of Antigone across historical and geographical borders, ranging from the 1841 Tieck/Mendelssohn production in Potsdam, Germany (Erika Fischer-Lichte), to Griselda Gambaro’s version set during Argentina’s “Dirty War” (María Florencia Nelli), to a Nigerian adaptation titled Tègònni: An African Antigone (Astrid Van Weyenberg). Focusing on Seamus Heaney’s The Burial at Thebes, first staged at the Abbey Theatre in 2004, Wilmer’s concluding chapter invites readers to look closely for political and social parallels between the play’s dire circumstances and contemporary contexts, heightening once more the extraordinary relevance of both the play and its main female character.

The editors of Interrogating Antigone have assembled an extensive collection of thought-provoking, original essays to foster productive conversations across disciplines and encourage interpretive possibilities in representing, re-imagining, and re-visioning Antigone in philosophy and literature, as well as in the visual and performing arts. While a more direct and intentional dialogue among contributing authors would perhaps have added further value, the volume presents an excellent example of an interdisciplinary discourse that fuses theoretical and practical concerns, offering useful insights to both scholars and theatre practitioners.

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To reconcile the ancient dispute between poetry and philosophy is an ambitious charge. Socrates brings up signs of “this old opposition” in book 10 of Plato’s Republic, so even for Plato the dispute was already long-standing. Nonetheless, scholars continue to exhume it, most recently in Max Statkiewicz’s Rhapsody of Philosophy: Dialogues with Plato in Contemporary Thought (2009) and Freddie Rokem’s Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance (2010). In The Drama of Ideas, Martin Puchner returns to the dispute by reassessing Plato’s far-reaching influence not only on philosophy, but on modern drama. This influence, Puchner emphasizes, “has been obscured by the distorted image of Plato as the enemy of drama and theater and, more generally, by the lack of interest in the conjunction of drama and philosophy on the part of both theater scholars and philosophers” (41).
Puchner begins by blurring the line between Plato the philosopher and Plato the creative dramatist who articulated his philosophy in a dramatic format. Noting Diogenes Laertius’s apocryphal account of Plato burning his play on the steps of the Theatre of Dionysus, Puchner revisits the philosopher’s dramatic mode of writing. He points out that Plato the philosopher, who had the audacity to write about banning theatre from the city of Callipolis in the Republic, was the same writer who embraced the dramatic mode of the Socratic dialogue and pursued one of the “most unusual careers in drama” (4). Puchner also reminds us that the Socrates character in Plato’s dialogues is much better known than the historic Socrates who lived from 469–399 BCE. Having established these paradoxes, Puchner argues that, in the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon, the fictional character of Socrates materializes the ideas to which he gives voice. Ultimately, Puchner’s aim is to demonstrate the oscillation between materiality and the philosophic ideal in modern drama and literature.

Puchner offers two distinct ways of revising Plato’s understanding of drama, the first half of the book framing the debate between drama and philosophy from the perspective of drama, the second half framing it from that of philosophy. In effect, Puchner suggests that “philosophical drama” and “dramatic philosophy” are simply different frameworks for understanding the relationship between matter and form (35). In chapter 1, for example, he introduces “dramatic Platonism” as a genre that oscillates between comedy and tragedy, materialism and metaphysics. He argues that dramatic Platonism allowed Plato to continually negotiate between “matter” (the dramatic embodiment of an idea in a character) and “form” (the distancing devices by which the drama’s ideas are revealed to the audience). Revisiting the purpose of character, action, and audience in Plato’s dramaturgy, Puchner even distills a poetics from Plato’s Socratic dialogues that rivals Aristotle’s better-known formulation.

The next chapter includes a fascinating survey of the “Socrates Play,” defined as the “thoughts and actions” of Socrates in dramatic form. Puchner shows us that the “lost-in-the-clouds” Socrates of Aristophanes was only the beginning of a long succession of staged Socrates types. Drawing on plays from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, Puchner recovers a vast spectrum of Socrates characters that range from tragic protagonist to comic stage philosopher. In chapter 3, dramatic Platonism is used as a lens through which to reconsider modern drama. Puchner’s argument here is that, since modern drama can be said to be non-Aristotelian, it can be “understood more specifically as Platonist” (73). The “Platonic impulses,” or “idiom,” that Puchner locates in the works of Kaiser, Strindberg, Wilde, Shaw, Pirandello, Brecht, and Stoppard manifest the “intellectual aspirations” of modern drama (75). Puchner’s project is, by his own admission, anachronistic, but his defense is that “an anachronism . . . can shed new light on a familiar topic” (30). Indeed, it does so in a refreshing way by reminding the reader that, like Plato, modern drama can be best understood as an “unsettling combination of idealist aspiration and material practice” (74).

The second half of the book, which includes the last two chapters, identifies dramaturgical tactics (including character and action) in philosophical dialogues, treatises, and literature. Puchner makes surprising connections between Plato’s dramaturgy and the works of Kierkegard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Kenneth Burke, and Gilles Deleuze, finding that each articulates philosophy through “invented characters born from [a] dramatic impulse” (123), even if some appear in novelistic form. In the final chapter, Puchner pushes the limits of his argument and definition of dramatic Platonism by offering examples from contemporary literature and philosophy. He identifies Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, and Alain Badiou as self-declared Platonists who have “touched on the dramatic dimension of Plato” by purposefully “negotiat[ing] between materialism and idealism” (174). In this way, Puchner delves into twentieth-century inquiries into language, “the medium in which philosophy invariably occurred” (175). He argues that the entanglement of literature, philosophy, and language is implicated in dramatic form.

In his conclusion, Puchner argues for the revival not of “the discredited Plato of idealism,” but “the Plato of dramatic Platonism” (198). Noting the rhetorical gesture of Socrates pointing upward in Jacques-Louis David’s painting The Death of Socrates (1787), he argues that the “act of pointing […] is dramatic Platonism’s most fundamental gesture,” in that it points to an idea beyond, without necessarily “knowing what this beyond might be” (198). This gesture is meant to counter the cultural relativism so prevalent in language, morality, and knowledge, yet however appealing Puchner’s reading of this gesture is in its call for “an absolute point of reference for knowledge,” the allusion neglects David’s nod to Raphael’s School of Athens (1511), in which an aged Plato points upward beside his student Aristotle, who presses his hand to the ground. Raphael’s fresco demonstrates the difficulty of separating the symbolic Socrates from the philosophic Plato, whose mode of dramaturgy will always be compared to Aristotle’s. No matter how much Puchner tries to mend the split between drama and Plato’s philosophy, the seam continues to tear, making this reader wonder if the ancient dispute will or can ever be settled. Nevertheless, The Drama of Ideas is an im-
portant contribution to theories of materiality in drama and philosophy and Puchner demonstrates that a case for Plato’s dramaturgy exists if we dare consider it. Ultimately, Puchner reminds us that philosophy and drama have an important though erratic relationship, and that Plato and Aristotle will forever remain at the center of it.

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OFFSTAGE SPACE, NARRATIVE, AND THE THEATRE OF THE IMAGINATION

William Gruber’s Offstage Space, Narrative, and the Theatre of the Imagination opens with an anecdote about Samuel Johnson’s criticism of The Winter’s Tale. Rather than show the joyous reunion of Leonides with his daughter Perdita onstage, Shakespeare narrates the action through the characters of three nameless “gentlemen.” Johnson is quoted: “It was, I suppose, only to spare his own labour that the poet put this whole scene into narrative”—(1). Gruber’s book probes this infrequently questioned supposition—that onstage narration is only a matter of taste or inadequacy, or alternatively, a matter of “taste” or the impossibility of adequate representation. How does the playwright choose which events to dramatize and which to express by recitation, and how can a productive relationship between the two modes—the diegetic and the mimetic—be upheld in theatre? Gruber appropriately situates his argument in terms of “different kinds of aesthetic responsive-ness” (3), considering how the relative immediacy of perception affects our mental image-making during the viewing of a performance. For Gruber, the role of imagination, especially as stimulated by the evocative power of words, is central to the theatrical experience.

The introduction succinctly traces a classical theoretical history of narration in relation to drama through Plato, Aristotle, and Horace (in whose writings a bias against onstage narration takes root), and Gruber’s text includes substantive examples from plays of many periods. The book’s primary focus, however, especially in the final chapters, is on the “widespread ascendency of narration, or telling, as an alternative strategy to enactment or showing in twentieth-century drama”—(13). More generally, Gruber’s concern is not with characters’ passing remarks about offstage events added to enhance a play’s reality effect, but those instances in which scenic enactment is bypassed. One might worry that Gruber’s focus on third-person accounts of offstage action overemphasizes the role of narrative within a dramatic framework. As he points out, however, “[n]arrative incursions are the rule, if anything, rather than the exception”—(89), and the book’s persistent regard for the tension between mimesis and diegesis reveals important insights into the subtle complexities of drama as a genre.

Gruber begins by tracking simple substitutions of narration for enactment and proceeds to more complex negotiations between telling and showing in plays where narration destabilizes stage action. Chapter 1, “Showing vs. Telling,” discusses the replacement of mimesis with narration by focusing on the messenger speech in classical drama and its equivalent on the modern stage. Gruber injects characteristic energy into this section (and sets up later chapters) by pointing to contemporary films that feature the retrospective narrative moment. An excerpted monologue from Jaws, for instance, proves that language can enhance the sensory effect that is typically provided by image and music in film. As Gruber argues, the details of a shark attack recounted by an eyewitness—of the shark’s “black eyes, like a doll’s eye,” and a victim who “[b]obbled up and down in the water, just like a kinda top”—aid spectators in constructing what might be called the felt experience of seeing a shark attack”—(21). Gruber moves beyond the paradox that staged violence (as “enactment”) is less real and shows why narration is more useful in activating the “mechanisms of visual perception and the visual imagination”—(25). As he points out, by engaging the audience’s imagination, narration provides a more participatory experience of the scene of theatrical violence.

The real innovation of Gruber’s book lies in its application of current neurophysiological theories of visual and cognitive processes of representation to the audience’s theatrical experience in order to account for how narration helps the audience imaginatively reconstruct the play’s narrated events. He suggests that the imagination works as effortlessly as the reflex of processing language; when audiences hear the messenger’s speech during a play, they decipher that language by drawing upon tropes and images found in both the fictional world of the play and the world of their own experience. Memory aids imagination, Gruber explains: “the messenger’s narrative [functions] as a blueprint or set of instructions for how to imagine actual sensory content”—(29). He cites examples from Euripides to recent performance art in order to demonstrate how narrated violence transcends the limits of language to become a vivid accompaniment to mimesis.

Chapter 2, “Against Mimesis,” concentrates on theatre’s unique capacity to generate empathy, but