

REVIEW–DISCUSSION
AGAINST THE AUTHENTICITY OF
THE *SEVENTH LETTER*

M. Burnyeat and M. Frede, *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter*. Edited by Dominic Scott. Oxford: OUP, 2015. Pp. xvi + 224, ill. Hardback, £30.00. ISBN 978-0-19-873365-2.

Introduction

The question of the authenticity of the seventh of the *Platonic Epistles* has been the subject of intermittent but intense debate for centuries now, and it is not hard to see why. Quite in general, controversializing over writings insecurely attributed to great names is an absorbing activity, offering believers and sceptics alike the pleasure of asserting the rightness and importance of their own convictions, while unmasking the perverse credulity or misdirected suspicion of their opponents'. But each instance also of course has stakes of its own, and in the case of Plato and the *Seventh Letter* these are notably high. Any piece of first-person writing by a great figure of the past is potentially very valuable, but it would be something else again to have just the one from a philosopher of the first rank who in the whole of the rest of his surviving work notoriously conceals himself behind a gallery of ventriloquized characters in dialogue and oration. Moreover, the particular contents of this unique piece of apparent self-disclosure take the reader into some highly charged areas for the understanding of Plato's philosophical views and career: the formation of his political theory, his beliefs about the possibility of translating that theory into practical action, his views on the status of writing as a vehicle for philosophical communication, the possibility of the existence of unwritten Platonic doctrines believed by their originator to be more important than the contents of the dialogues. And if that were not enough, the ostensible date of the *Epistle*, 354 BC, if vindicated, makes it a hugely important document in the story of the development of autobiography in antiquity.¹

Any account of the history of the scholarly debate will show a succession of weighty authorities intervening at regular intervals on either side from the

¹ The point is underlined in particular by Momigliano, in *The Development of Greek Biography* (rev. ed.; Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1993) 60–2. Momigliano wanted to believe in the authenticity of *Ep.VII* precisely because of this potential importance, but with some show of residual scruples: 'I am reluctant to admit that forgery preceded reality in the matter of autobiographical letters' (61).

eighteenth century onwards, with periodic shifts in the balance of general opinion between them.² When Michael Frede and Myles Burnyeat gave the seminar in 2001 from which this volume is derived, it seemed to them that, after a period in the later twentieth century when sceptical voices (above all, Ludwig Edelstein's) were more prominent, the balance had more recently, for no very good reasons, swung back in favour of the believers. Frede diagnosed 'an uncomfortable balance' in which 'scholars are prepared to accept ... *Ep.* VII, but not with much conviction and with some hesitation ... especially if it suits the author for some other reason' (7). Burnyeat, in characteristically more forthright style, speaks of a situation in which 'more and more scholars do accept the reliability of the Seventh Letter—but not because more and more of them have done serious scholarly work on the subject ... just going with the flow' (ix, cf. 121). He also pours scorn on the compromise of doubting Platonic authorship but allowing the letter none the less to be the work of a close associate who knew Plato's life and ideas well (122–3; 'this lazy solution' which allows one to 'use VII to deepen your understanding of Plato's life and thought without bothering with the tricky issues of language, history, and philosophy on which the authenticity debate depends'). It is this state of affairs—'uneasy' or 'lazy' as you please—that the 2001 seminar and its publication fourteen years later are intended to shake up, and if there is any sense and justice in philological debate should surely succeed in doing.

Epistle VII

A brief reminder of the contents of the *Epistle* would probably be in order here, to clarify what exactly it is that is under debate. The year is 354 BC. Plato's old friend, the Syracusan aristocrat Dion, son of Hipparinus, having returned home from a period of exile in Athens and elsewhere, has recently led a successful insurrection against the tyrant Dionysius II, only himself to be assassinated by a former associate. Syracusan politics have again been plunged into a chaos of civil strife, and Dion's friends and allies now write to Plato to ask for his advice and assistance in fighting their cause. Stripped back to the bare essentials, Plato's answer is that he is ready to help them if their aims and ideals are really, as they claim, the same as Dion's and therefore (since it was from Plato that Dion acquired his) the same as Plato's own (323d–324a), and if they themselves are prepared to listen receptively (330c–331a). What Plato believes in, and Dion was aiming at, and Dion's friends should want too, is a constitution in which supreme power is held by a philosopher ruler who administers the state through an impartially applied system of laws. This is, ultimately, the

² A fairly full review of the scholarship is provided, though in three instalments: 7 (Frede), 100 (Scott and Atack), 121 (Burnyeat); this could have been more tidily and helpfully done.

only way to ensure true prosperity and happiness in any state. For the time being, however, given the current desperate conditions, they should regard this as a long-term aim only, and for the present seek to stabilize matters by assembling a corps of legislators from mature citizens of good family and comfortable circumstances and getting them to enact a set of impartial laws, which the winning faction in the civil war will agree to be bound by as much as the losers (330c–337e).

On its own, this response would not be enough to make as long a letter as we in fact have in *Ep.* VII (at 28 Stephanus pages, 34 of OCT, it is only fractionally shorter than the *Apology*). What makes the remarkable length is the fact that the practical advice is spliced together with an elaborate and chronologically complicated account of the formation of Plato's own political ideals, the story of his and Dion's earlier, unsuccessful, attempts to put these ideals into practice by working on the tyrant of Syracuse, Dionysius II, and the colourful details of his own personal, political, and philosophical dealings with Dionysius. The account of the formation of Plato's ideals involves a narrative of his early adult years as a member of a good Athenian family, which famously also comments on the death of Socrates. The account of the personal and political dealings with Dionysius develops into a kind of adventure story, as Plato finds himself at first attempting to defend his friend Dion's interests in the face of the tyrant's treacherous scheming, then grappling with a series of threats to his own liberty and even life. The account of his (abortive) philosophical dealings with Dionysius involves him, famously again, in an explanation of why the deepest truths of philosophy can never be committed to written form. All these strands (less perhaps the adventure story aspect) are held together by their role in underlining the point that Plato's political ideals and advice have remained unwavering and consistent throughout, and are based on the most impeccable of moral and epistemological principles.

Pseudepigraphic Letter Collections

Between them Frede and Burnyeat offer a three-, or possibly a three-and-a-half-pronged assault on this *Epistle's* claims to authenticity. Although they do so from slightly different sets of starting assumptions and in noticeably different tones of voice, their arguments do none the less converge neatly enough overall (even if the convergences and occasional discrepancies are not always signalled by the volume's editor, Dominic Scott). A pleasing texture results, conveying something of the complexity of viewpoints that argument over the *Epistle* brings into play and at the same time preserving something of the atmosphere of the original seminar.

The first prong of the assault, pressed home by Frede alone in Seminars 1 to 3 in Part I (3–40), centres on the status of the *Epistle* as a member of a letter

collection and on what can be known or reasonably suspected in general of the letter collections attributed to early (pre-Hellenistic) Greek intellectuals. Overall, the acknowledged existence of collections that are clearly not the work of their ostensible authors means that any such collection, Plato's included, must be open to suspicion. Frede's own favoured illustration (8–11, 13) is the letters of Plato's pupil Chion of Heraclea, supposedly written over a number of years up to 353/2 BC, with their tell-tale anachronisms and clear apologetic purpose (to show that the education offered by Plato's Academy produced not tyrants but heroes of active virtue).³ Other collections, for example the *Letters of Socrates and the Socratics*, would also have served, but the case of Chion is particularly good because so clearly suggesting what might have motivated the production of the *Epistle VII* if someone other than Plato wrote it. With this general point established, Frede then moves to closer quarters with an examination of other philosophers' letters with which Plato's are in one way or another associated. In 'Plato' *Ep. XII* and the letter by Archytas to which its purports to be a reply (D.L. 8.80–1) he rightly and uncontroversially detects a pair of reciprocally supporting pseudepigrapha, the existence of which casts doubt on the good judgement of whoever first put together our collection of the Platonic epistles (Thrasylus? Aristophanes of Byzantium?), and thus on the credentials of any of its members (18–25; cf. 88–91). In 'Speusippus' *Ep. XXX* (in the *Epistles of Socrates and the Socratics*)—slightly more controversially but again undoubtedly correctly—he sees a telling parallel to *Ep. VII*: a letter by the head of the Academy discussing and defending Platonic involvement in contemporary politics, the authenticity of which is 'dubious, to say the least' (27–40; cf. 91–4).

In all of this, Frede's arguments (as helpfully clarified by Scott in his 'Editor's Guide', 85–97) are both well aimed and deployed with scrupulous caution; their results are useful, and economically suggestive of lines of thought deserving fuller exploration. What they do not add up to, however, is anything like a full and systematic introduction to this aspect of the Platonic *Epistles* and the arguments over them, or indeed a very substantial original contribution to them. Frede's scrupulousness in taking discussion back to the basics of textual transmission and the making of letter collections is admirable, and a valuable reminder to a philosophical readership above all of what kinds of consideration have to come into play; but it leaves us with the spectacle of a penetrating intellect getting itself impressively up to speed with areas it hadn't considered in such depth before and along the way becoming engrossed in some of the

³ To the bibliography on Chion (nn. 8–9, 100–1), add N. Holzberg, 'Novel-like Works of Extended Prose Fiction II. E. Letters: Chion', in G. Schmeling, ed., *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne, 1996) 645–53; D. Costa, *Greek Fictional Letters* (Oxford, 2001) xviii–xix, 108–23, 179–86; M. Trapp, *Greek and Latin Letters* (Cambridge, 2003) 30–1, 70–3, 217–19; id., 'Biography in Letters, Biography and Letters', in B. McGing and J. Mossman, edd., *The Limits of Ancient Biography* (Swansea, 2006) 335–50.

specifics more than others (on which cf. Burnyeat's comment on p. x). Matters are of course not helped in this regard by the circumstances in which the published version has had to be put together, reconstituted over this stretch of the book from Frede's manuscript notes following his untimely death in 2007, collated with those of other seminar participants, and supported by exegetic material by Scott and Carol Atack. This inevitably leads to some awkwardness and inconvenience for the reader. Thus for instance the full text of 'Archytas's' letter and 'Plato' *Ep.* XII, minutely discussed by Frede on pp. 18–25, is only to be found in Scott's 'Guide' on pp. 88–9. Had he lived to prepare the material for publication himself, Frede would surely have smoothed out such presentational wrinkles, and perhaps also provided a fuller, more rounded guide to the pleasures and perils of dealing with pseudonymous and possibly pseudonymous epistles.

Could Plato Have Thought That?

The second prong of the assault on *Ep.* VII's credentials, to which both authors contribute, seeks to uncover implausibilities in its contents, in the light of what we know from other sources on the one hand about the history and personalities it evokes, and on the other about the quality and orientation of Plato's thought. In his Seminars 4 and 5 (41–65; cf. 94–7) and again in slightly different form in an Appendix (67–84), Frede offers two separate lines of argument, connected in relating to central points of Plato's political philosophy and in turning on what the historical (real) Plato could or should have believed at the supposed time of writing. In the second and relatively more straightforward of them (59–65), Frede argues that whereas the author of the letter thinks of his late friend Dion as a true pupil—a committed philosopher who really could given the right circumstances have matched up to the criteria for a philosopher king in the style of the *Republic*—our external evidence for the historical Dion (largely mediated to us by Plutarch's *Life of Dion*, though Frede does not directly comment on this) shows us a Sicilian aristocrat with only a passing interest in philosophy whom the real Plato cannot possibly have thought up to scratch. The same goes *a fortiori* for the view offered in the letter of the potential of Dionysius II. As Frede observes, the picture that the letter gives of Dion's philosophical commitment looks suspiciously like something built on a pre-formed conviction, inherited from elsewhere, that he was indeed a philosopher, rather than a report from the life—which is just what one might expect from a post-Platonic fiction.

Frede's second, more intriguing and controversial argument turns instead on a reading of the role the author assigns to philosopher kings. The author of the letter, as he sees it, from first to last maintains that the only way to a truly good constitution and a truly happy life for a state is for political power to

come into the hands of philosophers, and for those philosophers to administer it according to a virtuous code of laws which they have created and by which they are bound as much as their subjects are. This is the conviction he came to himself in his youth (326b), transmitted to Dion (324ab, 327ad), and acted on in both his second and his third visits to Sicily (326b; 3338b, 339b, 339e); and it remains his conviction as he now writes to the companions of Dion in answer to their request for advice and assistance (335d). With the exception of the role given to laws, it is the famous doctrine of the *Republic* (473c11–d6). Yet at the supposed time of writing of the letter, the real Plato must have been well at work on this other great political text, the *Laws*, in which the ideal of philosopher kings is abandoned in favour of the ideal ('second-best' though it may be, *Laws* 739a4, etc) of a code of laws devised and enforced by legislators who, however wise, are definitely not philosophers as envisaged either in the *Republic* or in *Ep.* VII. *Ergo*, once more, the author of the letter cannot be the historical Plato.

Scott in his Editor's Guide tentatively proposes an alternative reading, also apparently subscribed to by Burnyeat, which might disable this line of argument (96, 137). It turns on a part of the letter which Frede does not cite or discuss. In (finally!) giving his advice to Dion's friends in 330b–337e, the author of the letter ends by urging them to create an impartial code of laws by first constituting a legislative council composed of men of good family, mature years, and comfortable material circumstances, and he explicitly refers to this strategy (337d) as 'closely akin' (*adelphe*) to what he and Dion had aimed at earlier, but 'second-best' (*deutera*). Does this not, Scott suggests, mark precisely the shift from the ideal of the *Republic*, which the author no longer subscribes to, to that of the *Laws*, which he now, at time of writing, believes in? In which case the case for supposing that the author cannot be Plato, as Frede has articulated it, falls to the ground.

In fact it looks as if neither Frede nor Scott has things entirely right here. If we backtrack in *Ep.* VII only a little from the passage that Scott relies on (and Burnyeat also alludes to in the same spirit), to 336d7ff., it becomes clear that this 'second best' course is not actually being advocated as the only one the author now thinks can ever realistically be applied. It is an emergency measure designed to stabilize matters in the short term in the face of the catastrophic civil strife now ravaging Syracuse, in the hopes that the more radical and idealistic solution might still be applied at some future date ('But if, after all this [sc. the installation of philosopher kings, 335e–336d] is work for a future time, whereas immediate action is called for ...'). The author does still hope for the high ideal, and has not switched from the *Republic* pattern to that of the *Laws*. Frede, not Scott and Burnyeat, is right on that point. Yet it might still be urged that, given our necessary uncertainty about what Plato himself (the real Plato) thought about the relationship between what he said in the *Republic* and

what he said in the *Laws* (something that Frede is well aware of) it is unwise to lean too hard on the assumption Frede has to make about what Plato could have written for other purposes when he was engaged in composing the latter.

It might then be better to reflect that our modern scholarly preoccupation with the development of Plato's thought over time, and specifically the apparent changes of heart between *Republic* and *Laws*, was not one shared by his ancient interpreters, who tended instead to see harmony between the works wherever possible. In this perspective, what we may see in *Ep.* VII is precisely what we might expect, on the hypothesis that the author is someone other than and substantially later than Plato, who looks back on his political thinking as a unity. He combines the *Republic* and the *Laws* right from the start, by splicing together philosopher kings and an impartially administered code of laws, believing that in so doing he is being perfectly Platonic. And then (in what he may have thought of as a particularly clever coup) he borrowed the equally Platonic idea of a second-best solution from the *Laws*, in order to apply it not to a substitute primary ideal but to an urgent emergency measure.

Burnyeat too has a contribution to make to the attack on the plausibility of the *Epistle's* contents. Delivered in the first and shorter of his two chapters (121–33), it focuses on the philosophical competence of what he describes as the *Epistle's* 'one and only attempt at philosophical argument'. At 342a1ff., in the course of an explanation of why there is no genuine Platonic writing on the highest truths of philosophy, the author of the letter—as Burnyeat reads him—apparently argues from the premise that words get their meaning by convention to the conclusion that neither individual words nor words combined into a definition can display the essence of a thing as opposed to its quality. This is, as Burnyeat indignantly insists, an appallingly invalid argument, 'scarcely intelligible as an argument at all'. It is deeply unworthy of a philosopher of Plato's calibre; therefore once more the author of the letter cannot be Plato. He is instead someone who has cobbled together an only approximately understood patchwork of ideas and phrases from *Laws*, *Phaedrus*, *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Parmenides*, in the attempt to *sound* convincingly Platonic. He is an attentive reader of Plato, but no philosopher.

The ultimate diagnosis that Burnyeat offers here is spot on, and could usefully be developed to cover the linguistic style of the *Epistle* as well as its philosophical matter. But at the same time there is room for the feeling that he has only achieved the devastating precision of his hammer blow—the diagnosis of specific and extreme intellectual incoherence—by some over-exacting and tendentious reading, finding attempted (and failed) logic where none in fact was intended. There is certainly an optimistic vagueness in what the author sets down: in some unexplained, and probably inexplicable way, the 'weakness of language' (343a1) is said to be responsible for the fact that name, definition, image, and knowledge all 'attempt to reveal quality in the case of an individual

thing no less than the essence of that thing'. But the shocking inference from the conventionality of language to this inability to get beyond quality to essence may be the product of Burnyeat's infuriated attempt to twist an identifiable argument out of his author, rather than something intended or articulated by the author himself. Burnyeat makes too much of a philosopher of him even as he tries to deny him philosophical competence.

Overall, then, the outcome of this phase of the argument is an interestingly complicated one. The specifics of the cases made, about the appropriateness and plausibility of some of the key contents of the letter for the real Plato, are not watertight. But in the process of making them, Frede and Burnyeat succeed in establishing a set of alternative profiles for the author which believers in its authenticity ought to find worryingly persuasive ones.

'Prose Tragedy': An Alternative Reading

The last major prong of the assault on the authenticity of *Ep.* VII, which is in many ways also the most imaginative and stimulating of the entire volume, is Burnyeat's sole work, and occupies his long second chapter (135–92: 'The second prose tragedy: a literary analysis of the pseudo-Platonic *Epistle* VII'). Threaded through Frede's discussion, there were indeed intermittent and intelligent suggestions of what frames one might set the *Epistle* in and how one might read it (as apologetic, as historical fiction with the benefit of hindsight) if and once it had been decided that it was definitely not by Plato. But it is Burnyeat who rises to this challenge directly and attempts a comprehensive reading in one such possible key. The result is impressive, sensitive and wonderfully provocative, even if in the end deeply questionable in many of its aspects.

For Burnyeat, as the chapter title just quoted indicates, the *Epistle* should not be understood as primarily a piece of apologetic, designed to defend Plato and the Academy against hostile criticism of their interventions in Sicilian politics. Nor is it the work of anyone with any kind of philosophical competence, or real philosophical interests. Its author was instead someone who had been inspired by Plato's invention of the idea of prose tragedy (*Laws* 817b) to try an experiment: the experiment of making a prose tragedy in epistolary form out of Plato's own life, from youthful idealism to his last sad abandonment in old age of the dream of realising those ideals in the messy reality of Sicilian politics—otherwise formulated 'the Tragick Tale of Plato's Adventures in Sicilie'. Or rather—there is something of a wobble here: is this the tragedy of a man or of an idea?—the tragic hero is the ideal, 'the Policy' of establishing the rule of a philosopher king in living reality ('a tragedy of Philosophy's attempt to change the world, not merely understand it', 138).

As already suggested, there is much to admire in Burnyeat's analysis, perhaps above all his insistence on the need for close attention to and appreciation of 'the economy of VII', as 'no random collection of historical *aperçus*, but a carefully structured literary narrative' (138–9), selecting, arranging, and eliding its materials with unobtrusive cunning (for instance in connection with the enormous complexities of Syracusan political manoeuvrings and the interrelations between the main actors, which are so prominent in Plutarch's *Life of Dion* but entirely neglected, or at most fleetingly hinted at, in *Ep. VII*). This general appreciation translates admirably too into an enviably keen eye for purposeful detail: for instance, in the observation (138) that the early mention of the attempt by the Thirty Tyrants to suborn Socrates to their evil schemes is not a casual piece of biographical colour, but a first appearance of the important theme of the confrontation of Philosophy with Tyranny and a prefiguration of the designs of Dionysius on Plato; or again, in the suggestion (138–9 n. 9) that the surprising mildness of the author's reference to Socrates's trial and execution betrays a desire to underline the essential reasonableness of the restored democracy, which is in turn connected with the moderate policy he now wishes to urge on Dion's friends and allies half a century later. Also utterly to the good is Burnyeat's alertness to the ways in which the author of the letter is recycling ideas, phrases, and episodes from genuine Plato. What is more questionable is whether in the end either the broad idea of 'prose tragedy' or the specific uses Burnyeat makes of it in this instance really work.

For one thing, he seems too keen to apply his analysis on the level of form as well as themes and atmosphere. Thus Plato's actual advice to Dion's friends, the overt point of the whole letter, comes to be branded an interlude, 'the prose equivalent of a long meditative choral interlude set just before, and culminating in, the midpoint of a tragedy' (149). And because this is a tragedy, moments have to be found to constitute the *anagnorisis* (162, 172) and the *peripeteia* (172). But equally, there is some strained and implausible reading in the identification of key themes and actors. For Burnyeat, key elements in the shaping of the events narrated are the interventions of a malevolent divine spirit (a notion he rightly brands as deeply unPlatonic; 143, 154–5, 181, 188) and the destructive operation of *thymos* in the human soul (190). And a key part of the tragic story that is presented of dashed hopes and high ideals gone to the bad is for him the corruption of Dion, the man who might have been his country's saviour as philosopher ruler but ended by betraying philosophy and succumbing to anger and revenge (185–9). But references to a baleful spirit (e.g. 337d, 336b) can be better read as a means of underlining the importance of key turning-points in the march of events than as serious attributions of causal responsibility. What the author constantly stresses as the antithesis to good philosophical motivation and the enemy of philosophical values is not *thymos* but *epithymia*, sensual appetite (326bc, etc). And the alleged motif of the corruption of Dion depends on highly tendentious readings of 350b–e (the meeting with Dion at Olympia)

and the letter's final verdict on Dion's fall (351c–d): in the former, Dion is indeed seen swearing revenge (which is a false step for a Platonist), but there is no emphasis at all on his giving way to corrupting anger; in the latter Dion is clearly portrayed as a good man (*hosios, sophron, emphron*) who slipped up by miscalculating the depth of the villainy of his opponents, not as a philosopher gone fatally to the bad.

For all the incidental acuteness shown in the analysis of individual sections (and there is much more of this than it had been possible to touch on here), the interpretation offered thus fails to convince as a whole, and one is left wondering if the idea of prose tragedy, as understood here, is a useful, or even a very coherent one (in what illuminating sense is a piece of prose a tragedy, if it has another identifiable literary form (a letter) and lacks any of the formal features of tragedy in the standard sense?). The overall spirit of the analysis, and the reading of the intention behind the letter—to be not a piece of philosophy, nor even primarily a vindication of the role of philosophy, or specifically the Academy, in politics, but a moving literary entertainment—do however seem to point in a very promising direction, even if (or perhaps precisely because) they threaten to take the *Epistle* out of the mainly philosophical contexts in which it has normally been discussed.

But if not 'prose tragedy', what interpretive frame or frames should be applied instead? *Pace* Burnyeat, apologetic aims cannot be dismissed as firmly as he wishes to do. Frede in his contribution, as indicated above, is rightly more hospitable to this idea, and in his discussion of Chion of Heraclea indirectly suggests a tempting chronological context in the criticism of the Academy in the later fourth century BC associated with the names of Demochares and Theopompus (10–11). But even if this is felt to be too precise, the fact remains that *Ep. VII* reads like the work of an author who is an admirer rather than a detractor of Plato and philosophy and is keen to show that the blame for political failure lay not with them but with a corrupt world. Above all, however, more needs to be made of the fact that *Ep. VII* is a letter, and can therefore usefully be read against the background of our awareness of the things letters in general are and do in ancient writing (an avenue that, again, Frede just begins to explore, but only incidentally to his main focus on issues of authenticity).

On a purely formal level, for instance, it is striking—but also very familiar from other letter collections—how much writing, sending, and reading of letters goes on in the action of the story it tells. Dion summons Plato to the court of Dionysius with a letter (327d–e), as subsequently does Dionysius himself (339b–c), supported by other missives from Archytas and his colleagues at Tarentum (339d). As he spars with Dionysius, Plato imagines the possibility of a lying letter from the tyrant to Dion (346e), urges the need for a joint letter from both of them (347c), and insists on the need to await a return letter from Dion (347e). Letters are a major mechanism for forwarding the action of the story, and also for exploring the deviousness of one of its principal actors and the

anxieties of the narrator, Plato, himself. But I would like to suggest that the most significant point—one that is not touched on by either Frede or Burnyeat, though it is present in some of the earlier scholarship on *Ep.* VII—is that letters were and were perceived as, among other things, a biographical medium: biographical in particular in the sense of ‘biography’ famously articulated by Plutarch in the preface to his *Lives* of Alexander and Julius Caesar, as something concerned with revealing moral character rather than recording exhaustive narrative detail. For, as a matter of their essential literary identity, as perceived by ancient critics, letters are a place where, more easily or more regularly than in other forms of writing, the essential character of the writer is on display (a letter is ‘a picture of the soul’) sooner than (though not excluding) the actions and events of his life. On this understanding of biography, it becomes all the more obvious that a collection of ‘real’ letters can be read, whether this is intended by their author or not, as a kind of autobiography, and that correspondingly a pseudepigraphic letter or collection can be designed as a contribution to third-person biography, made vivid by the impersonation of its subject.

This is a framework into which *Ep.* VII surely fits very neatly. It centres on a key episode in the life of Plato, which might in any case be felt to cast a revealing light on his character and values; but in addition to this it presents him as explaining directly and in person how his actions in the present are consistent with the values and ideals that he formed in his youth and has upheld even since. The ‘Plato’ of the letter thus provides an autobiography in both cases, sketching the key events of his life as they bear on his political thinking, articulating not only the key values of his political philosophy, but also the moral and epistemological convictions in which they are embedded, and illuminating his essential character in the moral choices he is shown making in his interactions with the other characters in the story. All this is done, moreover, in a verbal style that ostentatiously mimics that of the later Plato and (as Burnyeat well points out, 129–33, 169) constantly evokes famous words and phrases from the dialogues. It is as if an author, well versed as so many were in Plato’s works and style, but with only a relatively limited interest in the deeper aspects of his thought, had set out to capture the essential man for an audience with similar horizons to his own. This might indeed have been done with some defensive aim, in a context in which disobliging things were being said about the philosopher and his calling, but a defensive aim on its own did not necessitate the choice of this particular, epistolary-biographic medium.

Concluding Reflections

Where then does Frede's and Burnyeat's intervention in the discussion of *Ep. VII* leave us? I have tried to suggest a number of ways in which their contribution falls short of being an entirely full or balanced treatment. One further respect in which this is so is in the space given to stylistic matters. Burnyeat does indeed, as just observed, have some acute things to say about the ways in which the letter's author tries to sound like Plato; he also includes a brief and somewhat under-explained Appendix (193–5) on *un-Platonic* 'verbal repetitiveness in *Epistle VII*'. But neither side to this is very systematically developed. There is surely much more that could usefully be done on this score, focusing on the idea of stylistic mimesis, rather than on austerer forms of stylometric analysis, which have so far failed to produce a clear answer to the question of authenticity. Where Frede and Burnyeat, with Scott's and Atack's aid, do succeed admirably, on the other hand, is in the salutary jolt that they surely administer to any complacent belief that the *Epistle* is more likely than not to be by Plato, or that even if not by Plato it must be by someone who knew him and his times from close quarters. All the more effectively because they argue in such different styles from each other, and do not share exactly the same assumptions and preoccupations, the interaction and combination of their lines of attack throws the burden of proof firmly onto the shoulders of the believers. It will be extremely interesting to see how much or how little notice is taken of this in philosophical circles from now on.

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