

chapter culminates in a reading of *The Winter's Tale*. Altman first demonstrates how this romance begins with the problem of probability that consumes *Othello*, as when Leontes' imagination fabricates a story of adultery between Hermione and Polixenes, creating "out of the merest shreds of perceptibles a seamless fabric of adultery so tangible to him that its reality—its *res*—is as dense and compelling as the object world and, hence, of his own being" (367). But the play moves from probability to possibility, Altman continues, by staging an *im*-probable revelation in Hermione's resurrection and by "combining a real spiritual conversion with what is only a simulacrum of the sacred," an experience opposite to that of Othello surveying Desdemona's lifeless body, the effect of Iago's own perverse simulacrum of the probable as the true (371).

The Improbability of "Othello" is impressive as a study of the rhetorical tradition, a history of ideas, an investigation of Shakespearean genre, and an interpretation of *Othello*. It is formidably—and sometimes dauntingly—complex, with each chapter uncovering a new manifestation of the probable as articulated in humanist rhetoric, but time spent pays off. Latter chapters that have the potential to belabor the point engage the reader afresh by introducing social and phenomenological contexts. In this reviewer's opinion, Altman's greatest achievement is his bridging of the question of early modern subjectivity and that of rhetoric's influence on Shakespearean genre, or, as he represents them, ontology and rhetoric. While these two inquiries usually appear in separate studies, Altman has shown how *probability* is an early modern concept that, through words, defines and discomposes the self.

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Martin Puchner. *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 254. \$29.95.

Since my warm recommendation of Martin Puchner's new book appears on its back cover, and he at the same time composed a text appearing on the back cover of my own recently published *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance* (Stanford University Press, 2010; reviewed by Lydia Goehr in *Comparative Drama*), I hesitated to write this review when asked. But instead of recusing myself, I thought this would be an opportunity to raise some general issues concerning what I believe is a new direction (and perhaps even a new field) in the research of drama, theater, and performance, as well as for a philosophy that draws attention to the complex relationships between the discursive practices of these two fields. Puchner's contributions to this emerging area of research, to

which he, in different ways, has already drawn attention in his previous work, most prominently in *Poetry and Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2006), demand a thorough engagement.

One of the key issues in *The Drama of Ideas* is how to read Plato's dialogues and how to understand their main character, Socrates. The question is not on what grounds Plato will ban the arts from the ideal state and the (anti-theatrical) prejudices to which this position has given rise. Puchner's major concern is rather what kind of texts Plato composed and in which sense many of his dialogues are actually theatrical, not only in the sense that they are dialogical and can be performed, but mainly because they are profoundly connected to the theater of his own time. This is not a novel idea as such, but Puchner forcefully advances this claim, turning it into the intellectual and scholarly motor igniting a Platonic, alternative historiography of Western theater, a "dramatic Platonism" even overshadowing the much more canonized Aristotelean one. Puchner convincingly carves out a Platonic tradition based on a dynamic combination of dramas where Socrates is the main character, developing scenes in Plato's dialogues and dramatic texts with a strong philosophical basis, on the one hand, and philosophical writings (not necessarily written as dialogues) of "theatrical philosophers [who] think of drama and theater as their primary categories" (125) on the other.

One of the theoretical issues Puchner grapples with is how the genre of the dialogues, in particular, the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*, is constructed. This is an extremely complex issue, because both works, which are indeed among the most "dramatic" of Plato's dialogues, are actually retold by a direct or indirect witness to a curious listener who wants to learn what the participants at the occasions depicted in these dialogues said and how they, in particular Socrates, acted and reacted. Both dialogues (as well as *The Republic*, for example) are narrative reconstructions of past events.

Thus, after providing an analysis of the poetics of the Platonic dialogue in the first chapter (an issue to which I will return), Puchner surveys the hitherto unknown history of what he terms the "Socrates play," plays where Socrates figures as the protagonist. This is an impressive collection of sometimes less exciting plays, but they are important for a fuller understanding of the totality of the Platonic tradition. In an appendix Puchner provides a bibliography of more than one hundred such plays, indicating that more than half of them were written after 1900. The next stage in Puchner's argument for a "drama of ideas" is a chapter devoted to a group of modern playwrights, including Strindberg, Kaiser, Wilde, Shaw, Pirandello, Brecht, and Stoppard. Puchner argues that they can be understood as Platonic, not only because they are non- or anti-Aristotelian, but also in their own right, relying in different ways on Plato's own dramatic practices where ideas become materialized through scene, character, and (inter-)action. The "materializer" of ideas par excellence is of course Brecht, and the question

in which way his anti-Aristotelianism turns him into a Platonist (not just the initiator of epic theater) needs to be carefully studied, an endeavor for which Puchner provides a very useful starting point.

The last two chapters of the book are devoted to the work of philosophers who in different ways develop a dramatic as well as a theatrical perspective for writing philosophy, mirroring the two previous chapters. In the first of these Puchner examines the theatrical aspects in the thinking of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Burke, and Deleuze and the second is devoted to what Puchner calls the “New Platonists,” and it includes discussions of Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, and Alain Badiou.

It is impossible in a short review to relate to the wealth of ideas presented in these two chapters, analyzing a “turn” in philosophy that can be traced back to drama and theater in their broadest possible sense, through a broad range of engagements with the theater, its corporeality, mainly through acting, its use of language as situated in a specific context, and its ethical values. The reason philosophy is drawn to the condition of the theater in different ways, Puchner finally argues, is its ability, not to unify them, because that would obliterate their obvious differences, but to allow them to communicate meaningfully, even paradoxically enabling us to understand that which we do not yet know. This, Puchner reminds us in closing, is like the figure of Socrates in the famous painting by Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, who points at something which we do not yet know.

Finally, the reading of Plato’s dialogues opening Puchner’s book matters most for how the relations between the discursive practices of drama/theater/performance and philosophy are constructed. Without complicating matters too much—even though the issues are extremely complex—the most direct way to spell out the issue, is, on the one hand, to define the genre of the platonic dialogue when it is most theatrical, as in the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*, while at the same time trying to understand Socrates as a literary figure. I would say that Puchner begins from the issues of genre, suggesting that these dialogues are Satyr plays. My own point of departure (in *Philosophers and Thespians*) has been to draw attention to the similarities and differences between Oedipus, a philosophically inclined dramatic hero who suffers before he dies, and Socrates, who faces death without suffering.

Regardless of where we start both Puchner and I eventually end up in the same territory, in the liminal border landscapes where philosophical and theatrical discourses become creatively entangled. It is exciting to learn from Puchner how complex and productive these territories can be.

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