Plato’s *Phaedo* as a Pedagogical Drama

Sarah Jansen

The *Phaedo* has long been recognized as dramatic in nature (see, e.g., Jowett 1892, 193). Indeed, the dialogue’s dramatic portrayal of a Herculean Socrates attacking the heads of a Hydra naturally invites this assessment (89c). At the outset of the dialogue Socrates and the fourteen named companions are juxtaposed with Theseus and the fourteen Athenian youth, on their way to defeat the Minotaur (58a-c). Also, Socrates’ death scene is particularly dramatic. Fifteen companions, the exact number of a tragic chorus, surround the dying Socrates and lament (117c-d). Reflection on this scene has prompted scholars to speculate that it is intended to ‘lend moving force’ to the tragic perspective and to ‘rouse’ readers’ emotions (see Halliwell 1984, 57-58 and Crotty 2009, 87, respectively).

Despite these scholarly observations and compelling evidence that the dialogues were treated as dramatic performance literature in antiquity (see Charalabopoulos 2012), a number of key questions have yet to be satisfactorily and systematically answered: What is drama?; What is the *Phaedo* a drama about?; What is the function, if any, of the dramatic elements of the *Phaedo*? I undertake to answer these questions. I conclude with some thoughts about Plato’s purpose in writing dramatic dialogues and Plato’s attitude toward poetry. One of my aims throughout will be to demonstrate how a proper understanding of the literary dimension of the *Phaedo* sheds light on the philosophical content of the dialogue.

I. Defining Drama

Blondell 2002, 16 defines drama as the imaginative presentation of persons and acts, where the authorial voice is ‘suppressed’. Drama is ‘imaginative’ insofar as it represents persons and acts *as imagined* by the author. So, for instance, a courtroom transcript is not a drama but a record.

Blondell 2002, esp. 16 seeks confirmation of her definition in the views of Plato and Aristotle, the intellectual forbears of our modern notion of ‘drama’. According to Plato and Aristotle, poetry represents persons in action (*Republic* 603c3-4, *Poetics* 1448a1-2); and dramatic poetry is poetry absent authorial narration (*Rep.* 394b-c, *Poet.* 1448a19-24). In *Republic* iii the dramatic poet is said ‘to assimilate’ (ὁμοιοῦσθαι) his speech to each character, speaking ‘as’ (ὡς) him or her (393b-c, 394c). He ‘impersonates’ rather than ‘narrates’; that is to say, he uses

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1 Klein 1985 compellingly argues that the Minotaur represents the companions’ fear of death, which Socrates attempts to slay. In my view, Socrates battles this and other dangers.

2 In addition to the 14 companions named at 59b-c, Crito was present. See Crotty 2009, 66.
his voice and figure to imitate characters (393b). In like manner, Aristotle
describes the dramatist as ‘becoming someone other’ (ἐτερόν τι γραμμόμενον)
(1448a21-22). The tragic dramatist imitates human action by representing
humans doing (δρόντον) rather than ‘through a report’ (δυ’ ἀπαγγέλλως,
1449b26-27). So, for example, Oedipus Rex is dramatic in form because Sopho-
cles imaginatively represents (rather than records) persons doing things, and the
playwright impersonates (rather than narrates) the speech of Oedipus, Jocasta,
Tiresias, and others.

To be sure, this conception of the playwright as an ‘impersonator’ is the arti-
fact of an earlier age, when poetry was commonly composed and transmitted
orally, through performances. For our purposes drama presents characters, their
speech and their actions ‘directly’, rather than ‘through’ the narration of the
author. As Blondell 2002, esp. 17 points out, every Platonic dialogue is ‘dramatic
in form’, because every Platonic dialogue imaginatively represents persons in
action, doing philosophy. Plato directly presents persons in action (as opposed to
narrating).

Plato and Aristotle also adhere to the criterion that drama be about people, in
the strong sense enunciated above. For example, Aristotle distinguishes tragedy
from comedy on the basis of the sorts of characters each represents; tragedy rep-
resents characters who are ‘better than ourselves,’ and comedy represents charac-
ters who are ‘worse than ourselves’ (1448a15-17). And Plato criticizes Greek
poets for imitating the multicolored (πολυχρόν) and irritable character rather than
the rational and quiet character (Rep. 604d-e). Indeed, the supposition that dra-
matic poetry portrays personalities (and not just persons) underpins the censor-
ship program of Republic ii-iii, which revolves around the kinds of characters
poets represent. Moreover, in addition to representing characters, the dramatic
poet represents actions that are of practical significance to the agent(s). So, in
Republic x 603c4-6 Socrates says that poets imitate persons in action, ‘who
believe that, as a result of these actions, they are doing either well or badly and
who experience either pleasure or pain in all of this’.3

Given the criterion that drama be about people, it is no surprise that drama
nearly always engages (or intends to engage) our emotions. We come to care for
the characters, whose personalities and lives enter our imaginations. Indeed, both
Plato and Aristotle devote considerable attention to this emotional dimension of
drama, especially with regard to tragedy (e.g., Rep. 605c-d, 606a-b; Poet.
1449b21-29, 1452a4). In sum, drama is the imaginative and direct presentation of
persons, their characters and their actions, where said actions matter within the
larger context of the characters’ lives. Drama also typically arouses the emotions
of audiences.

What of the performance aspects of drama, like music, dance, or meter? Althou-
gh Plato and Aristotle associate meter, melody, and dance with Greek dra-

3 Throughout I use the Grube and Reeve 1992 translation of the Republic and the Grube 1977
translation of the Phaedo.
matic poetry, neither philosopher conceives of these features as essential to dramatic poetry. Aristotle assumes that meter and melody are mere ‘pleasurable accessories’ (ήδυσοματα, 1449b26, 1450b16-17). He adds that tragic drama accomplishes its effect whether it is performed or privately read (1450b16-20, 1462a11-17); the ‘spectacle’ (ὁψίς) is not the aim of tragedy (1450b16-20). In like manner, Plato refers to meter and melody as mere ‘musical colorings’, obscuring the true nature of a poem (Rep. 601a-b).

II. The Phaedo as Drama

a. Socrates the Poet

Does the Phaedo qualify as drama in our sense? The dialogue invites this question, insofar as it represents Socrates as both a philosopher and a poet. In order to appreciate the sense in which the Socrates of the Phaedo practices both poetry and philosophy, we must first examine the Phaedo’s characterization of the poet. Early on in 61b3, Socrates refers to the poet as a ‘teller of tales’ (μυθολογικός); Socrates declares that ‘a poet, if he is to be a poet, must compose stories (μύθοιος), not arguments (λόγοι)’. Socrates playfully pleads that he is not a μυθολογικός in order to placate the poet Eunus, who fears that Socrates seeks to rival him (60c-61b). However, in the same Stephanus page Socrates proposes ‘to tell tales’ (μυθολογεῖν) about the afterlife (61e2). Moreover, when Socrates is about to die, he makes good on his proposal, telling an elaborate ‘tale’ (μύθοις, 114d6) about the blessings awaiting the philosopher in the afterlife (107d-114c). Socrates even likens himself to a swan on the verge of death, who sings about the blessings of the afterlife, having received the gift of prophecy from Apollo (84e-85b). The clear implication is that Socrates’ eschatological myth is the poetic ‘swan song’ of Socrates, qua servant of Apollo.4

However, it is not immediately obvious why Socrates should practice poetry in his final moments. After all, at the outset of the dialogue in 61a2, Socrates famously remarks that philosophy, not poetry, is the highest μουσική (Muse-inspired art).5 Also, while Socrates’ myth is, no doubt, inspired by his philosophical vision, it is not philosophy proper, which the dialogue represents as the committed search for truth through argument (65b-d). Having devoted the majority of the day to philosophy proper (i.e., the arguments for the immortality of the soul), Socrates now practices the popular μουσική of poetry. Why?

Answering this question requires that we pay close attention to the beginning of the dialogue, especially 60e-61b. Therein, Socrates claims that he has, of late, composed poetry in response to a recurring dream, which bids him to practice and cultivate μουσική. Socrates explains that he had always assumed that μουσική referred to the μουσική of philosophy, this being the ‘highest μουσική’ (60e5-61a3). However, just in case the dream had actually been bid-
ding him to practice the ‘popular μουσική’ of poetry, Socrates takes it upon himself to compose hymns to Apollo and versifications of Aesop’s fables in his final days (61a-b). Therefore, it seems likely that the eschatological myth—Socrates’ Apollonian ‘swan song’—is a continuation of this project. Having devoted his last day to the highest μουσική of philosophy, Socrates now returns to the popular μουσική of poetry, in order to convince himself that he has obeyed the dream. In so doing, Socrates the philosopher becomes Socrates the poet—a philosophically inspired μυθολογία of the highest order. Again, it is noteworthy that in one of Plato’s most poetic, dramatic dialogues Socrates engages in both poetry and philosophy. Might Socrates’ preoccupation with poetry in the Phaedo reflect Plato’s own preoccupation with poetry qua author of the Phaedo? In explicitly indicating his own absence from the depicted events and setting up Socrates as a sort of mythical Theseus, Plato invites us to read the entire dialogue as a poetic myth or fable of Socrates.

And indeed, the Phaedo is dramatic in form. The Phaedo is an imaginative presentation of persons, absent authorial narration. The Phaedo is not a transcript of Socrates’ death, since Plato was not present (59b8). Also, Plato does not narrate the exchange between Phaedo and Echekrates but ‘speaks’ as Phaedo and as Echekrates. Moreover, Phaedo, in recounting Socrates’ last day, speaks as each character, with the result that we read the speech of Simmias and Cebes directly.

However, is the Phaedo drama simpliciter? Specifically, does the Phaedo represent the characters and actions of persons, where those actions are of practical significance to the interlocutors? Also, does the dialogue appeal to our emotions? In what follows, I shall answer both questions in the affirmative. Not only does my interpretation of the Phaedo resolve interpretive difficulties commonly associated with the Phaedo, it will also have important implications for two crucial areas of Plato scholarship, namely, Plato’s practice as author and Plato’s attitude toward poetry.

b. The Dramatic Structure of the Phaedo

Nussbaum 1986 (revised edition, 2001), 131 observes:

There are, of course, Platonic dialogues in which something humanly moving is taking place: the Crito and the Phaedo are obvious cases. In these dialogues the initial reaction of certain interlocutors is to feel grief or pity. But the dialogue explicitly teaches that these are immature and unhelpful responses. Xanthippe weeps and is escorted out of the room (60A). Socrates reproves Apollodorus for his womanish tears (117D); we are supposed to apply his reprimand to ourselves. Phaedo repeatedly insists that he felt no pity (58E, 59A); nor should we. Socrates leads the interlocutors on from the personal to the general, from the emotional to the intellectual; so the dialogue

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6 In his last days in taking up poetry, Socrates shows himself willing to call his whole life into question.
leads us on. The action of the Phaedo is not the death of Socrates; it is the committed pursuit of the truth about the soul.

In it Socrates shows us how to rise above tragedy to inquiry. Nussbaum 1992, 126 contrasts Xanthippe and Apollodorus to Socrates: ‘Socrates the hero, by contrast, confidently pursues the search for understanding; and the “drama” in question becomes the drama of argumentation, to be pursued by the intellect alone’ (see Tarrant 1955 for an earlier version of this view). Nussbaum has two points: (1) the Phaedo is intended to engage the intellect, not the emotions and (2) the ‘drama’ and ‘action’ of the Phaedo consists in abstract dialectic irrespective of personal, practical consequences. Hence, on our definition of drama, the Phaedo would not qualify as drama, since (a) the true ‘action’ of the Phaedo (i.e., argument) is not of practical importance (see Kuhn 1941, 25-26 for an earlier version of this view) and (b) the dialogue discourages emotional responses. In what follows I counter both of Nussbaum’s points. I argue that the action of the Phaedo is of the deepest practical importance to the lives of the interlocutors. In the process I uncover the dramatic structure of the dialogue, as well as the nature of its emotional appeal.

To uncover the dramatic structure of the Phaedo we must consider what is at stake in the dialogue and for whom. A number of scholars go wrong insofar as they assume that what is at stake in the dialogue must be at stake for Socrates, despite Socrates’ relative equanimity throughout the dialogue.7 However, the ‘drama’ of the Phaedo revolves around the plight of Socrates’ companions. When Socrates is about to die, the companions dwell on the great misfortune (σοφοφρονία) that has befallen them (116a). And, as Socrates expires, Phaedo weeps not for Socrates but for himself at his own τύχη of being deprived of such a companion (117c-d). It is noteworthy that Echekrates expresses sympathy for the companions, not Socrates (88c). Even Xanthippe pities the companions first and Socrates second, when she shrieks and says, ‘Socrates, this is the last time your friends will talk to you and you to them’ (60a5-6). In sharp contrast, Socrates staunchly refuses to regard his death as a great evil and either dismisses or corrects those who feel otherwise (84d-e, 115d-e). Strikingly, Phaedo commences his narrative of Socrates’ death, recounting his lack of pity for Socrates and his belief that Socrates would go to Hades with a good μοῖρα (58e-59a).

In losing Socrates the companions are not merely losing an acquaintance. The loss of Socrates signifies the loss of him who ‘charms away’ the companions’ fear of death (77e-78a), a disease of the soul. According to Socrates, the man who fears death, in his anxiety over soul-body separation, evinces a deep-seated attachment to the body, which necessarily embroils him in the pursuit of bodily concerns rather than the search for wisdom, a psychic good (68b-69b).8 Since,

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7 E.g., Arieti 1991 argues that the courage of Socrates is at stake; Socrates ultimately proves his courage by failing to prove the immorality of the soul, since dying courageously requires that one be in doubt about the immorality of one’s soul.

8 The philosopher, by contrast, longs for death because then (and only then) is his soul liberated from the body and its attendant fears, desires, pleasures and pains, all of which impede the soul’s
according to Socrates, wisdom is an excellence of the soul and hence constitutive of virtue (69a-c), the fear of death imperils soul health and virtue by preventing one from pursuing wisdom. Tellingly, the dialogue explicitly identifies the danger Socrates’ death poses to the souls of his companions. Cebers remarks, ‘Where shall we find a good charmer for these fears, Socrates, now that you are leaving us’ (78a1-2)? In reply, Socrates implores the companions to ‘spare neither trouble nor expense’ in search of such a charmer, ‘for there is nothing on which you could spend your money to greater advantage’ (78a4-7). Such a charmer better the soul, and it is Socrates’ dying wish that the companions care for their souls (115b). So, this exchange between Socrates and Cebers regarding the fear of death points to the precarious fate of the companions’ souls in the absence of him who ‘charms away’ the fear of death. Nevertheless, Socrates is hopeful that the companions will discover such a charmer amongst themselves (78a7-8). In fact, as the dialogue unfolds, much of the dramatic action consists in Socrates’ valiant efforts to bequeath to the companions affective and intellectual prerequisites for bettering their souls. Socrates—qua poet and philosopher—employs two sorts of ‘charms’ toward this end: argument and myth.

Socrates’ first ‘charm’ is the Affinity Argument (78b-83b), intended to persuade Cebers’ ‘inner child’ that the soul does not dissolve upon death (77d-e). The Affinity Argument establishes that the purified soul of the philosopher does not ‘scatter’ or ‘dissipate’ at death, because it is ‘like’ the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, etc. The fate of the impure soul is unknown. The Affinity Argument sends a clear message: ‘Do not fear death; take care of your soul.’

Simmias and Cebers remain unpersuaded by the Affinity Argument; for they both voice counterarguments (84d). Even Socrates admits that ‘there are still many doubtful points and many objections for anyone who wants a thorough discussion of these matters’ (84c5-7). Still, the companions are persuaded by the Recollection Argument for the preexistence of the soul before birth (92a), despite their doubts as regards the Affinity Argument and the Cyclical Argument. Moreover, both Simmias and Cebers deny any grounds for doubting the Final Argument, the last argument offered in support of the immortality of the soul (107a-b). Nevertheless, Simmias still possesses some ‘inner distrust’ (ἀποτία…παρ’ ἐμαντώ) as regards the Final Argument, owing to the ‘importance of the subject matter’ and his own ‘low opinion of human weakness’ search for truth and wisdom (66a-c).

9 To be precise, Socrates says, ‘in truth, moderation and courage and justice are a purging (καθαρσία) away of all such things [bodily affections], and wisdom itself is a kind of cleansing or purificatory rite (καθαρμός)’ (69b6-c1). So, each virtue (including wisdom) is a kind of purification of the soul. It does not follow that each virtue names the very same thing (i.e., the purification of the soul), because each particular virtue may very well represent a particular aspect of purification. E.g., courage might be the purification or purging of fears associated with the body.

10 This is not the first time Plato describes Socrates’ arguments as ‘charms’ or ‘incantations’. See Symposium 215c-216b and Republic 608a.

11 The companions’ doubt with regard to the Cyclical Argument is implied at 77c-d.
(107a8-9). Importantly, Socrates responds encouragingly to Simmias, saying, ‘you are not only right to say this...but our first hypotheses require clearer examination, even though we find them convincing’ (107b1-3).\textsuperscript{12}

Why are some of the arguments (i.e., the Cyclical Argument and the Affinity Argument) unconvincing? Why does Socrates applaud Simmias’ distrust of the Final Argument, despite his and the companions’ acceptance of its first hypotheses (i.e., the theory of the Forms)? Commentators have long grappled with these interpretive questions.\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, Socrates draws the following conclusion from his series of arguments for the immortality of the soul:

It is right to think then, gentlemen, that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care not only for the time we call our life, but for the sake of all time, and that one is in terrible danger if one does not give it that care. If death were escape from everything, it would be a great boon to the wicked to get rid of the body and of their wickedness together with their soul. But now that the soul appears to be immortal, there is no escape from evil or salvation for it except by becoming as good and wise as possible. (107c1-d2)

Given that Socrates attempts to convince the companions to care for their souls on the basis of the arguments for the immortality of the soul, he believes that the arguments are persuasive, even if they do not settle the matter and are not ‘finally persuasive’.\textsuperscript{14} Additionally, thus engaging in arguments displays its value as practice for dying. The arguments are of practical importance, insofar as they function to convince the companions to care for their souls through argument and philosophy. Socrates dies calmly, unperturbed by the prospect of death. His dying in this manner demonstrates his acceptance of the arguments (91a-b), as well as his conviction that philosophizing is the best life and the best preparation for death.

The success of the arguments (or argumentation) for the immortality of the soul is of practical importance to the companions. This is because the argumentation is intended to (a) remove an obstacle to the companions’ pursuit of wisdom and soul care (i.e., the fear of death) and (b) persuade the companions to care for their souls through argument and philosophy. The argumentation, then, is a crucial

\textsuperscript{12} See Blank 1986 for a useful discussion of this passage. Here I must disagree with the interpretation of Sedley 1995, 14-21, according to which Simmias’ inner distrust reflects his status as a ‘misologue’ (i.e., a ‘hater of argument’). First, this interpretation fails to account for Socrates’ encouraging response. Second, insofar as Simmias blames human weakness for his doubt (and not the arguments themselves), he is the antithesis of a misologue, as described at 90c-d.

\textsuperscript{13} See Gallop 2003, 317 and Sedley 1995, 17-18 for the view that the arguments are not intentionally fallacious and are in fact intended to be convincing.

\textsuperscript{14} While the Final Argument is taken to be persuasive, it is not necessarily ‘finally persuasive’ or intended to be the final word on the topic. It is not sufficient to satisfy the companions (nor should it be), until the companions go over the reasoning again and again, from different starting points. Socrates is satisfied with the arguments presumably because he himself has gone through this process of reasoning (see Blank 1986).
part of the dramatic action of the *Phaedo*, which centers around the fate of the companions’ souls in the absence of their soul nurturer. Two of the dramatic metaphors employed in the *Phaedo* bring this point into sharper focus.

First, when Socrates drinks the poison, the companions feel like ‘orphans’ who have lost their ‘father’ (116a). As if to lend dramatic force to this simile, Socrates’ biological children enter the jail cell (116b). Socrates ‘fathers’ the companions by fathering their souls. Recall, Socrates soothes the companions’ ‘inner child’ (ἐν ἠμῖν παῖς), who ‘fears death like a bogey’ (77e5). Perhaps the most striking image of Socrates as soul father occurs at 88c-91c, after Simmias and Cebo voice their counterarguments to the theory of the immortality of the soul. The companions’ former confidence in Socrates’ arguments is replaced by desolation and distrust of argument (88c-d). At this low point, Socrates, sitting above Phaedo, strokes Phaedo’s head, pressing his hair onto the back of his neck (89a-b). Importantly, this quintessentially fatherly gesture occurs at the very same moment that Socrates seeks to save the companions’ souls from misology.

The danger of misology looms large in the dialogue. After the companions and Echekrates lose faith in argument (88c-d), Socrates warns that ‘there is no greater evil one can suffer than to hate arguments’ (89d2-3). Like the fear of death, misology is an obstacle to the pursuit of wisdom. This is because argument is the very vehicle by which one searches for human wisdom. At 89b7-c6 Phaedo recounts how Socrates, stroking Phaedo’s hair, addressed him:

*Socrates:* It is today, he said, that I shall cut my hair and you yours, if our argument dies on us, and we cannot revive it. If I were you, and the argument escaped me, I would take an oath, as the Argives did, not to let my hair grow before I fought again and defeated the argument of Simmias and Cebo.

*Phaedo:* But, I said, they say that not even Heracles could fight two people.

*Socrates:* Then call on me to be your Iolaus, as long as the daylight lasts.

*Phaedo:* I shall call on you, but in this case as Iolaus calling on Heracles (89b9-c6).

Not only does the dramatic metaphor underscore the fact that the arguments are of practical importance to the interlocutors; it reveals something about the relationship between the companions and Socrates, as well as the nature of the dangers confronting the companions.

The dramatic metaphor refers to the second labor of Hercules; in particular, to Hercules’ slaughter of the Lernean Hydra, a many-headed serpent. As the story goes, when Hercules initially severed one of the hydra’s heads, two more grew back. Simultaneously, a giant crab attacked Hercules. Overwhelmed, Hercules called his nephew, Iolaus, to his aid. Together the pair chopped off the hydra’s heads and torched the neck stumps in order to prevent their regrowth. In the process, Hercules crushed the crab underneath his giant foot.

Two points warrant mentioning. First, Socrates describes himself as Iolaus, not
Hercules. Phaedo objects, insisting that he be Iolaus and Socrates be Hercules. In the companions’ eyes, Socrates is ‘uncle Hercules’, a father figure. Interestingly, Socrates does not readily assume this role. Just as Socrates earlier encouraged the companions to search for a soul charmer amongst themselves (78a7-8), Socrates now exhorts Phaedo to be Hercules and to lead the charge against the hydra. Whereas Socrates urges the companions to become autonomous in their pursuit of wisdom, the companions are reluctant to give up their soul father.

The metaphor is important for another reason as well, insofar as it illuminates exactly what is at stake for the companions. What does the hydra correspond to, and what does the crab correspond to? Although initially the pair appears to refer to the two counterarguments of Simmias and Cebes, it is noteworthy that Socrates refers to ‘the argument’ (λόγος) of Simmias and Cebes as a singular entity and immediately goes on to emphasize another danger in the vicinity; namely, the threat of misology (89d-e). Therefore, it seems likely that the threat of misology corresponds to the giant crab. Just as the giant crab prevents Hercules from effectively vanquishing the hydra; the companions’ potential misology imperils Socrates’ attempts to use argument to vanquish the objections of Simmias and Cebes. The objections of Simmias and Cebes correspond to two heads of the hydra, which itself represents the aforementioned ‘bogey’ feared by the companions, i.e., the possibility of the soul’s dissolution at death (77d-e). Socrates had slayed one head of the bogey only to witness two heads grow back, i.e., the twin objections of Simmias and Cebes.15 As this dramatic metaphor makes clear, the arguments are an integral part of the dramatic action of the dialogue. However, it is not simply the ‘fate of the logos’ that swings in the balance, but also the fate of the companions’ souls.

Just as Hercules employs a dual strategy to eliminate the hydra’s heads, i.e., severing the heads and burning the neck stumps, Socrates employs both argument and myth to combat the companions’ psychic ills and to put them on the path to soul care. This is because Socrates is concerned that the companions may fail to live according to the tracks he has laid down, even if they accept his arguments at present (115b-c). Immediately after Socrates cites this worry, Crito erroneously identifies Socrates with his corpse rather than his immortal soul, thereby exemplifying the quickness with which the tendrils of the possibility of nothingness after death reconquer the psyche (115c-d). Rational arguments can sever the heads of the frightful possibility of nothingness after death, but another sort of weapon is required to prevent the heads from regrowing.16 For this reason, Socrates concludes both his first and second series of arguments with myths, which function to deal the final and permanent ‘death blow’ to the terrible possibility of the soul’s dissolution at death.

According to Socrates, the final myth reveals that the philosopher ought ‘to be

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15 I have expanded on a line of interpretation that I owe to Dorter 1970, 570.
16 As evidence of the quickness with which the possibility of nothingness after death reenters the psyche, consider that at the end of the dialogue Crito identifies Socrates with his corpse, rather than his immortal soul (115c-d).
of good courage’ (θανατική) about his own soul, because the afterlife is blissful for the philosopher (114d-115a). Hence, the myth should be repeated ‘as if it were an incantation’ (114d5), presumably because it ‘charms away’ the companions’ aforementioned fear of death. So long as the companions pursue wisdom, virtue, and soul health, death is not to be feared. In addition, this final myth, like the arguments, functions to convince the companions to care for their souls, as evidenced by Socrates’ concluding remarks: ‘Because of the things we have enunciated, Simmias, one must make every effort to share in virtue and wisdom in one’s life, for the reward is beautiful and the hope is great’ (114c6-9).

One might wonder why myth, as opposed to argument, prevents the frightful possibility of nothingness after death from regrowing in the companions’ souls. I suspect that Socrates intends the myth to ‘reshape’ or ‘redirect’ the companions’ ineradicable, biologically-grounded fear of death. After all, according to Socrates, so long as the human soul is embodied, it experiences biologically grounded beliefs, desires and emotions, which can impair reasoning and interfere with the soul’s search for truth (66b-d). Socrates’ mythic portrayal of impure and vicious souls supports my hypothesis:

It wanders, as we are told, around graves and monuments, where shadowy phantoms, images that such souls produce, have been seen, souls that have not been freed and purified but share in the visible, and are therefore seen. . . Moreover, these are not the souls of good but of inferior men, which are forced to wander there, paying the penalty for their previous bad upbringing. They wander until their longing for that which accompanies them, the physical, again imprisons them in a body, and they are then, as is likely, bound to such characters as they have practiced in their life. (81d5-e3)

Those who are deemed incurable because of the enormity of their crimes, having committed many great sacrileges or wicked and unlawful murders and other such wrongs—their fitting fate is to be hurled into Tartarus never to emerge from it. Those who are deemed to have committed great but curable crimes...these must of necessity be thrown into Tartarus, but a year later the current throws them out... After they have been carried along to the Acherousian lake, they cry out and shout, some for those they have killed, others for those they have maltreated, and calling them they then pray to them and beg them to allow them to step out into the lake and to receive them. If they persuade them, they do step out and their punishment comes to an end; if they do not, they are taken back into Tartarus and from there into the rivers, and this does not stop until they have persuaded those they have wronged, for this is the punishment which the judges imposed on them. (113e2-114b6)
Both myths play on a number of fears, especially the fear of bodily harm or discomfort. We cannot imagine wandering around graveyards without also imagining extreme discomfort and threatening predators. Similarly, we cannot imagine being flung into Tartarus without also imagining the currents ravaging our bodies. No doubt, Socrates is aware of this effect. Socrates redirects the companions’ biologically-based fear of bodily harm by focusing it on the fate of the soul rather than death. In so doing, Socrates lessens the companions’ attachment to the body (and the care of it) and strengthens their attachment to the soul (and the care of it).

Socrates derides ‘exchanging fears for fears’ as a kind of faux virtue at 69a-b. Real and true virtue occurs with wisdom, ‘whether pleasures and fears and all such things be present or absent’ (69b3-4). However, insofar as pleasures and fears are a necessary part of embodied existence (66b), it follows that ‘earthly virtue’ does not require the complete eradication of pleasures and fears, but their redirection to motivate (rather than impede) the soul’s search for wisdom. To suppose that the Socrates of the Phaedo is an ascetic who champions a complete detachment from all emotion overlooks the obvious emotional force of both Socrates’ ‘swan song’ (i.e., the myth) and the Phaedo itself.

My emphasis on persuasion might seem to suggest that I class Socrates as a sort of sophist. I do not. Socrates does not wish to secure the companions’ uncritical acceptance. On the contrary, Socrates blames credulity for misology. Misology arises when ‘one who lacks skill in arguments puts his trust in an argument as being true, then shortly afterwards believes it to be false…and so with another argument and then another’ (90b5-8). Such an individual will conclude that ‘there is no soundness or reliability in any object or in any argument’ (90c2-3). In effect, two factors contribute to misology: (1) credulity with regard to arguments and (2) lack of skill in arguments. Thus, in order effectively to combat misology, Socrates must encourage the companions to be critical of arguments, as well as teach the companions skill in argument. This is precisely what Socrates does. As we have seen, Socrates actively encourages objections to his first series of arguments (84c), as well as encourages Simmias to reexamine the first hypotheses of the Final Argument (107b). Moreover, Socrates’ introduction of a superior type of explanation (i.e., formal causes, 96a-100e)—as well as his methodological remarks about argumentation (101d-e)—should be seen as Socrates’ last attempt to impart dialectical know-how to the companions. Not only does skill in argument protect the companions against misology, skill in argument enables the companions effectively to pursue wisdom and thereby purify their souls.

While the exact nature of Socrates’ methodological remarks at 101d-e is the subject of scholarly debate,17 some scholars (I think rightly) suggest that the

17 At 101d-e Socrates addresses Cebes as follows: ‘But you, afraid, as they say, of your own shadow and your inexperience, would cling to the safety of your hypothesis and give that answer. If someone then attacked your hypothesis itself, you would ignore him and would not answer until you had examined whether the consequences that follow from it agree with one another or contradict one another. And when you must give an account of your hypothesis itself you will proceed in the same
remarks constitute advice on how to engage in ‘cooperative dialectic’ or ‘joint inquiry’, not sophistical or eristic dialectic. Because the primary danger associated with cooperative dialectic is overly hasty agreement, Socrates offers Cebe's advice on how to deal with an inquirer who is determined ‘to cling to’ (ἐξερεύσθαι) the hypotheses. And indeed, this interpretation aligns nicely with Socrates' insistence that Simmias reexamine the first hypotheses of their arguments, despite the fact that everyone present accepts them (107a).

In sum, Socrates not only seeks to pass on to the companions the affective prerequisites for soul care, but also the intellectual prerequisites for soul care. In order to teach the companions how to pursue wisdom through joint inquiry, Socrates must present the companions with opportunities to practice cooperative dialectic and to overcome dialectical setbacks. Even then, if the arguments for immortality seem problematic, they nevertheless enable Socrates to show the companions how to persist with a line of inquiry despite difficulties. Once again, attention to the drama of the Phaedo has philosophical and interpretive payoffs, in clarifying both the nature of Socrates’ methodological remarks as well as the purpose of Socrates’ several arguments for the immortality of the soul.

Having outlined the dramatic structure of the Phaedo, we are now in a position to examine the outcome of the drama. What is the fate of the companions’ souls? Does Socrates succeed in curing the companions’ psychic ills? Do the companions emerge as capable of ‘fathering their own souls’ and pursuing wisdom through joint inquiry?

These are difficult questions, and to a large extent the question is left open, at least with regard to some of the companions. For example, it is doubtful that Crito and Apollodorus emerge as capable of fathering their own souls. Also, given that the companions wail for themselves when Socrates departs and even liken their position to that of orphans, it is unlikely that they are confident in their ability to father their own souls. At the same time, Socrates has successfully combated the companions’ psychic ills to some extent. Importantly, none of the companions weep for Socrates, only for themselves (117c). They do not fear that death is a frightful thing for Socrates; they assume that Socrates will fare well in the afterlife (58e-59a). (The exception is Crito, who identifies Socrates with his

way: you will assume another hypothesis, the one which seems to you best of the higher ones until you come to something acceptable, but you will not jumble the two as the debaters do by discussing the hypothesis and its consequences at the same time, if you wish to discover any truth. This they do not discuss at all nor give any thought to, but their wisdom enables them to mix everything up and yet to be pleased with themselves, but if you are a philosopher I think you will do as I say.’

18 Sedley 1995, 16-17 argues for this interpretation, following the suggestion of Blank 1986, 146-163 that Socrates outlines the method of joint inquiry at 101d-e, not eristic dialectic. Both point out that translators and commentators erroneously translate the verb ἐξερεύναμεν as ‘to object to’ rather than ‘to cling to’, and consequently infer that Socrates offers Cebe's advice on how to deal with an objector to his hypothesis. However, on a proper translation of ἐξερεύσθαι, Socrates can be seen as offering Cebe's advice on how to deal with a joint inquirer who uncritically ‘clings to’ a hypothesis without examining it adequately. The fact that Socrates himself engages in cooperative (rather than eristic) dialectic lends confirmation to this interpretation.
corpse rather than his immortal soul [115c-e].) Moreover, the companions are no longer in danger of hating argument. In fact, Simmias is the exact opposite of a misologist, when he refuses to blame his mistrust of Socrates’ final argument on the argument itself, instead blaming ‘human weakness’ (107a9). Whereas a misologist erroneously blames arguments when an argument appears true at one time and false at another, the lover of inquiry supposes that he himself is ‘not yet sound’ (90e).

Madison 2002 insightfully interprets Socrates’ last words to shed light on whether or not Socrates succeeds in bettering the companions’ souls. Madison interprets Socrates’ last words as both an acknowledgment that the companions’ psychic ills have been ameliorated, as well as a commandment that the companions care for their souls. Socrates’ last words are as follows: ‘Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; pay the debt and do not be careless’ (Ὄ Κρίτων, ἔφη, τῷ Ἄσκληπιῳ ὁφείλομεν ἀλετρούνα· ἄλλα ἄπόδοτε καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσῃτε, 118a3-4). Madison points out that ἄπόδοτε and ἀμελήσῃτε occur in the second person plural. Hence, it is unlikely that Socrates implores Crito (and only Crito) to ‘pay the debt’ and ‘not be careless’. Rather, contrary to what is standardly assumed, Socrates implores all of the companions to pay the debt and not be careless. Also, the fact that the debt is owed indicates that the favor has already been granted, contrary to the standard assumption that the ‘favor’ is Socrates’ impending death.19 Furthermore, it is likely that the ‘favor’ is especially the healing of the companions’ souls.20 Asclepius is the god of healing, and the primary ‘healing’ with which the dialogue is concerned is the healing of the soul, not the healing of the body. Lastly, ἀμελήσῃτε (‘do not be careless’) takes on a double meaning in this context, given that the verb μέλεω and cognates occur throughout the dialogue in the context of ‘caring for’ one’s soul (82d1, 107c3-4, 115b7). Socrates not only commands the companions to pay their debt to the god of healing; he also orders them to not be careless with their souls. In other words, Socrates both acknowledges that the companions’ souls have been partially healed and exhorts the companions to continue the healing process through dedicated soul care. This injunction is exactly what we should expect, if the dramatic action of the Phaedo consists in Socrates’ valiant efforts to put the companions on the path to soul care. Thus, the dramatic structure of the Phaedo illuminates Socrates’ last words.

I have attempted to establish that the Phaedo is a direct, imaginative presentation of characters and their actions, where said actions are of great practical importance to the characters. I now turn to the Phaedo’s emotional appeal. The Phaedo’s emotional appeal not only solidifies the dialogue’s status as drama, but also illuminates Plato’s moral psychology. Just as Socrates the ‘philosopher poet’

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19 The most prevalent interpretation of Socrates’ last words is that Socrates is thanking the god of healing for curing him of the disease of life. This prevalent view can be traced back to Nietzsche 1974, 272.

20 The inclusion of himself in ‘we owe’ indicates that for Socrates the argumentation has also succeeded in slaying the fear of death.
utilizes myth to train the companions’ emotions, Plato utilizes drama to train readers’ emotions and thereby improve their souls.

III. The Emotional Appeal of the Phaedo

The outer frame of the Phaedo consists in the dialogue between Eccekrates and Phaedo, who recounts Socrates’ last day with his companions. Socrates’ execution and the philosophical discussion that precedes it constitute the inner frame. Like the reader, Eccekrates is audience to Socrates’ last day; and, as a result, his responses are clues as to how the reader is supposed to respond to the inner frame drama.21 Strikingly, Eccekrates twice refers to a larger audience of which he is part. For instance, when Phaedo declares that nothing brings him greater pleasure than to call Socrates to mind, Eccekrates remarks that ‘your hearers (ἀκούοντες) will surely be like you in this’ (58d5-8). And again, after Socrates outlines the method of cooperative dialectic or joint inquiry (101c-d), Eccekrates exclaims that it is exceedingly clear to the present hearers (ἀκούοντες, 102a8). Who are the other hearers, if they do not include the readers?

A survey of Eccekrates’ responses reveals that the ‘audience’ is supposed to share some judgments and emotions with the companions, while nevertheless maintaining a degree of psychological distance. So, for example, Eccekrates expresses ‘sympathy’ (συνέγγυση) for the depressed companions (88c8).22 Importantly, Eccekrates shares the very same worry as the companions, namely, no argument for the immortality of the soul can be trusted (88c-d). That the dialogue should have this effect on Eccekrates is noteworthy, since, in the Republic, tragic drama is said to cause spectators ‘to sympathize with’ (συμπάθεια) the tragic hero (605d).

Neither συνέγγυση nor συμπάθεια correspond to our modern notion of ‘empathy’, which requires that one imagine being another person, in the sense of experiencing the world ‘through her eyes’. In contrast, sympathy (συνέγγυση or συμπάθεια) requires a degree of psychological distance between oneself and the other, because such sympathy for another is attended or constituted by the judgment that the other is undeserving of her present misfortune.23 The expression of sympathy for another does require that one experience some of the same types of mental states as the other, in this way resembling empathy. Yet, whereas sympa-

21 Here I follow the practice of Blank 1993, 437, who looks to Eccekrates’ responses to determine how Plato intends the reader to respond.

22 Konstan 2001, 39-41 claims that συγγνωμή retains its root meaning in the classic period, i.e., ‘to understand with’ (συγ-γνωστέοντες). However, the term is frequently used in legal contexts to denote the ‘favor’ or ‘pardon’ granted by jurors to a defendant presumed to be innocent.

23 See Konstan 2001, 39-41 regarding συγγνωμή. In the Republic Socrates claims that the audience of tragedy sympathizes with (συμπάθοι) and feels pity for ‘a man claiming to be good’ (605d-606b). Although the verb συμπάθοι was not commonly used in such contexts during the classical period; it later took on a meaning close to the English term ‘sympathy’ and was frequently found in association with pity, an emotion constituted by the judgment that its object is undeserving of his misfortune (see Konstan 2001, 49-74, and esp. 58).
thy requires a partial identification with another person, empathy is a more total identification. So, for example, in sympathizing with the companions, Echekrates expresses distrust of argument, an attitude shared by the companions. Echekrates also shares affective responses and evaluative judgments with the companions, e.g., his enjoying calling Socrates to mind (58d) and his judgment that Socrates has clearly explicaded the method of cooperative dialectic (102a). However, Echekrates does not imagine himself to be the companions, expressing attitudes, judgments, emotions, etc. from their point of view. In other words, Echekrates’ distrust of argument, enjoyment of Socrates, praise of Socrates’ explication, etc. are his and his alone and are experienced as such. Echekrates does not ‘assimilate’ his mind to that of the companions by ‘taking on’ or ‘simulating’ their mental states (as is thought to occur with empathy).

Therefore, given that our model audience member (i.e., Echekrates) sympathizes with the companions, it is likely that the dialogue is intended to have a similar effect on the larger audience of which Echekrates is part, i.e., the readers. The reader is supposed to share some of the companions’ responses, experiencing them as his own. Moreover, the reader is supposed to feel bad for the companions, i.e., to feel as though the companions undeservedly suffer a great misfortune. This latter emotion is closely connected with the Greek conception of ‘pity’—an emotion constituted by the judgment that the object of pity undeservedly encounters misfortune. And like sympathy, pity is commonly associated with tragic drama (e.g., Rep. 606b, Poet. 1449b27-28).

The Phaedo most definitely intends to evoke our pity for the companions, especially in its portrayal of the companions as ‘orphans’, undeserving of their fate. In fact, in the Apology, Socrates vehemently disparages defendants in capital punishment cases for using their children—and, in particular, the prospect of their impending orphaining—to arouse pity in jurors (34c-35c). Hence, when the companions lament the loss of their soul father, we are not only supposed to feel sadness ‘with’ the companions in regard to Socrates’ death, but also ‘for’ the companions, who shall be undeservedly orphaned. In other words, we are supposed to feel sympathy and pity for the companions.

This raises a genuine puzzle. If the Phaedo is intended to rouse readers’ emotions, then why does Socrates actively discourage the expression of emotion? As Nussbaum noted, the wailing Xanthippe is escorted out of the jail cell (60a); and,
upon drinking the hemlock, Socrates berates the companions, declaring that ‘it is mainly for this reason that I sent the women away, to avoid such unseemliness, for I have heard that one should die in good omened silence; so keep quiet and control yourselves’ (117d4-e2). The companions immediately feel shame and check their tears. Although Echekrates’ reaction is not explicitly noted, we can surmise his response. Insofar as Echekrates responds as the companions do, he would feel a measure of grief.

Is Socrates’ reprimand of the companions also intended to apply to the readers? Should we conclude that the Phaedo evokes the emotions of its audience only to stifle them? I do not think so. An important interlude between Socrates and the jailor indicates otherwise. The officer says to Socrates, ‘During the time you have been here I have come to know you in other ways as the noblest, the gentlest and the best man who has ever come here’ (116c3-5). The officer weeps and promptly exits the cell, whereupon Socrates remarks, ‘How pleasant the man is! During the whole time I have been here he has come in and conversed with me from time to time, a most agreeable man. And now how genuinely he weeps for me’ (116d3-6). In this instance, Socrates applauds weeping. Why should this be?

The answer must lie in the sharp contrast between the officer’s quiet and controlled expression of grief and that of the companions. Phaedo describes the companions’ response to Socrates drinking the hemlock as follows:

We could hold them [our tears] back no longer; my own tears came in floods against my will. So I covered my face. I was weeping for myself, not for him—for my misfortune in being deprived of such a comrade. Even before me, Crito was unable to restrain his tears and got up. Apollodorus had not ceased from weeping before, and at this moment his noisy tears and anger made everybody present break down, except Socrates. (117c7-d4)

The companions’ grief is uncontrolled and loud, for which reason Socrates orders the companions to keep quiet and control themselves. Most likely, Socrates worries that the companions will make a spectacle of their grief, like the characters of Greek tragic and epic poetry. Indeed, in the Republic Socrates warns against excessive, self-gratifying lamentation, on the grounds that it interferes with practical reason (604c) and even habituates the griever to respond to personal misfortune with lamentation rather than practical reason (606b). So, Socrates’ admonishments are most likely not intended to silence readers’ emotions so much as to shape the manner of their expression.

It is noteworthy that Socrates actually praises the officer for genuinely weeping. This is not so surprising, when we consider that both Socrates and the officer emphasize the time spent with each other, as opposed to the terribleness of death. Here, the object of grief is not death per se but rather the loss of a companion of the highest caliber and Socratic dialectic more generally. (Similarly, the companions bewail their own loss of a soul father and Socratic conversations, albeit they
express their grief immoderately and self-indulgently.) Thus, Socrates encourages the controlled and quiet emotional expression of the loss of a great comrade and soul nurturer. In addition to feeling sadness for the companions on behalf of their loss of a soul father, the reader is supposed to feel a quiet and controlled sadness with regard to the loss of a genuinely good friend of humankind. Because such sadness is constituted by a genuine appreciation of Socrates and his enterprise of soul care and joint inquiry, it serves the pedagogical function of inspiring the reader to follow in Socrates’ tracks and pursue wisdom. In this way, Plato’s practice as author of the Phaedo parallels Socrates’ own practice in the Phaedo. Both are ‘philosopher poets’, who freely use dramatic story telling to shape the emotions (and ultimately the values) of their audience.

Thus, the Phaedo is a pedagogical drama, which aims to inspire and equip the reader to follow Socrates’ tracks. Consideration of the outer frame lends further support to this claim. In the course of the dialogue we enter the outer frame four times. Tellingly, each time Phaedo and Echekrates extoll Socrates and/or Socrates’ virtues. In the first frame Echekrates and Phaedo declare that nothing gives them more pleasure than calling Socrates to mind, and Echekrates assures Phaedo that he himself and the reader will feel likewise (58d5-8). In the same breath, Phaedo communicates that Socrates died ‘nobly and without fear’ (58e). In the second frame, which occurs directly after the counter-argument of Simmias and Cebes, Phaedo eulogizes Socrates as pleasant, kind and admiring; Socrates is described as ‘healing the distress’ of the companions by galvanizing them to pursue the argument and not to admit defeat (88e-89a). The passage is not only a ringing endorsement of Socrates the man but also of the Socratic virtues of kindness, resilience, and the tenacious pursuit of argument. In the third frame, Echekrates and Phaedo laud Socrates for outlining the method of joint inquiry ‘extraordinarily clearly’ (102a). The virtue of Socrates consists, in part, in his ability and willingness to make his methods and reasoning clear (οὗτος οῡκ θεωρεῖ), in sharp contrast to the Pythagorean Philolaus (61e8). The fourth and final instance of the outer frame consists of a single line, uttered by Phaedo in the manner of eulogy: ‘Such was the end of our comrade, Echekrates, a man who, we should say, was of all those we have known the best, and also the wisest and the most just’ (118a15-16). In effect, the outer frame primes the reader to view Socrates as the paradigm of human excellence. The outer frame is the perfect delivery device for this lesson on virtue in that it trains our attention on Socrates and the Socratic virtues and also directs us to discover confirmations of Socrates’ virtue in the inner frame dialogue. Hence, it is no surprise that we feel a touch of sadness at the death of Socrates; the dialogue teaches us to appreciate Socrates and Socratic virtues.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the dramatic elements of the Phaedo ultimately function to shape readers’ characters and values. Might Plato’s other dramatic dialogues function similarly? Here it is important to remember that Plato was not only a
philosopher but also the founder and head of the Academy, a school that produced philosophers and philosopher-statesmen (see Guthrie 1970, 23). Plato’s dialogues most likely circulated in the Academy, where they would have served a pedagogical function. We know from the Republic that Plato puts great emphasis on educating both the intellects and the characters of future philosopher-statesmen. In fact, poetry forms the foundation of this character education. Could it be that the dramatic, poetic elements of the dialogues were intended to train the characters of Plato’s students and would-be students, so as to prepare them for philosophy?

Also, Plato may have employed drama so as to draw the reader into the philosophical discourse. Drama tends to elicit participatory responses on the part of the audience. Indeed, the audience of the Phaedo (and, in particular, Echekrates) expresses judgments and emotions in line with those of Socrates’ actual interlocutors. According to Socrates, one acquires wisdom through personal pursuit (i.e., through discourse with others and oneself) rather than through reading journal articles. In the Phaedo Socrates puts his position into practice, imploring and equipping the companions (and the reader) to pursue understanding on their own and to not take Socrates’ arguments as the final word on the question of the soul’s immortality.

The Phaedo’s status as a ‘beneficial’ or ‘pedagogical’ drama also has bearing on how we should understand Plato’s criticisms of dramatic poetry in the Republic. Does Republic x really contain an attack on mimesis and/or poetry as such? Or is Plato in the business of reinventing dramatic poetry to suit his own pedagogical purposes? After Socrates completes his critique of Greek tragic and comic drama in the Republic, he issues the following caveat:

if the poetry that aims at pleasure and imitation has any argument to bring forward that proves it ought to have a place in a well-governed city, we at least would be glad to admit it, for we are well aware of the charm it exercises. ...Therefore, isn’t it just that such poetry should return from exile when it has successfully defended itself, whether in lyric or any other meter?—Certainly.—Then we’ll allow its defenders, who aren’t poets themselves but lovers of poetry, to speak in prose on its behalf and to show that it not only gives pleasure but is beneficial to constitutions and to human life. Indeed, we’ll listen to them graciously, for we’d certainly profit if poetry were shown to be not only pleasant but also beneficial. (607c2-e1)

This is not the only place that Socrates anticipates a form of ‘beneficial’ poetry, aimed at making men better. In both Gorgias 503a-504e and Phaedrus 269d-278b, Socrates ‘speaks in prose’ on behalf of beneficial forms of oratory and rhetoric respectively. Moreover, Gorgias 503a-504e classes poetry as a kind of

27 See Blank 1993 for a good discussion of the sorts of participatory responses elicited by the dialogues.
oratory, and *Phaedrus* 258b3, 277e8–9, 278c classes poetry as a kind of rhetoric. In other words, in all three dialogues Plato acknowledges the possibility of reformed poetry, aimed at making men better. The *Phaedo* is an example of reformed poetry.²⁸

Department of Philosophy
Carleton College
Northfield MN 55057

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63-81.