even if he were the greatest king, "as Plato affirms, must be thought to remain impure within" (CPW I, 846). In a book which tends to eschew classical authorities such a reference stands out all the more.

Milton is referring here to *Sophist*, particularly the conclusion at 230d-e that "cross-questioning" (Milton's "reproof") is the "greatest and most efficacious of all purifications [of soul], and that he who is not cross-questioned, even though he be the Great King, has not been purified of the greatest taints." The passage which precedes this one also appears in Milton's account, since at 229 the Stranger identifies two kinds of instruction for the soul: admonition, which is gentler and appropriate for, say, fathers with their sons; and the more severe cross-questioning. Likewise, Milton imagines brethren and friends engaging with church Elders in admonition, but if this should fail, reproof and, ultimately, removal from Christian fellowship is permitted.

Although Milton's primary concern here is with morality, this use of Plato shows the possibility of overlap in the categories of Political and Theological Platonism which I have used. Ficino, too, found Plato's accounts of the proper purification of the soul interesting and valuable to consider. The main difference between the uses of Plato in such cases lies in the greater gap writers such as Milton perceive between Plato's ideas and what a Christian should believe. Consider, for example, the difficulty which Theaetetus and the Stranger have in *Sophist* in identifying the practitioner of the arts of admonition and reproof (*Sophist* 231-3). Milton identifies them with the Minister and calls them not arts but "divine ingredients"—suggesting that knowledge of principles is insufficient for the practitioner without the help of a certain divine grace.

Milton also follows the pattern of use and immediate qualification, noted above in his political and civic thought, in his application of Plato to moral matters. In *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1644), he argues that human marriage must be something more than copulation and remaining together afterwards. Even animals can be said to "marry" in this fashion. Instead, its dignity and blessing must lie in the "mutual enjoyment of that which the wanting soul needfully seeks, that of that which the plenteous body would joyfully give away" (PWJM III, 192-3). To illustrate this, he uses Socrates' account in *Symposium* of Love being the child of Penury and Plenty begotten in the garden of Jupiter. This account he says is confirmed—and I would add interpreted—by Moses' teaching, that Love was the son of Loneliness, begotten in paradise by that social and helpful attitude which God implanted in man and woman toward each other.

In presenting the Platonic account and its Mosaic correction Milton both gains the support of Plato's authority and indicates his divergence from him. In *Symposium*,

Diotima explains that love is more than desire for bodily union, as Milton too argues. The desire for bodily union is certainly characteristic of the relations between men and women, but the desires of love may also take place not in the body but in the soul. This second way involves the begetting of prudence and moral virtue (cf 209a-d). Diotima characterizes this second way as a thing found between men. The *trattati d'amore* Christianized this account by connecting the latter form of love to the love of the divine which one might find in another. Milton does this but also domesticates Diotima's account by linking the second kind of love to the original relationship between man and woman.

The same pattern appears later in the same work when Milton addresses the charge laid against Protestants that the doctrine of predestination is tantamount to accusing God as the author of sin. In defense of Protestantism Milton points to "the doctrine of Plato and Chrysippus, and their followers, the Academics and Stoic, [who] held that virtue and vice were the gifts of divine destiny" (223-4).¹¹⁵ The examples work in this context because, as he continues, though these philosophers knew nothing of Adam and his native innocence, they still did not find reasons for mortals to blame God and fate for their destinies. Milton's argument is that if philosophers using reason alone did not hold that God's foreknowledge absolved men of guilt for their actions, then those who by revelation know of Adam and original sin have must less reason to argue thus.

In the same work, in the chapter discussing Moses' first institution of divorce, Milton also states as "the constant opinion of Plato in *Protagoras*, and other of his

¹¹⁵ Though Milton presents this as the view of a number of the ancients, in Plato's case one could point to passages such as the one in *Laws* IV, where the Athenian notes that it is a problem for the lawgiver that human affairs seem almost to be governed by pure chance. Another way of viewing this, he says, is that God controls all that is, and that Chance and Occasion cooperate with God in the control of all human affairs (709a-c).

dialogues...that ‘no man is wicked willingly’” (239). He marshals this opinion for his attack on the view that Moses’ law permitted but did not approve of divorce. Such a view is tantamount to saying that Moses’ law permitted something evil to be done. If something is not to be done, he argues, it should be put down and not encouraged. Even Plato and the Greeks understood this (239-40).

***Paradise Lost* and Milton’s Reading of Plato**

Plato is not mentioned in *Paradise Lost*, but his influence may well be visible in Milton’s description of human being and human virtue. The description of man in book VII, for instance, calls him a creature “endu’d / With Sanctity of Reason...[able to] Govern the rest, self-knowing, and from thence / Magnanimous to correspond with Heav’n, / But grateful to acknowledge whence his good / Descends” (ll. 507-12). Whether directly from Plato or not, Milton certainly falls into the Platonic tradition in seeing self-knowledge and the governance of reason as critical to governing oneself and others. “Sanctity of Reason” is a particularly interesting phrase, since Genesis I and II emphasize the will and activity of God and the combination of earth (or dust, *adamah*) and divine breath (breath or spirit, *neshamah*) which makes up man. After the Fall, when Adam is angered at the sight of tyranny shown to him by Michael, Michael tells him that such troubles are bound to come to man now that true liberty has been lost. Liberty, he explains, “always with right Reason dwells,” but “Reason in man obscur’d or not obey’d, / Immediately inordinate desires / And upstart Passions catch the Government / from Reason” (XII, ll. 86-9). Not only is tyranny identified with the rule of passion as opposed to the rule of reason, but Michael’s argument presents tyranny as an outward expression of the human soul permitting unworthy powers to rule over reason—that is, he sees

political conditions as in some sense a reflection of the condition of the soul (cf *Republic* II).

Raphael's warnings also have a certain Platonic ring, given that the terms he uses suggest rational control of appetite and desire. In book VII, Raphael tells Adam and Eve to "govern well thy appetite, lest sin / Surprise thee" (ll. 546-7); his last warning to Adam in book VIII tells him to "take heed, lest Passion sway / Thy Judgment to do aught, which else free Will / Would not admit" (ll. 635-7). Adam, though, suggests in his warning to Eve that reason itself might be deceived. For something which appears to be good might lead the reason to dictate false and misinform the will "to do what God expressly hath forbid" (IX, ll. 356).

But *Paradise Lost* also contains passages which suggest limits to the use of human reason which can scarcely be found in Plato. In book VIII we see Adam grant that Raphael has revealed wisdom to him which his reason alone could not attain. He thanks him for allaying "the thirst I had of knowledge" (l. 7) with things "else by me unsearchable" (l. 10). He still has questions about nature and its workings, however. Raphael suggests that God may have concealed secrets so that man might not learn the truth but instead learn to admire the creation. God's ways, he adds, are inscrutable to human sense, for God has

Plac'd Heaven from Earth so far, that earthly sight
If it presume, might err in things too high
And no advantage gain. (VIII, ll. 120-2)

He asks Adam to leave certain thought to God and instead be "lowly wise: / Think only what concerns thee and thy being" (ll. 173-4). Adam seems to agree when he observes that the Mind or Fancy, when left unchecked, is apt to rove widely with no end to its

searches. The end comes when the mind learns that prime Wisdom is to know “that which before us lies in daily life” rather than things remote from use, obscure, and subtle (ll. 191-3). In the temptation scene with Eve, Satan as the serpent seems to praise the Tree for granting him the powers Raphael has just warned Adam about. He tells Eve that after perceiving the growth of reason within himself and gaining the power of thought and speech, “Thenceforth to speculations high or deep / I turned my thoughts” and began to consider all the visible things of the earth—that is, to nature (IX, ll. 602-3 ff). When he gives his “classical oration” in praise of the Tree, he lauds it for giving him the power to know the nature of things, to “discern / Things in their causes” and trace “the ways / Of highest Agents, deem’d however wise” (ll. 681-3).

Reason is not the ultimate source of authority. As Adam puts it earlier in book IX, “best are all things as the will / Of God ordain’d them” (ll. 343-4). Thus, the Fall is due not only to failure to govern appetite but also to failure to govern reason. Eve reasons out her decision, as we see when she thinks that God implies praise of the Tree by forbidding it—and that such forbidding infers both its good and human want (ll. 753-7). Her reasoning *per se* is not wrong, but she is replacing one set of principles with another. That is, she takes good and evil (or perhaps good and bad) to be things one infers rather than as divinely ordained. If one assumes that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are what God says they are, it is impossible for God’s forbidding something to “infer” its good. But Eve doubts that principle in the light of the serpent’s speech. In its place she substitutes one of her own reasoning. Thought alone does not make the Fall—the eating of the apple, a concrete action, does that—but once revealed principles are set aside for humanly-derived ones, one suspects that the action was inevitable.

These passages from *Paradise Lost* provide some insight into Milton's more direct references to Plato. We can see a couple of objections implied. First, Plato's picture of the well-ordered soul and its application to political affairs has a certain truth and value to it. Multiple passages suggest that reason should properly govern human appetite and that when this does not happen, unhappiness and tyranny are the results. But Plato's picture cannot be perfect, for Milton, because it does not tell the whole story of the human soul. Sin and error can come from reason, too—not just unruly appetite. Thus, there is a certain justification for Jesus' argument in *Paradise Regained* that the ancient philosophers go awry on the soul because they don't know how man fell, by his own fault, and requires grace for salvation.

Second, knowledge is not an unqualified good. It might be difficult to puzzle out precisely which investigations Milton thought were “too high” for human speculation, but by suggesting that, in principle, there are such investigations, he shows he does not entirely accept the philosophical project.¹¹⁶ In the first chapter I referred to Jesus in *Paradise Regained* objecting to Plato's fables and conceits. Raphael's warning to Adam might also be a clue to this objection: namely, in matters “too high” for speculation, such as the vision of the gods or of the highest good, human speculation—even, perhaps, in the form of stories and fables—is apt to lead one astray. But when Raphael advises Adam to be “lowly wise” and concern himself with matters of his daily life we can see a hint of how Milton did make use of Plato. Politics, education, moral virtue—these are all concerns of daily life. These are also concerns in which Milton throughout his life continued to turn to Plato for assistance.

¹¹⁶ Namely, the free inquiry into all the Beings with the goal of replacing opinions about them with the truth. Of course, the philosophers do not necessarily claim that a human mind could ever accomplish such a thing.

Reflections

Milton's relation to the classics and Plato in many ways resembles More's. Though classical philosophy might be mistaken about the true end of politics or about the soul, it retained value for men both as a sometime guide to moral life and as an excellent training ground for reason and virtue. With Milton, though, the absence of a single Church providing a stable body of scriptural interpretation necessitates a broad and serious training for the reason of all men, or at least as many as possible.¹¹⁷ Further, Milton's commitment to a more self-governing or republican society led him naturally to the classics as the best theorists at the time of republican or mixed government (cf Berns 440-1, 444-5). Thus the classics and Plato are, if anything, more urgent for Milton than they were for More—though of course they remain secondary to familiarity with the Bible. The classics are useful for training reason and preparing the soul for virtue, but Milton's Protestantism and republican hopes require that their training and preparation be followed more seriously and extensively than before.¹¹⁸

Milton expressly rejects the use of the classics, Plato included, for most of the purposes to which Theological Platonists such as Ficino put them. Plato is of little interest to Milton as a "theologian" or a poet of the soul. But in matters human rather than divine, such as politics, moral virtue, rhetoric, and the like, he looks to Plato and others for what wisdom and guidance they offered him. This division, though, is not absolute. For many writers, Milton included, divine and human matters were so intertwined that

¹¹⁷ Cf the epistle to *The Christian Doctrine* (CPW VI, 118), where Milton observes that God "demands of us that any man who wishes to be saved should work out his beliefs for himself," and More's argument in *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* regarding "if a man is to perceive what he should believe."

¹¹⁸ Thus it is no accident that perhaps More's finest expression of his classical education, the *Utopia*, is written in Latin and addressed to a broadly educated audience, while Milton writes the vast majority of his prose in English and directs it to a fairly broad—though of course still educated—audience.

one could not—and should not—speak of the one without some reference to the other. Thus, even in his account of the Minister's art he can turn to Plato's words on the purification of the soul in *Sophist* for guidance.

Whatever his interest in the classics, though, Milton's ultimate commitment was to revelation, not reason alone. For this reason he frequently and repeatedly places the wisdom and guidance of the ancients under the "determinate sentence" of the Bible and his own conscience. It is with the classics foremost in mind that his Jesus asserts that those who read books without bringing to them a spirit and judgment equal or superior will always remain uncertain and unsettled, deep-versed in books but shallow in themselves (IV, ll. 322-7). Still, Milton's own estimation of the high value of Plato remains evident throughout his works—perhaps best illustrated by his simple synecdoche illustrating how a particular can be expressed by the genus, "as the Poet for Homer or Vergil, the Philosopher for Aristotle or Plato, and the like" (CPW VIII, 337).

General Conclusion

The essential difference between Renaissance Englishmen who made use of Plato and Plato himself can be illustrated by a simple observation. In *Republic*, the discussion of justice runs through the religious festival, through dinner, and through the night. Discourses and arguments in a way take the place of the ordinary physical needs of food and sleep. In the works I have discussed above, that never happens. The discussion of *Utopia* is broken off both for the Mass and for dinner. The speeches of Starkey's *Dialogue* are broken off for dinner as well. In Elyot's dialogue, Plato offers to break off into a pleasant digression to give Aristippus some much-needed respite from the argument. One can find this pattern also in the discussion between Adam and Raphael in

Paradise Lost, which is accompanied by a repast—along with Milton’s insistence that angels, too, have bodies and thus require a sort of sustenance as well. Even metaphorically, words and speeches never take the place of physical needs.

This is not because English writers were simply and primarily practical thinkers, or because they were incapable of abstract thought—as an earlier generation of scholars might have argued. To be sure, many Englishmen did prefer practical concerns, and many, too, could be impatient with or intolerant towards abstract flights of the mind. But for people who believe in the incarnation of a God or who look to the literal resurrection of the flesh, Plato’s understanding of Being and Becoming or of the difference between body and soul is not entirely acceptable without some qualification.¹¹⁹ The efforts of philosophers such as Ficino and Pico indicate that such qualifications could be made, but many English writers remained cool to such approaches—particularly when compared with their counterparts in Italy or France.

In areas of thought where reason alone had more say—liberal education, politics, moral virtue—English writers seem more receptive towards Plato. Though he does not seem to have been entirely or enthusiastically embraced, his dialogues become interesting sites for vigorous intellectual wrestling over the meaning of human affairs. What many saw as Plato’s greater concern for religion in such matters, as compared with Aristotle, seems to have appealed to English writers more than any specific theological principles.

The rapturous speech of Cardinal Bembo in book IV of Castiglione’s *Courtier* is sometimes taken as a kind of high-water mark for Renaissance Platonism in the Ficinian

¹¹⁹ Bacon’s case is a bit different, but one can see the seeds for similar objections to Plato in, say, *Of Principles and Origins*, where he complains that philosophers do not take their principles from things as found in nature and by experience, and objects that the human mind is not entirely trustworthy when it comes to universals (PWFB 648).

manner. His lovely description of the wonders of transcendent, divine love certainly recalls something of the speech of Diotima from *Symposium* as well as—to a greater extent—Ficino’s own version of that dialogue in his “commentary.” But if Bembo at the close of the speech, with his eyes gazing towards heaven as if astonished, is an example of Ficinian Platonism, Lady Emilia’s response may well be an example of the English approach. She takes the cardinal by the hem of his garment and asks him to take heed that his thoughts not make his soul forsake his body. With a gentle joke and a polite request that Bembo continue his speech she seems to exemplify the preference so many English writers evince for civil, polite conversation over raptures and astonishment.

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