

# THE SEVENTH LETTER

A Discussion of Myles Burnyeat and Michael  
Frede, *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter*<sup>1</sup>

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MEDIEVAL manuscripts contain over twenty letters purportedly written by Plato. Thirteen of these letters form the fourth and last element in the ninth and last of the Tetralogies in the canon of Plato's works that was compiled by Thrasyllus, court astrologer to the Emperor Tiberius. Of these thirteen letters, by far the most substantial is the one that Thrasyllus placed seventh. It is equal in length to all the other twelve put together: that is to say, it is about the size of the *Charmides*, or of a typical tragedy.

The Seventh Letter has an interest out of all proportion to its size. For it is unique among the purportedly Platonic letters in being often taken for genuine Plato;<sup>2</sup> and if it is genuine, it gives us two things that we can get from none of Plato's dialogues. In the first place, the dialogues give us only the scrappiest of facts about Plato's life: he was present when Socrates was tried, offering to pay a fine on his behalf (*Ap.* 34 A 2; 38 B 7–9), but absent through illness when Socrates was executed (*Phaedo* 59 B 10). The Seventh Letter, by contrast, contains an ample narrative of Plato's political life from his coming of age in the late fifth century down almost to the time of his death in the middle of the fourth, and focused on his misadventures over the years in Syracuse. In the second place, the dialogues do not contain a single passage, not even a short one, where Plato speaks, in his own voice, to tell us of his philosophical beliefs. They leave us in a curious position: we have quite as much information about what philosophical thoughts Plato entertained as we have for

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<sup>1</sup> Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter*, ed. Dominic Scott (Oxford, 2015), pp. xv+224.

<sup>2</sup> See D. Del Corno and P. Innocenti, *Platone: Lettere* (Milan, 1986), 37–9, which tabulates thirty different judgements on the authenticity of each of the letters in Thrasyllus' canon.

more or less any philosophical thinker in history; when, however, we ask which thoughts Plato not merely entertained, but positively accepted, we are reduced to conjecture, whether crude (for instance, that Plato believed the thoughts that he put into the mouths of the heroes of his dialogues) or subtle (for instance, that Plato believed the thoughts to which we are forced when we do justice to all the thoughts that he puts into the mouths of all his characters). The Seventh Letter, by contrast, avows many beliefs about political theory, metaphysics, language, and epistemology. Moreover, the Seventh Letter might also, if genuine, help us with our ascriptions to Plato of beliefs which it does not directly avow. For example, if the beliefs that it does avow are all put into the mouth of Socrates, then we might infer that Plato also believed whatever else he put into the mouth of Socrates. Perhaps such information about the beliefs and political activities of Plato is only a higher form of gossip, something that should be of no great interest to us as austere philosophers. But accurate gossip about the philosophical great is bound to interest us as human beings, and as historians of philosophy; moreover, even the austere philosopher should be interested in the relations between philosophical thoughts entertained, beliefs accepted, and political actions undertaken.

And what if the Seventh Letter is not genuine? A lot will then depend on the intentions, capacities, and opportunities of its author. At one extreme, people sometimes suppose that the author was a close follower of Plato, well informed about the master's beliefs and activities, who at least meant his letter to have the plausibility of a properly researched historical novel, and who perhaps even hoped to get his letter accepted as genuine by people who were equally well informed. On this supposition, the Seventh Letter would be almost as useful a source as it would if genuine. At any rate, when it says something that was once readily checkable, it will even now be readily credible. And if—as might be expected—the readily checkable concerned Plato's political activities more than his philosophical beliefs, Plato's political activities are where we particularly feel the want of information from the man himself. At the other extreme, we might suppose that the author of the Seventh Letter has as little connection to Plato as the authors of the letters of Socrates, Heraclitus, and Diogenes<sup>3</sup> have to those other philosophers. In

<sup>3</sup> These, and many other such collections of letters, are to be found in R. Hercher, *Epistolographi Graeci* (Paris, 1873).

that case, we should no more think of deriving information about Plato from the Seventh Letter than we think of deriving information about, for example, Epicurus' senile pursuit of the courtesan Leontion from her letter about it to Lamia (Alciphron, *Ep.* 4. 17).

The authenticity of the Seventh Letter was the subject of a series of Oxford seminars in Michaelmas Term 2001, which eventually resulted in this book. Michael Frede and Myles Burnyeat led the original seminars.

Burnyeat is still with us, and was able to polish his contribution to the seminars into the form in which it is presented here. Frede died in 2007, leaving one version of his thoughts on the Seventh Letter in a polished essay, here reprinted. But his contribution to the seminars had to be reconstructed from the detailed manuscript notes of his own from which he spoke, occasionally supplemented by the recollections and notes of three scholars who attended the seminars: Lesley Brown, Tobias Reinhardt, and Christopher Taylor. Dominic Scott did this reconstruction, turning Frede's notes into continuous prose. Scott describes the process of reconstruction in an 'Editor's Introduction' and an 'Editor's Guide', and gives a vivid sense of what it required by reproducing in facsimile a few pages of Frede's manuscript. In collaboration with Carol Atack, Scott also equipped Frede's contribution with a scholarly apparatus of endnotes, which amplify some of Frede's references, comment on some editorial difficulties, and the like. This gives the Frede section of the book a strangely inconsistent character. On the one hand, Frede's manuscript is treated as something of an object of scholarly study in its own right. Thus Frede's own redundant and repetitive checklist of putatively Platonic epistles is faithfully reproduced on p. 16, instead of being silently set straight; and while any resolute copy editor of a living author would simply insert parenthetical English translations where house style forbids the quotation of untranslated Greek, every Greek word that Frede quotes is translated in the endnotes. The spirit here seems that in which we do not prune Shakespeare's redundancies, or promote our glosses on his words from margin to text: it is as if the editor is presenting a source for future historians of scholarship. On the other hand, Frede's manuscript is also used as raw material for a work addressed to those interested not so much in Frede as in the Seventh Letter. Thus the manuscript's elaborate marking of sections and subsections with roman and arabic numerals, and Greek and Latin letters, is almost

entirely removed. The spirit here seems that in which, on serving the roasted joint, we remove the string that trussed it when raw. But we can hardly blame Scott for giving the Frede section of the book a character so strangely inconsistent. For what else could Scott have done? Provide what the palaeographers call a diplomatic transcript of Frede's manuscript? Promote himself to Frede's co-author, and treat Frede's notes as ruthlessly as one treats one's own rough drafts?

The original plan for the seminars was that Frede would attack, and Burnyeat defend, the authenticity of the Seventh Letter. But as Burnyeat prepared for the seminars, he came to think that this would mean defending the indefensible (p. ix). The upshot is that the book contains two attacks on the authenticity of the Seventh Letter.

Before Frede and Burnyeat present their attacks, Frede argues in detail that the Seventh Letter is, if not quite guilty by association, at the very least highly suspect because of the company it keeps. Almost all philosophical letters that purport to be earlier than Epicurus' are bogus. Indeed almost every collection of such letters is entirely bogus. In most cases, that would be agreed without argument. Frede provides a compelling argument that it applies also to the correspondence of Speusippus with Philip of Macedon. So if the Seventh Letter is genuine, it is a freak. The point is not simply that the Seventh Letter would be the first authentic philosophical letter; for after all, given that there are now and have not always been such letters, there must have been a first. The point is rather that there would be no second such letter for a long time afterwards. We therefore need a strong argument if we are to accept the Seventh Letter as authentic. And we lack what would be the strongest kind of argument: someone close in time to Plato who mentions the Seventh Letter and says it is by Plato. Indeed, there is not this kind of argument for the authenticity of any other of the supposedly Platonic letters; and for some of them—notoriously the Twelfth—there is actual argument against authenticity. Of course, such reasons for suspecting the Seventh Letter are precisely that and only that: reasons for suspecting it. Nor does Frede claim otherwise.

As for positive arguments against authenticity, Burnyeat has two, and so does Frede.

Burnyeat's first argument is that by speaking about malign deities at 326 E 1–3 and 336 B 4–C 1 the author of the Seventh Letter

reveals a commitment to a radically un-Platonic theology. The difficulty with this argument is that even if maleficent deities are denied by Socrates at *Rep.* 379 C 2–7, they are not clearly affirmed in the Seventh Letter; and the cagey formulations of the Seventh Letter are not out of keeping with what the Stranger says in the *Laws*. Compare 326 E 1–2 ‘it might have been chance, but the appearance is that one among the superior powers was even then contriving’ (ἴσως μὲν κατὰ τύχην, ἔοικεν μὴν τότε μηχανωμένῳ τινὶ τῶν κρείττωνων) and 336 B 4–5 ‘presumably a sort of supernatural being or a sort of vengeful spirit’ (ἢ πού τις δαίμων ἢ τις ἀλιτήριος) with *Laws* 854 B 1–4 ‘some bad thing that is neither human nor divine . . . a sort of sting, innate in the human race from ancient and unexpiated wrongs, that goes about in vengefulness’ (οὐκ ἀνθρώπινον . . . κακὸν οὐδὲ θεῖον . . . οἰστρος δέ . . . τις ἐμφυόμενος ἐκ παλαιῶν καὶ ἀκαθάρτων τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἀδικημάτων, περιφερόμενος ἀλιτηριώδης).

Burnyeat’s second argument is that the author of the Seventh Letter is a philosophical incompetent: nobody with the philosophical capacity of Plato, or of a pupil of Plato, or even of a philosophical critic of Plato, would think to move, as the Seventh Letter does at 342 A 7–343 E 1, from the premiss that words get their meaning by convention to the conclusion that words can give only an inadequate representation of the essence of a thing. One counter to this second argument would be that the philosophical incompetence of the author of the Seventh Letter cannot be all that gross, given that Burnyeat did not discern it until preparing for his seminars with Frede. Another counter would be that even competent philosophers sometimes produce strangely gappy inferences; for is not detecting and filling such gaps a main task for historians of philosophy?

Frede’s first argument is that if Plato wrote the Seventh Letter, he would have written it when he was writing the *Laws*, and thus, at the very least, taking very seriously, as worthy of ample development, the idea that the rule of law is an acceptable second best to rule by a philosopher king. Yet that attitude to that idea cannot be squared with what the Seventh Letter says when it borrows from the *Republic* to maintain that only the prospect of establishing ideal rule by a philosopher king can license any intervention in politics. This argument is hard to counter. It requires no contentious identification of a view of one of Plato’s characters with a view of Plato’s own; and its assumption about the date of the *Laws* is, in the light

of Arist. *Pol.* 1264<sup>b</sup>26–7, as certain as anything else, and far more certain than most things, in the dating of Plato's dialogues.

Frede's second argument is that Plato could not possibly have been so foolish as to think that Dion was, and that Hipparinus and the younger Dionysius had the capacity to become, a philosopher fit to be king. This argument is more problematic than Frede's first. For consider what would be the purpose of the Seventh Letter if its author is not Plato. The Letter could be interpreted as something of an apologia, a sympathetic narrative of key events in Plato's life, devised by some supporter or admirer with a view to giving those events as good a gloss as possible. In that case, the key events presented here—Plato's visits to Sicily, his failure to achieve anything worthwhile in the tangle that was Syracusan politics—must have been notorious among those for whom the apologia was meant. Finer details of those events, and of Plato's motives for his part in them, would no doubt have been matters for debate or speculation or apologia. But the apologia would be motiveless unless the story that it tells is true in its broad outlines. This would mean that Plato, on coming to engage in practical politics, was guilty of some grotesquely foolish misjudgements. And someone foolish enough to get caught up in Syracusan politics, as Plato must have done if the apologia interpretation is correct, is certainly foolish enough to hope that in Dion he has found a philosopher king.

But what if the apologia interpretation is not correct? The largest part of Burnyeat's contribution to this volume is an argument that while the Seventh Letter may contain apologetic elements, it is not in fact an apologia at all, but something more like a tragedy: a tragedy in prose. To quote Burnyeat's own formulation from p. 136: 'The idea of a tragedy in prose is Plato's invention (*Laws* 817b). My suggestion is that our author borrowed the idea to make a tragedy in epistolary form out of Plato's own life.' This conceit is somewhat strained. When *Laws* 817 B 2–5 mentions prose tragedy, the context is what we should say to tragic poets who seek admission to our new city: 'We ourselves are poets, so far as in us lies, of a tragedy that is most fine and most good. For we have ordered our entire constitution as a representation of the most fine and most good life; and this ordering is pronounced, at least by us, to be, in reality, the most true tragedy.' Strained also is Burnyeat's suggestion that 'Our author will do his best to give us a tragic plot of the kind Aristotle approves, in which events are linked to one another by necessary or

probable connections' (p. 140; cf. pp. 144–5). For it is odd to suppose an author so eager to follow Aristotle in this respect, and yet so eager also to write 'The Tragick Tale of Plato's Adventures in Sicilie' (p. 137's proposed title for the Letter), in defiance of Aristotle's warnings about *Theseids* and *Heracleids* composed by poets who imagine that a plot is properly unified, not by representing one action (or adventure), but by representing incidents in the life of one man (*Poet.* 1451<sup>a</sup>16–35), and in defiance also of Aristotle's observation that a tragedy is overloaded if it contains as many incidents as an epic (*Poet.* 1462<sup>b</sup>3–11). In fact, Burnyeat himself does not always insist that the Seventh Letter is a tragedy. For he describes it, not only in dramatic terms (e.g. p. 137 'let the curtain rise on'; p. 142 'Act I'; p. 158 'Enter Archytas') but also in terms more redolent of the cinema (p. 151 'Flash forward to') and of chapter headings in vintage novels (p. 138 'The birth of our hero'). Hence it seems that the important thing for Burnyeat is not so much that the Seventh Letter be a tragedy as opposed to some other kind of storytelling, but that it be storytelling as opposed to history. It is 'a work of imaginative literature' by 'a distinctive, original, and interesting creative mind' (p. 137). Thus the claim on p. 177 that the conversation at 348 E 5–349 A 2 is 'stichomythia-like' is less a comment on its formal properties than a reminder that nothing like it need actually have taken place.

Burnyeat substantiates his claim that the Seventh Letter is a literary confection by an extended literary analysis, which goes through aspect after aspect of the letter, in each case displaying the literary effect achieved by that aspect's being as it is. The aspects include the large and structural, as when pp. 144–5 display the effects of leaving unexplained Plato's motives for his first visit to Sicily, and of postponing the introduction of Archytas until late in the story. The aspects also include the subtlest details, as in pp. 140–1 on the suspense generated by the tense of  $\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\chi\epsilon\nu$  at 323 D 10, and in p. 176 n. 104 on why we should accept the manuscripts'  $\epsilon\phi\alpha\mu\epsilon\nu$  at 348 A 3, and reject the emendation  $\epsilon\phi\acute{\alpha}\nu\eta\mu\epsilon\nu$ : 'it piles on the pathos if Plato feels that he must cooperate in maintaining appearances'.

Burnyeat turns to literary analysis only after inferring, from the philosophical incompetence of its author, the conclusion that the Seventh Letter 'cannot be relied upon to offer trustworthy evidence either on Plato's philosophical development or on the aims and activities of the Academy' (p. 135). But Burnyeat's literary analysis

gives him another, and to my mind stronger, argument for the same conclusion. The systematic accumulation of literary effect after literary effect makes it hard to doubt that these effects were contrived by an author whose aim was just such effects. Such an author would no doubt have been happy to incorporate facts into his narrative when the facts suited his literary aims. But he could not have achieved those aims so splendidly without a readiness to ignore, distort, or fabricate when—as is the way with facts—the facts were inconvenient. We should, in other words, think of the Seventh Letter rather as we do the anecdotes about Plato at the court of Dionysius that we find in S.E. *PH* 3. 204 and Lucian, *Par.* 34. Of course, there are differences: the Seventh Letter is long, but the anecdotes are short; the Seventh Letter is sad, but the anecdotes are funny. There is, however, also a momentous similarity. When we appreciate the anecdotes, we realize that each belongs to a genre whose aim is not to tell the truth; and when we appreciate the Seventh Letter, we realize that it too belongs to such a genre. The anecdotes are jokes; the Seventh Letter is much more like a tragedy. But neither anecdotes nor Letter even try to tell us much about the history of Plato's intellectual and political career.

If the Seventh Letter tells us little about Plato himself, might it not nevertheless show us something about how people have understood Plato? And will that not itself be of philosophical interest? Perhaps. But if the Seventh Letter is in reality a work of imaginative fiction, then it need be no more a contribution to philosophy than it is to geometry. For consider how, at 342 B 7–8, the Seventh Letter defines a circle as ‘that which is equally far from the edges to the centre in every way’ (τό . . . ἐκ τῶν ἐσχάτων ἐπὶ τὸ μέσον ἴσον ἀπέχον πάντη). There is an obvious objection to this definition: no figure can be at any distance from its edges. Burnyeat is kinder to the definition than it deserves. He calls it ‘perfectly good (if clumsily expressed)’ and translates as ‘that which everywhere extends an equal distance from its extremities to its centre’ (p. 122). His translation saves the definition from the obvious objection only by giving ἀπέχω a meaning that is hard to document elsewhere. LSJ s.v. ἀπέχω III.b do indeed say that it can mean ‘project, extend’, and cite two passages for this meaning: Arist. *PA* 655<sup>a</sup>32 and *GA* 781<sup>a</sup>11. The former passage has ἀπέχω in the sense of ‘stick out’; this might be rendered ‘extend’, but not in any sense of ‘extend’ that would help the Seventh Letter's definition. The latter passage would have

ἀπέχω in the sense of ‘stretch’; this might be rendered ‘extend’ in just the sense of ‘extend’ that is used in Burnyeat’s translation, but editors find ἀπέχω with this meaning so odd that they often emend to ἐπέχω instead. At all events, the Seventh Letter’s definition of a circle is far inferior to the definition that occurs on the lips of Parmenides at *Parm.* 137 E 2–3: ‘whatever has edges equally far from the centre in every direction’ (τοῦτο οὐδ’ ἂν τὰ ἔσχατα πανταχῆ ἀπὸ τοῦ μέσου ἴσον ἀπέχη). Why the contrast? Like the author of the *Parmenides*, the author of the Seventh Letter intends to give the impression of someone with some geometrical knowledge; but, unlike the author of the *Parmenides*, the author of the Seventh Letter is ignorant of geometry himself, and so is content to put together a few words that will, to those equally ignorant, give the intended impression. This passage from the Seventh Letter is as little part of the history of geometrical thought as the representation of the geometer Meton in Ar. *Birds* 992–1020. The interest of such passages is not the geometry that they contain, for they contain none of note. Their interest rather is as evidence for what smattering of which geometrical ways of talking had percolated how far away from those who talked like that in earnest.

So too, more or less, when the Seventh Letter talks philosophically. Its author intends not so much to philosophize as to give the impression of someone philosophizing. He is acquainted with philosophizing in Plato’s way. Some of his acquaintance is probably indirect, from reading manuals and textbooks. At any rate, his numbered list at 342 A 7–B 3 of five items that pertain to knowledge smacks of the lists to which Platonism was sometimes reduced, as for example in Diogenes Laertius’ *Life of Plato* (D.L. 3. 80–109: ‘There are three forms of good things . . . There are five forms of constitution . . . There are three forms of justice . . .’) and Alcinous’ *Epitome of Platonic Teaching* (*Didask.* 10. 5–6: ‘The first way of thinking about God . . . The second way of thinking about God . . . The third way of thinking about God . . .’). But whether direct or indirect, his acquaintance with Plato enabled him to develop a plausible patter. Take, for instance, his jargon at 343 B 8–C 1 of τὸ ποιόν τι and τὸ τί. This marks perhaps the contrast between qualities and things, or perhaps the contrast between accidents and essences. The context at 343 B 8 provides the unhelpful clues that τὸ τί is an equivalent for ‘that which is’ (τὸ ὄν), and that both τὸ ποιόν τι and τὸ τί are members of ‘a pair of things that are’ (δυσὸν ὄντων).

Even the accentuation of these phrases is uncertain: for instance, should the former be τὸ ποῖόν τι ('the somehow something') or τὸ ποῖόν τι ('the how-is-it?')? and should τὸ τί be understood with τί ('the what-is-it?') or with τι ('the something')? But whatever the details, this jargon certainly looks at first sight impressively and authentically philosophical. It is therefore surprising to note, as Burnyeat does on pp. 128–9, that the jargon is without extant parallel elsewhere. Our surprise should make us respect the author of the Seventh Letter, not indeed for any philosophical achievement, but for the achievement of inventing something that sounds so plausibly philosophical. And we therefore need not worry about the philosophical content of the Seventh Letter, any more than we worry about the geometrical content of its definition of the circle.

Two parallels should serve to emphasize the point. One is Faustus' opening monologue in Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. Faustus twice garbles his Justinian, declares himself 'ravish'd' by Aristotle's 'sweet *Analytics*' while quoting with approval a notorious anti-Aristotelian, and is very sloppy about the difference between immediate and ultimate ends, equating 'finis logices' with 'logic's chiefest end' and 'summum bonum medicinae' with 'the end of physic'.<sup>4</sup> So we should simply acknowledge that in Faustus Marlowe has represented for us a marvellously versatile and learned scholar; we should not probe further into what his versatile and learned scholarship actually amounts to. The other parallel to the Plato of the Seventh Letter is the Socrates of Aristophanes' *Clouds*: a magnificently imaginative version of a magnificent philosopher, but not a version from which we should hope to learn philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup> Some of these observations I owe to Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, ed. F. S. Boas, 2nd edn. (London, 1949), 58–9.