

Theater Outside Athens

Drama in Greek Sicily and South Italy

Edited by KATHRYN BOSHER



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8 | Dionysius I and Sicilian theatrical traditions in Plato's *Republic*

Representing continuities between democracy and
tyranny

S. SARA MONOSON

In the *Republic* Books 8 and 9 Socrates addresses the implications of the philosophical arguments developed earlier in the dialogue for the assessment of familiar regimes. At the center of this part of the *Republic* is the critique of tyranny. Socrates argues that tyrannical rule is, contrary to common understanding, *inevitably* brutal and that the inner life of a tyrant is *necessarily* miserable. There is no room in his account for the notion of a benevolent or happy tyrant. His arguments challenge his readers to be alert citizens, not easy marks for a would-be tyrant's duplicitous propaganda, and urge them to develop their capacities to resist their own inner tendencies to desire great power and, however secretly, envy the tyrant. To convey these points Socrates presents a theoretically driven model of a tyrant's political and inner rule that features winged drones and wolves. Though it is not a historical portrait of any tyrant in particular, allusions to recognizable empirical examples enliven the account, giving it an added layer of fascination. Specifically, the portrait of tyranny in the *Republic* appears to be based on the rule of Dionysius I of Syracuse. In this essay I review the usual evidence cited to support this identification, introduce considerably more, and argue for its substantial theoretical significance. In particular, I argue that this identification is a central part of Plato's presentation of a key theme in his political thought – the continuities between tyranny and democracy. In addition, I find that patterned allusions to Sicilian theatrical traditions and to Dionysius I's ambitions as a dramatist figure importantly in Plato's critique of dramatic poetry, including its eviction from the ideal city. I also find that recognizing the importance of Sicily in Plato's imaginary reveals new layers of meaning in the dramatic setting of the *Republic*. Finally, I review supporting evidence for this reading from the *Gorgias*.

Dionysius I and the portrait of the tyrant in *Republic* 8 and 9

The generally accepted dates of both Plato's first trip to Sicily (388–387)¹ and the composition of the *Republic* (not earlier than the 370s) are consistent with the possibility that Plato's first-hand observations of this tyrant could have informed his written portrait of tyranny in the *Republic*.² In addition, three features of the depiction of the tyrant in the *Republic* strongly suggest Plato was thinking of Dionysius I of Syracuse and have been read this way by commentators.

First, in *Republic* 8 Socrates argues that tyranny springs from democracy, specifically, from a demagogic leader adept at exploiting the aspirations of unsophisticated people (562a–566a, esp. at 565c5–e1).³ This model of revolutionary change did not have widespread empirical resonance. It does not fit the Athenian experience with the Peisistratids. It does not fit the case of Hieron of Sicily. It does not fit the early Greek tyrants discussed by Herodotus (e.g., the Corinthian Cypselus and Periander or Polycrates of Samos) nor, of course, does it fit the legendary Persian king/despot

¹ It is difficult to fix the exact date of Plato's visit. Finley suggests 388/7. Finley (1979) xiv, 88–93. My argument assumes only that the *Republic* was composed after the first visit and this much is not controversial, except among the very few outliers who question whether any visit took place at all, e.g., Caven (1990).

² Plato's visits to Syracuse during the reigns of Dionysius I and II and long relationship with the elder tyrant's nephew, Dion, are known to us from the collection of thirteen letters attributed to Plato, only a couple of which are probably genuine, and the fanciful tales related nearly 400 years later in Plutarch's *Life of Dion*, a source which drew heavily on the letters and legends about such things as Plato being sent to the slave market at Corinth by Dionysius only to be serendipitously rescued by other philosophers who were present and could buy his freedom. In addition, as Finley notes "there is not a trace" of any account of Plato's actual influence on Sicilian affairs in the historical narratives we have in Diodorus of Sicily or even in Aristotle's "references to Dion's maneuvers, which took place in his own lifetime." Finley (1979) 91. Finley is referring to Diod. Sic. 16.6–20 and Arist. *Pol.* 1312a4–6, 33–9; 1312b16–17. Diodorus discusses Plato only to note that Dionysius welcomed him to his court along with a number of other noteworthy intellectuals, poets and cultural leaders from around Greece and to relate the suspect tale about Plato being sold into slavery (at Diod. Sic. 15.6–7), and not to suggest he had any impact whatsoever on any policies pursued by Syracusan rulers. I accept *Letter Seven* and *Letter Eight* as genuine. See Monoson (2000) 119.

Plato's account of his interest in Dionysius II and Dion captured imaginations starting already in antiquity and through to today and persistently presents vexing problems for the interpretation of his political thought. Did he go to Sicily to "implement" a fully formed idea of a philosopher-king? Did his experiences in Sicily shape his understanding of tyranny or of the philosopher-king? In what sense are Plato's political ideals "realizable?" The evidence for Plato's trips to Syracuse begs these questions. I address these issues in Monoson (2000) 145–53.

³ Τοῦτο μὲν ἄρα, ἦν δ' ἐγὼ, δῆλον, ὅτι, ὅταν περ φύηται τύραννος, ἐκ προστατικῆς ῥίζης καὶ οὐκ ἄλλοθεν ἐκβλαστάνει "So when we look at the growth of a tyrant, I said, one thing at least is clear, this position of champion is the sole root from which the tyrant springs" (Pl. *Resp.* 565d). (Trans. Ferrari – see note 7.)

Cambyzes who was an exemplar of tyrannical cruelty for the Greeks. In fact, Aristotle complains at *Politics* 1316a (Book 5) that Socrates' account of revolutions (regime changes), and especially his account of the origins of tyranny, is deeply flawed precisely because it is contradicted by so many known empirical examples.⁴ We can observe, however, that the rise of one famous Greek tyrant does indeed fit the account given in the *Republic* – Dionysius I of Sicily. Indeed, Aristotle himself cites the elder Dionysius as an example of a tyrant who attained power by demagogic appeals to the poorer classes (Arist. *Pol.* 1305a26–2). Moreover, Diodorus provides documentation to substantiate that view (Diod. Sic. 13.91.3–96.4).⁵

Second, the *Republic's* account of a tyrannical soul's uncontrolled condition and the human behavior it produces matches the description in *Letter Seven* of the behavior of Dionysius I observed by Plato during his first visit to Syracuse. Plato says in *Letter Seven* that Dionysius I frequently indulged in excessive feasting, drinking and sex (326b). Precisely the same vices are ascribed to the tyrant in the *Republic* (573d). In the *Republic* Socrates indicates that such a soul, when placed in a position of political authority, will be avaricious to the point of ordering the confiscation of citizens' property and pathologically paranoid to the point of seeing conspiracies everywhere and being utterly friendless. *Letter Seven* ascribes the tyrant's failure to stabilize and extend his empire in Sicily to a dearth of true friends and comrades (331e–332a).⁶ *Letter Seven* also stresses Dionysius' paranoia, indicating that he was constantly suspicious of his own nephew Dion and that others close to him were party to some conspiracy. Dionysius' association with paranoia was legendary. The anecdotal tradition includes stories about how he had his own wives strip-searched before bedding them, had a broad trench dug around his bed to deter any attacks while he had his guard down in the throes of passion, and allowed only his own daughters to give him a shave and even then allowed them only an odd, dull tool – heated walnut shells that would singe the beard (Cic. *Tusc.* 5.20). Cicero's account of the Sword of Damocles also links Dionysius I to the image of an isolated paranoid. Dionysius is said to favor illustrating the pressures on a sole ruler to a flatterer by seating him on a throne located directly beneath a sword suspended by a single horsehair (Cic. *Tusc.* 5.21).

⁴ ἐν δὲ τῇ Πολιτείᾳ λέγεται μὲν περὶ τῶν μεταβολῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ Σωκράτους, οὐ μὲντοι λέγεται καλῶς “The subject of revolutions is discussed by Socrates in the *Republic*, but is not discussed well” (Arist. *Pol.* 1316a1). (Trans. Rackham [1944].)

⁵ I am indebted to Finley (1979) 75 for this reference. Another Sicilian tyrant, Gelon, of Syracuse may also fit Plato's account, though far less neatly. See Finley (1975).

⁶ Nails observes the link between this passage in *Letter Seven* and the portrait of the tyrant in *Republic* Book 9. Nails (2002) 134.

The third feature of the depiction of the tyrant in the *Republic* that strongly suggests Plato was thinking of Dionysius I of Syracuse is a remarkable passage in which Plato uncharacteristically inserts his own voice into the text of the dialogue. At *Republic* 577a–b Socrates alludes to the travels of the dialogue's author. Socrates asks, who is capable of properly judging a tyrant's mental state? The "best judge" he says, "is the person who can mentally worm his way into a man's character and take a long, hard look at it."⁷ When Socrates continues we expect an explanation that stresses the philosopher's capacity to penetrate the external appearance of the tyrant and "see" his internal state. The passage identifies the tyrant's ruling strategy with the organization of grand displays put on for "outward show" and clear thinking with an ability to resist being "dazzled" (μη ἐκπλήττεται) by "theatrical costumes and props." Instead, at this point we get an appeal to the special credibility one should afford an eyewitness. Socrates states:

He must not see it [the tyrant's mental state] from the outside, like a child, and be dazzled by the display of grandeur which tyrants put on for outward show, but must look at it fairly and squarely. And if I were to think that *we should all listen to the man* who is qualified to form a judgment, *who has lived under the same roof as a tyrant, who has been in a tyrant's company and seen his behavior* – both in his private life, the way he deals with each member of his household, where he can be seen stripped of his theatrical costume and props, and then again in public, when he is in danger – *should tell the person who has seen all this to give us his report* on how that compares, in terms of true happiness and unhappiness, with other people? (577a–b, my emphasis)

In this passage, as Adam noted in his commentary, "the dialogue form is strained almost to the point of breaking . . . We are all to be silent and listen to Plato himself."⁸

Assessing the theoretical significance of the identification

These three elements of the account of tyranny in the *Republic* combine to provide strong evidence for its identification with Dionysius I. What could be the theoretical significance of these allusions? What connections might they work to highlight? Plato did not need to place Dionysius I before his readers to convey that brutality and the arbitrary use of power

⁷ Throughout this chapter *Republic* translations are from Ferrari (2000). Citations of the Greek texts are from Burnet (1903) on Perseus Digital Library.

⁸ Adam (1969 [1902]) II, 333.

are markers of tyranny, nor to recall for readers that tyrants often whip up wars, enjoy little true friendship, are often manipulative and duplicitous and cause domestic disaffection. These features of tyranny were already part of the stock image of the tyrant in Greek literature. Why direct attention to one Sicilian tyrant in particular? Did Plato conjure a contemporary figure (contemporary to readers, not to the characters in the dialogue) in order to mobilize current empirical observation in the service of theoretical points expressed by Socrates in the dialogues, perhaps as a nod to the force of Thucydides' work? Possibly, but such a point must remain speculative. I propose that we must look more closely at the text for additional evidence of a meaningful engagement with Sicilian affairs in the *Republic*. When we do, we find that references to the rule of Dionysius I are more numerous still and that they systematically mobilize the tyrant's associations with theater. In particular, we find that the association of Dionysius I with the use of tragic theater as a means of "royal self-presentation"⁹ proved tremendously helpful to Plato as he developed an account of the place of theater in the story of the troubling continuities between democracy and tyranny and presented it to his readers.

Dionysius I and Sicilian theatrical traditions in the *Republic*

As the contributions to this volume stress, the evidence for a flourishing theatrical culture beyond Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries supported by tyrants is strong. From Plato's vantage point, we know, for example, that in his adulthood Archelaus of Macedonia commissioned work from Euripides and that the tragedian Agathon (in honor of whose victory the action of Plato's *Symposium* takes place) also had some kind of contact with Archelaus.¹⁰ Already in the time of the action of this dialogue in the fifth century a vibrant theatrical culture existed under the rule of several different Sicilian tyrants (e.g. Gelon and Hieron). For example, the comic playwright Epicharmus of Sicily was very highly regarded well beyond Sicily and Aeschylus had ties to the court of Hieron. His *Aetnaeae* was written to celebrate Hieron's re-founding of that *polis* and there is good evidence that Aeschylus' *Persians* was produced at Sicily.¹¹ Recent excavations and assessments of other material and visual evidence also supply compelling

⁹ I borrow this phrase from Duncan, this volume, 143.

¹⁰ On Euripides' ties to Macedon see Revermann (1999/2000).

¹¹ On Epicharmus, see Willi and Rodríguez-Noriega Guillén, this volume, and Bosher (in press). On Hieron and Aeschylus, see Bosher, this volume.

evidence for a flourishing theatrical culture under the reign of the fourth-century tyrants at Sicily.¹² Turning to the rule of Dionysius I in particular (404–367), we know that the tyrant not only supported theater in Sicily as a means to curry favor with the populace, but also aspired to be a serious playwright himself. Several titles and a few fragments of his poetry are extant.¹³ In addition, we find a collection of peculiar anecdotes about his poetry in various later sources (all of which ridicule the quality of his verse). The reputation for poor poetry notwithstanding, it is recorded that in 367 his tragedy, *Ransom of Hector*, was staged at the Lenaia, an Athenian dramatic festival – and won first prize.¹⁴

Duncan argues in this volume that Dionysius I composed tragedies and arranged for their elaborate stagings as part of a “concerted campaign” to present himself to spectators in Sicily and beyond as a “Just Ruler.” I find this suggestion and her assessment of much of the evidence more than plausible. But we should also note that in so doing Dionysius was not necessarily being particularly innovative. Oost has argued, for example, that in Syracuse “there was nothing incompatible in actuality between the fact of tyranny and the title of king, and that Syracusan monarchs or tyrants of that time did in fact assume the royal title” and promote themselves as just rulers.¹⁵ Claiming a royal title and association with justice were parts of a propaganda effort. This view fits well with other evidence we have for Dionysius’ concern to avoid allowing Athenians formally to refer to him as *tyrannos*.¹⁶ Duncan further argues that to promote his political goals and indulge his appetite for repute as a poet, Dionysius I may have experimented with some unorthodox forms and ideas, perhaps writing historical or even autobiographical tragedies. This reading is an interesting way to assemble some of the disparate and fragmentary evidence for his poetry. There is one exception. I think it is improbable that one of his “autobiographical” plays could have represented Dionysius I’s personal falling out with Plato over the proper understanding of the just ruler. Plato stresses in *Letter Seven* that Dionysius I went to great lengths to conceal their personal conflict from others, especially from the Syracusan demos, because maintaining the appearance of being a confidant, even a favorite, of the philosopher supported his propaganda efforts. Indeed, Plato reports that Dionysius I detained him for so long precisely because he was concerned to produce this

¹² On the archaeological evidence see Marconi and Dearden, this volume. On the evidence from the visual arts see Taplin (2007a) and in this volume.

¹³ The evidence is collected in Snell (1971). ¹⁴ Diod. Sic. 15.74.7. ¹⁵ Oost (1976) 224.

¹⁶ Dionysius I negotiated a treaty with the Athenians around 367 the language of which avoids calling him a *tyrannos*, choosing instead the unusual term *strategos autokrator*. This suggests he was managing his image in the larger Greek world, and especially in democratic Athens. I am indebted to Duncan, this volume, 151, for this detail.

appearance (*Letter Seven* 329d, 330a). And so, I think it highly unlikely that Dionysius would have produced a drama (“genre-bending tragicomedy” or not) attacking Plato.¹⁷ Perhaps it was Plato’s own followers who, in order to separate the philosopher from the tyrant, spread stories about their conflict, possibly even about Plato being sold into slavery by Dionysius I only to be rescued by friends of philosophy. News of a serious conflict between the two served Plato’s interests in distinguishing the idea of a philosopher assuming the title “king” from this empirical example of a tyrant who actually did assume the title king. Publicizing the conflict would not have served the interests of Dionysius.

Putting aside the question of what we can say about the specifics of the style and plot of any of the individual autobiographical plays possibly produced by Dionysius I, if it is simply true that, as Duncan proposes, he wrote and staged tragedies expressly to promote a view of his own rule as something other than a brutal tyranny and himself as something other than an unhappy, paranoid despot – that is, that his poetry was a remarkably straightforward part of a political propaganda campaign – Plato would certainly have found it useful to layer references to this figure into his critique of tyranny in the *Republic*. A main aim of that text is, after all, to blast the very notion that a benevolent tyranny and happy tyrant could ever truly exist and to show that anyone who makes such a claim is delusional. Another aim, of course, is to show that dramatic poetry clouds the judgment of its viewers, making them vulnerable to precisely such delusional thinking. I show below that Plato refers regularly to Dionysius I to develop precisely these central points of his critique of dramatic poetry.

Four additional puzzling passages from the *Republic* support the identification of Dionysius I with the portrait of the tyrant and in seeing that portrait as harboring Plato’s interest in the continuities between democracy and tyranny. Each of these passages pivots on allusions to Sicilian theatrical traditions.

First, Socrates refers first to democracy and then to tyranny as the “most delightful” of regimes (of democracy, καλλίστη αὕτη τῶν πολιτειῶν εἶναι at 557c; of tyranny, ἡ καλλίστη δὴ, ἣν δ’ ἐγώ, πολιτεία τε καὶ ὁ κάλλιστος ἀνὴρ λοιπὰ ἄν ἡμῖν εἴη διελθεῖν, τυραννίς τε καὶ τύραννος, at 562a). The terms in these two passages are striking and so raise questions for readers. What can account for this common appellation? What charming, attractive cultural productions characterize both democracy and tyranny? Recognizing that the full passage alludes to Sicilian theatrical traditions, we can illuminate the meaning of this pair of passages. At 568c Socrates links the

¹⁷ Duncan, this volume, 147.

allure of both tyranny and democracy to their support for theatrical productions. Tragedians tour cities, "drawing great crowds and hiring actors with fine, loud persuasive voices, and so seduce those states into tyranny and democracy" (εἰς τυραννίδας τε καὶ δημοκρατίας ἔλκουσι τὰς πολιτείας 568c). He continues, in both regimes "they get paid for this, and are treated with respect. First and foremost by tyrants, as you might expect, but also by democracy." First and foremost by tyrants, as you might expect? If we assume readers are familiar only with Athenian theater (and fifth-century poets), that comment certainly seems odd. But, if we imagine that Plato's contemporaries saw both tyrants and the Athenian demos as great patrons of tragedy and tragedians, the passage makes better sense. The point of the passage is to raise awareness of the possibility that their common support for theater signifies a shared weakness; both promote activities that corrupt their citizens' capacities for critical thinking.

Recognizing allusions to Sicilian theatrical traditions, and especially to the poetic aspirations of Dionysius I, also clarifies another difficult passage from the *Republic*: Socrates' famous exile of tragedy from the ideal city. The text of that passage in the *Republic* offers a straightforward political reason for the necessity of the exile.¹⁸ Tragedy can, and does, valorize tyranny. The exact phrasing of the point is arresting.

Writers of tragedy, being so wise, will forgive us and those with regimes like ours [ideal ones], if we refuse to accept them into our state on the grounds that they are apologists for tyranny [ἄτε τυραννίδος ὑμητῶς, 568b].

If we assume that readers are thinking only of Athenian poets and extant tragic poetry, these grounds do not make clear sense. And indeed commentators have even suggested that Socrates is being unfair to tragedians like Euripides. But, if we allow that Plato's readers could be thinking not only of Athenian theatrical traditions but also of contemporary Athenian tragedians' occasional forays to the Macedonian court of Archelaus, of Sicilian theatrical traditions flourishing under tyrants, and indeed of the poetic ambitions of Dionysius I in particular, these grounds are less puzzling.¹⁹ The passage may even be leveraging knowledge of Sicilian theater to provoke

¹⁸ That argument is, of course, deepened philosophically by the critique of mimesis that follows.

¹⁹ Adam nearly suggested this way of reading this passage in his commentary on the *Republic*. He proposed that Dionysius I likely is the model of the arrogant type of tragedian sarcastically referred to in the passage as "so wise." In Adam's view, this passage recalls Dionysius I's reputation for "effrontery" because it alludes to the following well-known line of (bad) poetry composed by a sitting tyrant: "Tyranny is the mother of injustice." This sentiment was a commonplace. As a notable quote from the work of the propagandist/tragedian/tyrant Dionysius I, however, it was infamous, even scandalous. See Adam (1969) II, 260 and Snell (1971) fr. 4.

some questions about the merits of the form altogether. It prods readers to ask, "How far are there troubling continuities between the work of a tragedian like Euripides (mentioned in the same passage) and a propagandist/tragedian/tyrant like Dionysius I?" The passage acknowledges the reader's desire to distinguish between two kinds of tragedians. Adeimantus says to Socrates, for example, that some of the excluded tragedians "will forgive us. Or the more civilized of them (αὐτῶν κομψοί, 568c) will at any rate." But the discussion of imitative poetry that follows drives home Socrates' critique of the form they share, pushing recognition of their likeness (in contrast with philosophy). For example, Socrates allows poetry re-entrance to the ideal city only once the poets or their defenders can deliver a compelling argument in behalf of poetry being "a good thing" in another meter or in prose (607d).

Two additional references to Sicily in the *Republic* have Dionysius I in mind and both suggest tyranny's link to unrestrained passions, a weakness that, in Plato's view, also links tyranny and democracy. In the discussion of the physical education of the guardians in Book 3, Socrates asserts that if you want your body to be in good shape you must avoid fancy foods. He continues, addressing Glaucon, "Then if you think this is right, my friend, Syracusan cuisine and the Sicilian *à la carte* are apparently not things you approve of?" (404d). This mention of cuisine could be a reference not only to well-known Sicilian indulgences but specifically to Dionysius I. His court was famous for elaborate feasts, unusual ingredients and fancy preparations. So much so, it seems, that the anecdotal tradition attributes Dionysius I's collapse and death in 367 to overeating and drinking at a celebration following his play's victory at the Lenaia (Diod. Sic. 15.74). In Book 10 Socrates refers to Sicily again. Here the issue is whether good poets, like Homer, can create knowledge and whether striving to be a good poet is even a laudable aim. Socrates insists that it would be better to set one's sights on being a memorable lawgiver. He cites three examples of lawgivers who famously resisted the allure of tyranny—the Spartan Lycurgus, Sicilian Charondas and Solon of Athens (599d). The contrast between these lawgivers and Dionysius I, a *tyrannos* who famously sought recognition as a poet, is just under the surface. Mention of the Sicilian Charondas alongside the Solon and Lycurgus is unexpected, making the implied contrast with Dionysius I more evident.

Before moving ahead we should pause to consider whether Plato's contemporary readers had a sufficient measure of familiarity with Dionysius I to be able to recognize these allusions. Is it reasonable for us to assume that Plato could expect his particular take on Dionysius I to indeed resonate

and enter the public discourse? We have ample evidence to put this concern to rest. We know that ties between the Athenian *polis* and the Sicilian tyrant Dionysius I were topics of public discussion in Athens. For example, the Athenian poet Cinesias proposed a decree honoring Dionysius and his family in 394/3.²⁰ Lysias the orator reports that Dionysius I responded to the request of an Athenian embassy to refrain from sending triremes to assist the Spartans that same year (Lysias 19.19–20). In Aristophanes' *Wealth* the character Poverty "laments the stupidity of the Athenians" by saying that "Thrasylbulus and Dionysius are one and the same to you" (*Plutus* 550).²¹ Isocrates wrote Dionysius after the Battle of Leuctra urging him to "save Greece."²² Dionysius I and his two sons were given honorary Athenian citizenship in 368.²³ As we noted earlier, in 367 his play *Ransom of Hector* won first prize at the Lenaia. And, of course, the court of Dionysius entertained notable cultural figures from Athens, including Plato.

The dramatic setting of the *Republic* and patterned references to Sicily

Alert to the part reference to Sicilian affairs plays in Plato's presentation of the continuities between democracy and tyranny, we can see new meaning in the dramatic setting of the *Republic*. This has gone unnoticed in the scholarship because it is not often thought important that Cephalus, the *metic* whose family hosts the gathering at which the action of the dialogue takes place, is a native of Syracuse.

We know some details of Cephalus' life from his son Lysias' autobiographical speech (Lys. 12). Cephalus left Syracuse for Athens during what Finley calls the brief "democratic interlude" in the history of tyrannical rulers in Syracuse.²⁴ He left for economic reasons and, at the urging of Pericles, came to Athens. He arrived during the 450s, before the Peloponnesian War and during a period of great prosperity at Athens. He flourished, becoming one of the wealthiest men in Athens from his ownership of a shield factory. He lived in Athens for more than thirty years. Commentators have noted that his personal history and connection to the democratic stronghold of Peiraeus suggest some of the features of "democratic man" that Socrates

²⁰ IG II.2 3028 with Nails (2002) 98.

²¹ I am indebted to Sanders (1987) 12 for this reference. ²² Sanders (1987) 5.

²³ See Pomeroy *et al.* (1999) 364–7 for review of Athenian views of Dionysius.

²⁴ Finley (1979) 58.

details later in the text, that is, his passion for money-making, short attention span and abrupt movement from one activity to the next as the mood strikes. That the notable life stories of his sons Polemarchus and Lysias could also be meaningful has received little attention. This is unfortunate as their stories suggest some of the ways in which democracies produce tyrannical forms of power, giving credence to a main argument of Book 8 that democracies are exquisitely vulnerable to slippage into tyranny (if not in the sense of a full-scale regime change then at least in the sense of bringing about tyrannical episodes of consequence).

The action of the dialogue is set at the home of Polemarchus, a son of Cephalus who has a prominent speaking role in Book 1 of the *Republic* advocating the (later rejected) view that justice involves helping friends and harming enemies (332a–c). The silent presence of Cephalus' other son, Lysias (the famous orator) is surely also significant.²⁵ How does Sicily fit into the story of these two sons beyond the family's Syracusan origins? Most importantly, the sons of Cephalus were among the colonists who founded Thurii in Sicily in about 443 or so. Thurii was a remarkable experiment. Protagoras (of "man is the measure" fame and whose name provides the title of another Platonic dialogue) designed the colony's law code at the request of Pericles, and the colonists, all of whom would enjoy citizenship status in the new colony, seem to have had some idealistic aims.²⁶ During the Peloponnesian War, the Thurians sent ships to help the democratic leader of Syracuse, Hermocrates, subdue the Athenian forces threatening Sicily. A wave of anti-Athenian sentiment hit Thurii following that Athenian expedition and Lysias and Polemarchus opted to return to Athens (as *metics*). Once back in Athens these brothers fared badly. The Thirty executed Polemarchus (and confiscated his considerable wealth). Lysias escaped and left Athens to join the exiled democratic partisans led by Thrasybulus. He fought alongside exiled citizens to topple The Thirty and restore the democracy. Back in Athens Lysias quickly found himself at the center of controversy over an "unconstitutional" policy pursued by over-zealous returning democratic partisans. Thrasybulus proposed that all *metics*, foreigners and slaves who

²⁵ The silent presence of Lysias might be due to his age at the time of the dramatic date of the *Republic*, that is, if we date the action of the *Republic* before his departure to Thurii in about 430 (explained below). At that time Lysias would have been a young teenager (about 15). If we date the *Republic* later, we would have to explain the silent presence of a famous orator in some other way.

²⁶ For discussion of the measure of idealism that may have motivated the colonists see Fleming (2002). For discussion of the collaboration of Protagoras and Pericles regarding Thurii, see O'Sullivan (1995). For an account of the involvement of Lysias and Polemarchus in Thurii see Nails (2002) 190–4 and 251.

had supported him and the overthrow of The Thirty be given full Athenian citizenship. The decree passed. This sounds modestly progressive to us given how routine the naturalization process is in modern liberal democratic societies. But granting citizenship to *metics* and freed slaves – even those who served with distinction in the Athenian military – was a very radical idea at Athens. So it is not surprising that an Athenian statesman successfully challenged this policy and the offers of citizenship were revoked. Nor should it surprise us that moderation-loving Aristotle showers that statesman, Archinus, with extraordinary praise precisely for his opposition to the citizenship decree proposed by Thrasybulus (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 40.1–2).²⁷

In Plato's view, the stories of the ethnic Syracusan *metics* at Athens,²⁸ Polemarchus and Lysias, brought to mind moments at which the Athenian demos acted impulsively and thus irresponsibly. The turbulent life stories of Polemarchus and Lysias recall what we can imagine Plato categorizing as "tyrannical episodes" in the history of Athenian democracy that predate the clearest example of such proclivities in Plato's view – the prosecution of Socrates. The Sicilian expedition, The Thirty²⁹ and Thrasybulus' overreaching are all episodes that Plato casts as empirical exemplars of the dangerous tyrannical proclivities that inhere in democracy, an argument developed theoretically in Books 8 and 9. Setting the action of this dialogue at the home of Polemarchus signals that a central theme of the inquiry into justice about to unfold is the troubling continuities between democracy and tyranny.

Supporting evidence from the *Gorgias*

If knowledge of Dionysius I and Sicilian affairs in general are among the resources Plato draws on to craft the presentation of his critique of tyranny, and especially to make a case for the troubling continuities between tyranny and democracy, we should expect to find evidence of this in the *Gorgias*. The critique of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* turns on Socrates' ability to undermine the attraction that mastery of rhetoric holds, an attraction that he and his interlocutors identify as both central to the practice of democracy and very

²⁷ For discussion of Aristotle's assessment of Archinus see Frank and Monoson (2009).

²⁸ For discussion of the figure of the *metic* in ancient political thought see Kasimis (2010).

²⁹ It seems that Plato did not treat this episode as an oligarchic revolution but as a tyrannical interlude in the history of Athenian democracy. This is consistent with the references to The Thirty in *Letter Seven*. In the *Apology*, moreover, Socrates treats the rule of The Thirty as an example of the violent excesses of one faction in a democracy, not necessarily as the actions of separate, oligarchic regime.

much “like” the allure of holding a tyranny. This likening comes out in the exchange between Socrates and the ethnic Sicilian Polus at 466b–e.³⁰ Socrates insists that, contrary to common opinion, “orators have the least power of any in the city” (466b). Polus answers him, “Really? Don’t they, like tyrants, [ὡσπερ οἱ τύραννοι, 466b10] put to death anyone they want and confiscate the property and banish from the cities anyone they see fit?” To which Socrates responds, yes, “both orators and tyrants have the least power in their cities . . . They do just about nothing they want to, though they certainly do whatever they see most fit to do” (466d–e). “What an outrageous thing to say, Socrates,” Polus explodes. “Perfectly monstrous!” (4667b).³¹ And so, one of Socrates’ goals in this dialogue turns out to be to persuade his listeners that tyrannical power and, correspondingly, rhetorical skill, are not indeed in themselves desirable. Having great power and being wildly happy are, Socrates argues in the *Gorgias*, properly understood to be vastly different from possession of tyrannical rule or exceptional rhetorical skills. Plato’s effort to knit together his critiques of rhetoric and tyrannical rule establishes a major theme of the *Gorgias*: the worrisome continuities between democracy and tyranny.

So, how far does the substantive argument of the *Gorgias* press the example of Dionysius I into service? Does the text activate the author’s knowledge of this Sicilian tyrant to enliven the argument about the continuities between democracy and tyranny? It does. It is even possible that one attraction of the *Gorgias* for readers in mid fourth-century Athens was its veiled discourse on the (contemporaneous) flamboyant ruler of this rival *polis*. In any case, I propose that key features of the argument of the *Gorgias* refer to Sicily and forecast arguments further developed in the *Republic* at places I have already shown to be animated by allusions to Dionysius I. As a preliminary note, the scholarship on the date of composition of the *Gorgias* is consistent with the suggestion that knowledge of Dionysius I informs its content. It places the composition of the *Gorgias* very soon after Plato’s first visit to Syracuse.³²

The *Gorgias* first alludes to Dionysius I in Socrates’ exchange with Polus over the happiness of the tyrant. Polus refers to “current events” in a manner that recalls not only a contemporary of the dialogue’s action, Archelaus of Macedonia, but a reader’s contemporary, Dionysius I, as well. The passage

³⁰ Polus of Acragas in Sicily. See Nails (2002) 252.

³¹ Translations from the *Gorgias* throughout this essay are from Cooper (1997). Citations from the Greek text are from Burnet (1903) on Perseus Digital Library.

³² Dodds suggests that the sequence of composition is the *Euthydemus*, visit to Sicily, *Gorgias*, *Menexemus*. See Dodds (1979) 27.

in question starts with Polus expressing longing for a taste of tyrannical power. He has a hard time accepting Socrates' view that people who have acquired vast tyrannical power are, by definition, not happy. Challenging Socrates on the misery of the tyrant, Polus says: "There is no need to refer to ancient history to refute you. Why, current events quite suffice to do that." Polus strikingly distinguishes between a tedious look back at the past for evidence and the easy availability of contemporary evidence to show that many people who behave unjustly are indeed happy (οὐδέν γέ σε δεῖ παλαιοῖς πράγμασιν ἐλέγχειν: τὰ γὰρ ἐχθὲς καὶ πρώην γεγονότα ταῦτα ἱκανά σε ἐξελέγξει ἐστὶν καὶ ἀποδείξει ὡς πολλοὶ ἀδικοῦντες ἄνθρωποι εὐδαίμονες εἰσιν, 470c–d). He explicitly identifies two contemporaries (of the action of the dialogue) whom he considers supremely happy because they are able to commit horrible crimes with impunity. On your reasoning, he asks Socrates, are Archelaus of Macedonia and indeed the Great King of Persia actually miserable? (*Gorgias* 470d–e). It is almost as if Polus is a stand-in for Plato's contemporaries who wonder, are you, Plato, really saying that Dionysius I is unhappy? That the example of Dionysius I is just below the surface is even clearer when Socrates playfully suggests that actually he cannot really judge the happiness of Archelaus because he has not met the man (οὐ γὰρ πῶ συγγέγονα τῷ ἀνδρί, 470d8) – a proviso that does not apply to the author's ability to judge his contemporary, Dionysius, as he again stresses at *Republic* 577a (when Plato inserts his own voice into the action).

Three additional passages from the *Gorgias* allude to Dionysius I and Sicily. Two refer to the excessive indulgences that characterize Sicilian culture in the Athenian imaginary. The third refers explicitly to Sicilian theatrical traditions.

Socrates attributes the origins of the notable soul/sieve analogy of the *Gorgias* to a Sicilian teller of stories (493a–d). At this point in the dialogue Socrates is trying to explain the misery of a man who suffers *pleonexia*, a condition of insatiable desire, to which democratic souls are vulnerable and which defines a tyrannical soul. Socrates argues that a miserable soul is like a leaking sieve (493b); peace is elusive because no matter how furiously one tries to fill up the container and enjoy its pleasures, the contents keep seeping out, requiring endless labors to continually replenish it. This soul can never be sated but is always struggling, constantly in want and distress. Socrates reworks the tale a second time only a few lines later. This tale too, he says, originated "in the same school" (493d), that is, "in Sicily or at least Italy." Here we get an image of a pair of lives. One man's life is like a sound, full jar. The other's is like a leaky, rotten one. The life that is akin

to a leaky, rotten jar is characterized by constant labor. Such a life is miserable. It is bereft of enjoyment, rest, relaxation and satisfaction (493e–494a). What meaning can we find in the attribution of these images to a Sicilian? Sicilians, and especially the renowned Dionysius I, were, in the Athenian imaginary, famously gluttonous. And so the empirical references seem designed to enliven the theoretical point about the nature of a tyrannical soul.

In Socrates' discussion of whether rhetoric and poetry can claim to make their hearers better or are, at best, forms of demagoguery (502c10–d2) we find a reference to Dionysius I's poetic aspirations. Socrates suggests it is necessary to look at the "majestic, awe-inspiring practice of the composition of tragedy" (502a). Can poets educate or merely gratify spectators? Stripped of its adornments, is dramatic poetry really a form of demagoguery? Socrates directly asks Callicles:

Don't you think poets practice oratory in the theatre?

οὐ ῥητορεύειν δοκοῦσί σοι οἱ ποιηταὶ ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις;

Yes, I do.

So now we've discovered a popular oratory of a kind that's addressed to men, women, and children, slave and free alike. (502d)

A poet practicing oratory in the theater seems a near explicit reference to Dionysius, the tyrant/dramatist who unabashedly utilized dramatic poetry and theatrical productions as vehicles for promulgating a propagandistic view of his own rule and self.³³ This passage anticipates the argument in the *Republic* for banishing the poets on the grounds that they are apologists for tyranny (discussed above re: *Republic* 568b). Taplin has suggested another reason to see allusions to Sicily in this striking passage. He proposes that this passage assumes the conditions of Sicilian, as opposed to Athenian, theatrical culture.³⁴ Taplin's concern is the evaluation of the evidence for the presence of women in the audience of the ancient dramatic festivals. The evidence is notoriously difficult because it seems contradictory, and there is no consensus in the scholarship. Taplin proposes that the earlier literary evidence for women's presence in the theater may refer to Sicilian norms, and the earlier literary evidence for the exclusion of women from the theater may refer to Athenian norms. Later sources indicating the presence of women

³³ A more direct reference to Dionysius I would have introduced a blatant anachronism into the text of the *Gorgias*. While the several indicators of the dialogue's dramatic date conflict, all place the action during the years of the Peloponnesian War, years before the rule of Dionysius I.

³⁴ Taplin, "Were Women Among the Theatre Audience in Ancient Athens? And Does It Matter?" a talk delivered at Northwestern University, Nov. 5, 2008, as part of the John E. Sawyer Seminar Series, 2008–10.

among the spectators at Athens, he offers, likely refer to a development at Athens that was possibly influenced by contact with Sicilian customs. Taplin thus suggests that this passage in the *Gorgias* – a passage that explicitly refers to a kind of theater that is addressed to men, women, and children, slave and free alike (502d) – assumes the example of Sicilian theater-going customs or the Sicilian influence on the development of Athenian customs.³⁵

More *Gorgias* passages demonstrate that Plato fashions evocations of Dionysius I to augment his account of the continuities between democracy and tyranny. Socrates famously calls up his reader's knowledge of his own fate at the hands of an Athenian jury when he tells Callicles that he has little confidence in the ability of ordinary members of the demos to judge him well. Any prosecution of Socrates will resemble the following scenario:

I'll be judged the way a doctor would be judged by a jury of children if a pastry chef were to bring accusations against him. (521e)

At this point in the text Socrates has just completed his critique of oratory and is trying to cast himself as the "only one among our contemporaries to take up the true political craft and practice true politics" (521d). Nevertheless, he acknowledges, he is very likely to be misunderstood, even ridiculed. To explain he offers the clever Callicles a metaphor he had earlier used to try to communicate with Polus (a lesser intellect, cf. 465c). The inference we are supposed to draw from this image, of course, is that the critical capacities of the jurors are pathetic and that orators are masters at exploiting their vulnerabilities. The jurors/citizens are likened to sick children who neglect a doctor's recommendations because a fancy chef entices them into believing that the doctor is wrong to say medicines can help more than a plate of rich sweets. The pastry chef in this example, like a demagogue in a democracy or a tyrannical propagandist, stimulates and directs desires that benefit his own standing, all the time pretending to be tending to the well-being of others. Socrates prods interlocutors to ask, "Is the pastry chef a good caretaker of the body?" "In what cultural environment would the answer be, 'Yes'?" Socrates' doctor/pastry chef comparison indicts everyday contemporary Athens under the democracy and, I think, everyday Sicily under the tyranny of Dionysius I as well. Why think Sicily as well as Athens is in play here? Plato sets up the link earlier in text. At *Gorgias* 518d Socrates identified excellence at pastry baking with a notable Sicilian, the Syracusan

³⁵ The *Gorgias* reiterates an awareness of Sicilian dramatic traditions by mentioning Epicharmus, the notable Sicilian comic dramatist, at 505e.

Mithaecus. He cites this Sicilian author of a book about pastry baking along with an Athenian wine merchant and Attic baker as wonderful caretakers of the body in the eyes of most people.³⁶

Concluding remarks

Critical examination of the allure of unrestrained power and democracy's tendency to unleash the tyrannical impulses of individuals and cities did not of course start with Plato. Neither did the practice of setting Sicily at the center of attention to this theme. Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War had already placed the Sicilian campaign at the crest of his depiction of the relationship between democracy and empire.³⁷ Plato exploits his reader's familiarity with these connections. But Plato's use of references to Sicily to situate theater at the center of an investigation of the continuities between democracy and tyranny was innovative. In this chapter, I have shown that Plato relied on references to Sicilian manners, rulers and practices to keep the key role of theater in his account of the continuities between democracy and tyranny before his readers. In particular, the portrait of the tyrant in *Republic* Books 8 and 9 recalls the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius I, reiterates the *Gorgias*' attack on tyrannical power's appeal (developed with references to Sicilian affairs) and systematically deploys patterned sets of allusions to Sicilian theatrical practices, including the poetic aspirations of Dionysius I.

³⁶ See Nails (2002) 260, 278 and 341.

³⁷ For example, Thucydides depicts the Athenian empire as a tyrannical outgrowth of democratic power. Both Pericles and Cleon refer to Athenian rule (*archē*) as a "tyranny" (2.63.2 and 3.37.2), the Athenians' decision to attempt to subdue Sicily is likened to an act of unimpeded eros (6.19, 24) and the Athenians are said to have turned on Alcibiades because they worried he aspired to tyranny (6.15.4).