Porters, *Paidagogoi*, Jailers, and Attendants: Some Slaves in Plato

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In memory of Professor A. Wasserstein: a scholar of exceptional learning, lucidity, and integrity and a much-loved teacher and mentor

I. Background Servants

While there are conventions relating to the presentation of slaves in tragedy, comedy, and the orators, Plato, writing in a form he virtually invented, is not bound by any constraints of this kind.[1] Thus his frequent, casual inclusion of slaves in the setting of his works is interesting, first of all, for the evidence it provides on common practices in late 5th- and early 4th-century Athens. It seems that slaves are found in the background of the dialogues for realism's sake, simply because they were part of everyday life. Slaves participate in the dialogues in different ways. At times, various nameless background figures silently perform a task they have been ordered to undertake. As with the attendants of the noble figures of tragedy, we are made aware of the presence of these mute persons only when they are called upon to act. Critias, for example, after some opening banter with Socrates about the young and beautiful Charmides, sends his attendant (whom he addresses simply as παῖ) to fetch the youngster, to the "physician" Socrates (*Charmides* 155 b; contrast e.g. *Theaet.* 144 d). No notice has been taken of the attendant up to this point and we hear no more of him afterwards. The very anonymity of such servants and the immediacy of their response to their masters' requests indicate how their existence and activity are taken for granted in Plato's world.[2] The slave belonging to Socrates' anonymous interlocutor in the opening frame of the *Protagoras* (310 a), who is to make room for the philosopher to sit on the bench next to his friend, epitomizes these silent background servants, who are on the very fringes of the action. He, a marginal figure in every sense, is both there and not there, coming to our attention only when he is about to absent himself.[3] In the *Phaedo*, Crito takes several such silent attendants along to Socrates' prison cell, and their presence in the jail

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1 For the conventions of drama and oratory, see e.g. D. Bain, *Masters, Servants and Orders in Greek Tragedy*, 1981; Y. Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece*, 1988, 15-18.

2 Cf. e. g. J. Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*, 1974, 16.

3 The removal of the slave from the bench may be symbolic: Socrates replaces his friend's lowly companion and occupation — gossip about love affairs — with his richer philosophical presence; cf. M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 1986, 93.

on the very last day of the philosopher's life points to the ubiquity of such servants. Crito's slaves run errands in the *Phaedo* and, again, that is when we note their presence: several escort the weeping Xanthippe home from prison (*Phaedo* 60 a). Another of Crito's attendants, at a simple signal from his master, will summon the slave who is to administer hemlock to Socrates. Crito has been trying to persuade Socrates to postpone taking the drug, but when the philosopher states that the time has come, Crito merely nods to the servant standing nearby (καὶ ὁ Κρίτων... ἔνευσε τῷ παιδὶ πλησίον ἑστῶτι *Phaedo* 117 a) who then immediately understands and summons the poisoner: this unnamed attendant clearly has been following the exchange between Socrates and his master carefully. The man who is to administer the hemlock is a public slave[4] and this may be why a servant is sent to call for him: it would hardly do for one of Socrates' own companions to summon a slave.

In the *Crito*, on the other hand, Socrates' friend apparently arrives at the jail unaccompanied, perhaps because Crito, who will urge the philosopher to make an illicit and clandestine escape from the prison, intends their conversation to be private. At the very opening of the dialogue, we hear of a public slave when Crito explains that he has been permitted by the guard to enter the prison unusually early because he is well acquainted with the man and has done him a favor of some kind (43 a). Crito is characterized here in a nutshell: he is kindly and takes the trouble to cultivate even lowly public servants, but he also uses his money and influence to circumvent the prison's rules, just as he will subsequently try to persuade Socrates to break the laws of their city.

Other slaves in Plato, while still anonymous, are allotted a few words; they are no longer mute *dramatis personae* in the dialogues, but have tiny speaking parts. At the opening of the *Republic*, we find Polemarchus' slave asking Socrates to await his master (*Rep.* 327 b; contrast *Symp.* 172 a); a slave of Agathon's reports that Socrates is not yet ready to join the party (*Symp.* 175 a; cf. 175 c) and in the *Phaedo* (59 e), the porter at the prison gate explains to Socrates' friends that they cannot enter yet. (These exchanges are reported both in direct and indirect speech.) One slave's voice is heard throughout a lengthy dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, and his is virtually the only speaking voice in the work. Euclides has written up a conversation Socrates held with Theodorus and Theaetetus many years earlier and he has his slave read the lengthy, complex text out loud, while he and his friend Terpsion relax (*Theaet.* 142 c-143 c). The slave is simply a mouthpiece for Euclides, who is, in turn, a voice for Socrates, Theodorus, and Theaetetus, but one wonders what he is thinking as he reads the conversation aloud.[5] Euclides' slave is, then, well versed in letters, and this

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4 See Plutarch *Phocion* 36. 3 and cf. below, n. 21.

5 There was apparently an alternate introduction to the *Theaetetus*, possibly by Plato himself, which opened with the command "Boy, are you bringing the dialogue about Theaetetus?" (ἆρά γε, ὦ παῖ, φέρεις τὸν περὶ Θεαιτήτου λόγον;); presumably the slave then fetches a copy of the conversation and reads it out. This alternate opening is recorded in an anonymous commentary on the *Theaetetus* dated to the first or second century AD; see H. Diels and W. Schubart, *Berliner Klassikertexte*

passage not only teaches us something about the use of literate slaves,[6] it also points to a missing slave in another of Plato's dialogues, the attendant who does *not* read Lysias' speech aloud to Socrates and Phaedrus as they sit in their quiet countryside spot. It is Phaedrus himself who must find as comfortable a position as possible for reading the book roll and then read the speech out while Socrates lies down (*Phaedrus* 230 e; cf. 228 e). It is surprising that there is not even one attendant who accompanies Phaedrus and Socrates on their walk. If nameless background attendants are taken for granted and are virtually part of the scenery, this makes missing or absent attendants all the more noteworthy. Here, the absence of any slave confirms the view that the secluded setting of the *Phaedrus* has overtones of a seduction scene.[7] There is an explicit link between seduction and absent slaves in the *Symposium*. In his campaign to attract Socrates, Alcibiades first ensures that they meet alone and no longer have an attendant present at their encounters. He subsequently tries to seduce the philosopher one night, when the lamp is out and — he adds — the servants are outside (*Symp.* 217 a-b, 218 b-c; cf. 217 d-e). Omnipresent background attendants can get in the way sometimes.

II. Comic Slaves

All the slaves we have looked at so far, whether absent or present, silent or with small speaking parts, have virtually no life or character of their own — they are faceless as well as nameless. But there are more vivid servants to be found in the dialogues. One such servant, is the witty and charming Thracian servant girl (Θρᾷττά τις ἐμμελὴς καὶ χαρίεσσα θεραπαινίς *Theaet.* 174 a) who does not appear in person in a dialogue, but features in an anecdote told by Socrates. When the star-gazing Thales falls into a well, Socrates relates, the maidservant laughingly points out that the philosopher is so eager to explore the heavens he does not see what is in front of him and under his feet. This brief anecdote encompasses a world of contrasts: the absent-minded, unworldly philosopher and the practical down-to-earth slave, the serious, cultivated Milesian and the uneducated, laughing Thracian, the free man and the slave girl, etc.[8] The tale is meant to illustrate Socrates' preceding depiction of the "slavish" knowledge of the practical man of affairs which is contrasted with the free knowledge of the philosopher (*Theaet.* 172 d-173 a): Thales and the Thracian maid personify these opposing qualities. This Thracian maidservant is a rare instance in Plato of a

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II, 1905, 3.28 ff. (= Pack^2 1393) and cf. F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, 1935, 15.

6 See W.V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 1989, 111 and cf. Dem. 29. 11-12, 51, 55; 33. 17-18; 45. 72.

7 R.B. Rutherford, *The Art of Plato*, 1995, 242, 247-248.

8 See A. Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 1995, 31-56, who teases out the many meanings of the tale and explains why the slave is a woman. Aesop has a similar tale (ἀστρολόγος, no. 40 Hausrath) telling of an anonymous astrologer who falls into a well and an unnamed, apparently free man who rescues him.

type of slave more regularly found in comedy: the slave who is — in certain respects at least — more clever than his master.[9]

Another vivid servant, one who does appear in the flesh, is the eunuch doorkeeper at Callias' house (*Prot.* 314 c-e). This porter slams his master's door, in slapstick fashion, in the face of Socrates and his young friend Hippocrates, taking them for sophists seeking entry to an already sophist-ridden household, and he has much in common with the slave doorkeepers of comedy.[10] But Callias' porter is particularly interesting, even surprising, because he is a *eunuch* (cf. ὁ θυρωρός, εὐνοῦχός τις 314 c). While eunuchs were often the doorkeepers at Oriental royal households and decided who would be granted an audience with their masters, the Greeks considered the use of such servants a strange and barbaric custom: this passage in the *Protagoras* seems to be the earliest attested instance of a eunuch found as a household slave in Athens.[11] It may not be a coincidence that it is the notoriously wealthy and dissolute Callias who has a eunuch as a servant: perhaps Greek mores have been influenced by Persian practices, and the once-proscribed eunuchs were acquired by the rich as a rare and luxurious kind of slave.

III. Did these Slaves actually Exist?

Callias' slave is not the only servant to open doors in the *Protagoras*. At the opening of the dialogue, there seems to be a reference to Socrates' own personal slave. When young Hippocrates eagerly knocks on the philosopher's door at the crack of dawn, an unnamed person opens the door (cf. καὶ ... αὐτῷ ἀνέῳξέ τις *Prot.* 310 b). This could be a member of the philosopher's family but the anonymous τις is much more likely to refer to a household slave. Did Socrates, a relatively poor man in his later years, have one or even several slaves?[12]

Scholarly debate on the average number of slaves in a humble Athenian household rages hot and heavy; perhaps almost every Athenian citizen had at least one servant.[13] If the philosopher does have slaves, none is found in the vast crowd present in his jail cell in the *Phaedo*;[14] we have seen that it will be one of

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9 Cf. e. g. Dionysus' slave Xanthias in Aristophanes' *Frogs* and see Vogt (above, n. 2), 8-11.

10 See R. Brock, "Plato and Comedy", in: *'Owls to Athens': Essays on Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover*, ed. E.M. Craik, 1990, 47 who compares Aristoph. *Ach.* 394-403 and Eur. *Hel.* 435 ff.

11 See e.g. Hdt. 8. 105-106 and Xenophon's apologetic acrobatics at *Cyr.* 7.5.59-65; cf. P. Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene in der griechisch-römischen Antike*, 1980, 67 and 81-83.

12 See Pl. *Apol.* 23 b9- c1; Xen. *Oec.* 2. 2, 11. 3; *Mem.* 1. 2. 1 and cf. T.C. Brickhouse and N.D. Smith, *Socrates on Trial*, 1989, 15-17.

13 N.R.E. Fisher, *Slavery in Classical Greece*, 1993, 37-46 summarizes the debate surrounding the number of slaves employed by the average citizen-peasant.

14 E.A. Havelock, "The Socratic Problem: Some Second Thoughts", in: *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, eds. J.P. Anton and A. Preuss, 1983, 161 likens

Crito's attendants who accompanies the philosopher's wife home. The family of young Hippocrates, Socrates' early morning visitor, certainly owns several slaves. It is because he was chasing after his runaway slave, Satyrus, Hippocrates explains to the philosopher, that he did not know that Protagoras had arrived in Athens. Hippocrates' brief statement ὁ γάρ τοι παῖς μϵ ὁ Σάτυρος ἀπέδρα (*Prot.* 310 c) is, of course, confirmation that fugitive slaves were a commonplace phenomenon. The runaway slave may be intended to cast light on his restless, flighty master as well: we hear immediately afterwards that Hippocrates meant to tell Socrates about Satyrus, but some other matter made him forget; now he is in pursuit of Protagoras. It is particularly interesting that Hippocrates mentions the name of his slave — Satyrus seems to be the only named slave in Plato — and he obviously assumes that Socrates is familiar with him, too.

This brings us to the question of the historical reality of the slaves found in the dialogues. It is generally agreed that Plato does not include fictitious characters in his work:[15] does this apply to such minor figures as slaves as well? Did Hippocrates — who is not known outside of Plato's dialogues, but is nonetheless thought to have been a historical personage — actually have a slave named Satyrus? Or is Plato's casual use of a typical slave name only meant to lend a touch of authenticity? Did Callias really have a eunuch doorkeeper? It is certainly likely that he had a porter of some kind, but the door-slamming eunuch would still be a comic figure if he were an ordinary slave and Plato need not have invented that detail. And what of Euthyphro's two dead employees? Euthyphro tells Socrates that he is prosecuting his own father for the manslaughter of an agricultural laborer (πϵλάτης) who had murdered a family slave (τῶν οἰκϵτῶν τινι) in a drunken rage (*Euthyphro* 4 c-e; cf. 9 a, 15 d). Whatever the exact difference in legal status between the two dead men, we see that Euthyphro feels obliged to prosecute the killer of his laborer, just as his father felt that the murderer of his household slave had to be punished. Was there such a legal case and did these two men actually exist?[16] Available evidence does not allow us to answer these questions.

IV. The *Paidagogoi* of the *Lysis*

Euthyphro's dead servants, whether actual or invented, do not appear in Plato's dialogue proper, but are nonetheless an essential part of the work, for their tale leads to the main theme of the conversation between Socrates and Euthyphro,

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Socrates' prison cell in the *Phaedo* to a domestic apartment and notes that there are, at times, no less than 18 people present.

15 See e.g. E.R. Dodds, *Plato, Gorgias*, 1959, 12; D.M. Halperin, "Why is Diotima a Woman?", in: *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 1990, 119.

16 See I. Kidd, "The Case of Homicide in Plato's *Euthyphro*", in: *'Owls to Athens': Essays on Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover*, ed. E.M. Craik, 1990, 213-221, esp. 214-215 who discusses the legal issues and argues convincingly that Plato's account of Euthyphro's prosecution is "faction", a fictional narrative developed from real events or characters.

their discussion of piety. Here, then, slaves clearly are more than part of the setting of a dialogue and are related to its content. In the *Lysis* we find another instance of slaves whose presence is pertinent to the content of the conversation, but the two slaves are used to close a discussion, rather than open one. The *paidagogoi* of Lysis and Menexenus, found at the end of the *Lysis* (223 a-b), bring the conversation between Socrates and his young friends to an abrupt halt, when they insist that their charges return home with them. The philosopher and his friends try to drive these attendants away, but the slaves — who speak only broken Greek and are drunk and difficult to ward off — manage to break up the gathering. At first sight, the *paidagogoi* of the *Lysis* seem to be little more than comic stereotypes of rowdy slaves, who bring the dialogue to a somewhat undignified end.[17] When Plato excludes dramatists from the ideal state of the *Republic*, one of his complaints is that they include representations of slaves up to their usual practices (δούλας τε καὶ δούλους πράττοντας ὅσα δούλων *Rep.* 395 e), yet as these *paidagogoi* — and Callias' doorkeeper — show, Plato is not above making use of such comic figures himself.[18] But the slaves of the *Lysis* seem to have been conjured up by Plato to do more than end the discussion prematurely (and thereby indicate that there is more to be said on the topic of friendship and love).[19] These *paidagogoi* are surely also meant to remind us of Socrates' earlier conversation with Lysis in which the youngster is made to admit that he is altogether under the control of his parents and has less liberty than a servant or a slave. (Just before this exchange between the philosopher and his young acquaintance, Lysis' friend Menexenus is called away by their gymnastic teacher, the *paidotribes*, and this is further confirmation that these young men are constantly at the beck and call of others.) Lysis concedes to Socrates that he is ruled by his *paidagogus*, a slave, and the philosopher remarks that it is certainly a terrible thing for a free man to be ruled by a slave (ἦ δεινόν ... ἐλεύθερον ὄντα ὑπὸ δούλου ἄρχεσθαι *Lysis* 208 c-d). Socrates' interrogation of Lysis, meant to serve as a demonstration to the concealed Hippothales of how one should humble one's beloved *paidika* rather than sing his praises (206 c; 210 e), is not altogether serious. Yet there is a certain irony in finding that at the end of their conversation, slaves impose their will not only upon their young charges, Menexenus and Lysis, but upon Socrates and his friends as well: all must give way before these attendants. It is perhaps significant that Lysis — in all likelihood as a result of his conversation with Socrates — resists the tutors' attempt to return him home and aligns himself with the philosopher. If Socrates undermines

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17 Compare the undignified — and unexpected — altercation between Orestes and the Phrygian slave at Eur. *Orest.* 1503-1536. Fisher (above, n. 13), 70-78 is a good survey of the stereotyped characteristics normally assigned to slaves; see also Stobaeus *Flor.* 4. 19. K.J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, 1972, 206 notes that normally domestic slaves in comedy do not speak incorrect Greek and are not differentiated linguistically from free men; cf. Brock (above, n. 10), 47.

18 See also Agathon's mock complaint at *Symp.* 175 b (and Dover's comment *ad loc.*). In the *Laws*, Plato allows comedy on the condition that it is performed by slaves or foreigners (816 e).

19 W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* IV, 1975, 150.

the authority of Lysis' parents and their agents, the *paidagogoi*, and wins over the boy temporarily, it is nonetheless the slaves who are in the end triumphant, and the final irony is that these representatives of parental authority are not sober and upstanding servants, but barbarian-sounding and drunk (cf. ὑποβαρβαρίζοντες ... ὑποπεπωκότες 223 a7-b1).[20]

V. Socrates' Jailers

This brings us to another series of slaves who control not Socrates' conversations, but his very person — the attendants who are in charge of the philosopher during his stay in prison. There are three public slaves found in the *Phaedo*: the porter at the prison gate (ὁ θυρωρός *Phaedo* 59 e), the assistant to the Eleven (τῶν ἕνδεκα ὑπηρέτης 116 b-d) who bids Socrates farewell, and the slave who administers the hemlock (ὁ μέλλων δώσειν τὸ φάρμακον 117 a-118; cf. 63 d).[21] (It is interesting to note, incidentally, that when commentators list the characters of the *Phaedo*, they are always careful to include the long list of Socrates' silent pupils and companions who are simply said to be present during these final hours (59 b-c), while Xanthippe, the porter, the jailer, and the poisoner — all of whom have speaking parts in the dialogue — are omitted; theirs are muted voices indeed![22]) Of the three public servants found in the *Phaedo* it is the gentlemanly assistant to the Eleven — the board of eleven citizens chosen by lot to supervise the policing of Athens — who is particularly interesting. He is dignified, on good terms with Socrates and cries when he bids him farewell. Plato has him praise the philosopher as the noblest, gentlest and best man he has ever encountered in prison (116 c) and the jailer adds that he knows that Socrates, unlike other prisoners, will not hold him personally responsible for his execution. The philosopher compliments the jailer in return, mentioning the conversations they have held and remarking upon his civility, goodness, and nobility (cf. ὡς ἀστεῖος ὁ ἄνθρωπος ... καὶ ἦν ἀνδρῶν λῷστος, καὶ νῦν ὡς

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20 See H. Teloh, *Socratic Education in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 1986, 10, 72-73; D. Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*, 1979, 65, 85-86, 198; contrast the overly benign interpretation of Vogt (above, n. 2), 110. M. Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens*, 1990, 145-163 discusses the complicated relationship between Athenian children and their *paidagogoi*. Plato himself seems to take an ambivalent attitude towards such slave tutors — see *Prot.* 325 c-d; *Laws* 808 d-e; *Rep.* 397 d; cf. *Alc.* I 122 b.

21 Although some scholars conflate the last two men into one attendant — see e.g. O. Jacob, *Les esclaves publics à Athènes*, 1928, 82 and 85 — they are two distinct figures. It is the duty of the assistant to *announce* that the time has come to take the poison (cf. 116 c 3 ἐπειδὰν ... *παραγγείλω* πίνειν τὸ φάρμακον), but not actually administer it. See, too, 116 d7-9, where αὐτῷ, the assistant to the Eleven is clearly demarcated from τις and ὁ ἄνθρωπος, the slave in charge of the hemlock. It is not clear whether the jailer of the *Crito* (43 a) should be identified with the porter of the *Phaedo*, or the more senior assistant to the Eleven.

22 See R.D. Archer-Hind, *The Phaedo of Plato*, 1894, xliii-xlvii; R.S. Bluck, *Plato's Phaedo*, 1955, 34-36.

γενναίως με ἀποδακρύει 116 d). These are not qualities which we would expect to be especially associated with slaves. The jailer is sometimes taken by commentators to represent the view of the ordinary, well-intentioned man in the street, someone capable of appreciating the philosopher's fine character even if he does not understand the complexities of Socrates' behavior[23] and it is again somewhat unexpected to find a slave cast in this role. This public servant is, then, unlike any of the slaves we have encountered in the dialogues so far, both in his character and the role he is allotted: can we be certain that he is, in fact, a slave? While it is generally thought that the assistant to the Eleven, τῶν ἕνδεκα ὑπηρέτης, was a slave, the term ὑπηρέτης need not refer only to slaves and the word is also used of free assistants or aides of various kinds: some of the subordinates of the Eleven may in fact have been free men.[24] The use of slaves to police free Athenians — to arrest them, keep them in prison, and even execute them — is strange at first sight, and scholars suggest that the practice was intended to avoid a situation whereby citizens came into conflict with their fellow citizens or manhandled one another. Public slaves owned by the community as a whole, the argument runs, could be seen as purely objective agents of the general public when they employed physical restraints of any kind against a citizen.[25] Here Socrates' jailer is sensitive enough to find it necessary to apologize for his role in the imprisonment and execution of the philosopher: does he speak as an unusually sympathetic slave or does his dignified behavior indicate that he is a free man? Again, we cannot answer the question, but it is worth bearing this servant (and his relationship with Socrates) in mind when looking at one last slave, Meno's attendant.

VI. Why is Meno's Slave a Slave?

Meno's attendant, who is interrogated by Socrates in order to demonstrate to Meno that learning is in fact recollection, is, of course, the best-known slave in Plato and has the most substantial part to play in a dialogue.[26] This episode (*Meno* 82 a-85 e), in which the philosopher, after several false starts, guides the slave to the solution of a geometrical problem by means of a series of leading questions, is one of the most famous passages in Plato and has been investigated from a variety of angles: my interest is in Meno's slave as a *slave*. Why does the philosopher choose a slave as the best candidate to illustrate the truth of his

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23 See R. Loriaux, *Le Phédon de Platon* ii, 1975, 160 (*ad* 116 b); Archer-Hind (above, n. 22) *ad* 116 c; Jacob (above, n. 21), 85-86.

24 See P.J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia*, 1981, 439 and 580; cf. B. Jordan, *The Athenian Navy in the Classical Period*, 1975, 247-249, 267-269 and see Jacob (above, n. 21), 5 and 85.

25 See T.E.J. Wiedemann, *Slavery*, 1987, 41-42 and Fisher (above, n. 13), 56-57. See also P. duBois, *Torture and Truth*, 1991, on the Greeks' perception of slaves as thinking with their bodies.

26 Nonetheless, as with the slaves of the *Phaedo*, he sometimes is not even included in a list of the dialogue's participants — see e. g. R.W. Sharples, *Plato, Meno*, 1985, 17-19.

thesis?[27] The most immediate answer is that the slave makes a good choice for this experiment in learning because he is completely uneducated and clearly will be unacquainted with the geometric problem,[28] but this would be true e.g. of a young, free Greek boy as well. Indeed, commentators often refer to Meno's attendant as a slave *boy* or simply as a boy (ignoring his servile status), but there is no real justification for having the word παῖς serve a double function here and mean "boy" in addition to "slave".[29] It is of course more comfortable for us to assume that Socrates is questioning a young boy: as one frequently quoted scholar notes, the older Meno's slave is, the less charming the scene.[30] We much prefer to think that a young boy is made to discover a theorem of geometry, rather than having Socrates take a middle-aged man through his paces and put him to shame in order to illustrate an argument to his master, but there is no actual basis in the text for this assumption. Meno's attendant is simply a slave, not necessarily a young one, and a closer look at the episode will show how a slave is particularly well-suited to Plato's purposes.

Socrates' interlocutor is chosen from one of the many attendants Meno has with him and the mention of this large number of retainers both reflects the wealth and ostentation of the young Thessalian aristocrat — in Demosthenes, the fact that Apollodorus son of Pasio has *three* attendants accompanying him is a sign of his licentious lifestyle (Dem. 36. 45) — and serves to indicate that the slave is chosen at random. Socrates' offer to demonstrate on *any* of the many attendants present, whichever one Meno likes (ἀλλά μοι προσκάλεσον τῶν πολλῶν ἀκολούθων τουτωνὶ τῶν σαυτοῦ ἕνα, ὅντινα βούλει *Meno* 82 a8-b1) is *not* the same as the philosopher's customary willingness to converse with "anyone of you I happen to meet at any given time", "anyone, young or old, citizen or foreigner" (*Apol.* 29 d, 30 a), and seems more akin to the sophist Gorgias' offer to answer any question put to him (*Gorgias* 447 c-448 a). Socrates' exhibition will work equally well with any of the slaves and this means that Socrates has no interest in his interlocutor as an individual. The philosopher's indifference to the identity of his partner here is in sharp contrast to his usual approach in the dialogues, where he consistently addresses his arguments to individuals and tailors his approach to the specific personalities involved.[31] Some commentators consider this interrogation of Meno's slave the very model or paradigm of a Socratic *elenchus*,[32] but for all its neat, logical refutation of the slave's false

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27 My question here owes much to the thoughtful article by Halperin (above, n. 15).

28 See e.g. R.S. Bluck *Plato's Meno*, 1961, 128 and cf. *Meno* 85 e.

29 See e.g. M. Golden, "*Pais*, 'Child' and 'Slave'", *A C* 54, 1985, 91-104 who discusses the similar positions slaves and children occupied within the structure of Athenian society.

30 Fritzsche as quoted e. g. by Bluck (above, n. 28), 128 n. 2 etc.

31 See e.g. H. Teloh (above, n. 20); L. Coventry, "The Role of the Interlocutor in Plato's Dialogues: Theory and Practice", in: *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature*, ed. C. Pelling, 1990, 174-196.

32 Teloh (above, n. 20), 12-13, sees it as the most successful *elenchus* of all in the early dialogues; see also T. Irwin *Plato's Moral Theory*, 1977, 139 and cf. G. Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 1991, 119.

assumptions and its jewel-like demonstration of the various stages leading to knowledge — the initial mistaken impression that one knows something, the recognition of one's ignorance, the descent into a state of bafflement or *aporia*, and the subsequent eagerness to search for the truth — the episode exhibits in fact only one half of the twofold character of an *elenchus*. A Socratic *elenchus* investigates not just propositions, but lives; it is "an examination of the truth and coherence of the interlocutor's life as well as of his propositional claims."[33] Here Socrates completely ignores the character of his respondent and even when verifying that Meno's attendant fulfils the bare criteria essential for his demonstration — i.e. that he is a Greek and speaks Greek — he does not question the slave directly but asks Meno to supply these simple biographical details (*Meno* 82 b). The philosopher's indifference towards the identity of the slave — who is a native Greek born in Meno's Thessalian household and proves well able to count, decipher geometric diagrams, and follow Socrates' lead, in addition to speaking Greek — extends to his very name and he is addressed by Socrates simply as σύ, ὦ παῖ or παῖ Μένωνος; the slave on the other hand knows and uses the philosopher's name (*Meno* 82 b9, 82 e 14, 85 b 5-6; cf. 82 d4, 82 e1 etc.). We are reminded of the advice given by the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* (777 d-778 a): an address to a slave should generally be a command; there should be no joking or camaraderie with slaves. Socrates' impersonal attitude towards the slave is a good instance of such a stance.

The philosopher's lack of interest in the slave for his own sake is also apparent when Socrates plunges directly into the geometrical problem with no polite introductory remarks or even word of elucidation to the attendant: all the explanations are addressed to Meno. The philosopher twice breaks off his interrogation in order to underline to Meno exactly what he is doing and point out the various stages of learning (*Meno* 82 e, 84 a-d; cf. 85 b-86 a) and one can almost imagine him turning his back on the slave during these interludes with Meno. There are similar scenes in other Platonic dialogues where Socrates' conversation with an interlocutor serves as a lesson or exhibition of some kind to other listeners: we have already seen that Socrates converses with Lysis in an attempt to show the hidden Hippothales how one should address his beloved (*Lysis* 205 d-210 e; see above, pp. 94-5) and the philosopher also questions Cleinias in front of the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in order to demonstrate how the youngster is to be encouraged to pursue wisdom and virtue (*Euthyd.* 278 d-282 e; cf. 275 a-b). But in both these cases it is not only Socrates' wider audience who is meant to profit: his actual respondents, Lysis and Cleinias, are addressed for their own sake and the two young men derive considerable benefit from their exchange with the philosopher.[34] At no point does Socrates turn his back on them, metaphorically speaking. While it is true that Meno's slave does "recollect" some geometry, this seems to be simply because Socrates wants to show Meno how the attendant learns; he is not questioning or "reminding" the

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33 C.H. Kahn, "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*", *OSAP* 1, 1983, 76; see too G. Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus", *OSAP* 1, 1983, 27-58, esp. 34-37 and cf. *Laches* 187 e-188 a.

34 Cf. Teloh (above, n. 20), 73, 203.

randomly selected slave for his own sake. Perhaps Socrates can ignore the character of his interlocutor because they discuss an objective geometrical problem, not any kind of ethical or moral issue. Scholars suggest various reasons why Socrates chooses to demonstrate that learning is recollection by means of a neat geometric theorem rather than an investigation of *arete*, but it may also be related to the fact that Socrates' interlocutor is a slave. Would the philosopher have discussed virtue with a slave? In other words, it seems that Socrates chooses an anonymous, interchangeable slave because his topic is geometry; we might even argue that he chooses geometry as the subject of his lesson (in part, at least) because his interlocutor is a slave. It seems fair to say, in any event, that the slave is treated as no more than a useful tool to prove a thesis: Socrates actually says that he will demonstrate *on* the slave (cf. ἵνα ἐν τούτῳ σοι ἐπιδείξωμαι 82 b1-2; contrast *Lysis* 206 c5-6; *Euthyd.* 275 a4-5, 282 d8, e1-2) rather than together with him. This may indicate something about Socrates' (or Plato's) underlying attitude towards slaves: a slave character who is merely an animated tool does not surprise us when we look at Plato's more theoretical assumptions concerning slaves. In the state he constructs in the *Laws*, Plato clearly envisions the slaves not as ends in themselves, but as means: his provisions for slaves are, if anything, harsher than the actual Athenian laws of his time and accentuate the distinctions between slaves and free men.[35]

Meno's slave is not only a tool used by Socrates to demonstrate the learning or recollection process. He is also a mirror held up to Meno, a substitute or stand-in utilized by Socrates to remind the Thessalian aristocrat of the faults he has earlier displayed. While at first Socrates claims that he will not come up with any comparison to counter Meno's description of him as a paralyzing torpedo fish, the Thessalian's attendant — whom the philosopher shows up for thinking that he could speak well on geometry "in front of many people and on many occasions", just as Meno confidently thought he could lecture about virtue — is, in fact, the counter-comparison Meno has invited.[36] It is illuminating to compare here another "mirror" or alter ego who greatly resembles an interlocutor present at a conversation, the imaginary questioner introduced by Socrates in the *Hippias Major*. In his conversation with the sophist Hippias, the philosopher interposes a hypothetical interlocutor who asks difficult, probing questions and repeatedly criticizes statements made both by Hippias and Socrates (*Hipp. Mai.* 286 c-293 e, 298 a-300 a, 303 d-304 e). This imaginary figure (who bears a remarkable resemblance to the philosopher himself) serves as "a wonderfully convenient buffer between the two antagonists," Hippias and Socrates, allowing each to attack the other while avoiding a direct confrontation.[37] Meno's slave is

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35 G. Morrow, *Plato's Law of Slavery*, 1939 (repr. 1976), esp. 120-133.

36 *Meno* 80 b-c, 84 b; cf. Sharples (above, n. 26), 153 (on 84 b12).

37 P. Woodruff, *Plato, Hippias Major*, 1982, 107. Diotima of the *Symposium* plays a similar role, when she is first introduced into the conversation by Socrates (*Symp.* 201 d ff.). The philosopher has just cross-examined Agathon and overturned his description of Eros, but he hastens to add that he originally had the same mistaken ideas, until Diotima instructed him. The priestess acts the part of Socrates in her

an equally convenient buffer, allowing Meno to feel superior (because he knows the answer to the geometrical problem while the slave does not) and yet permitting Socrates to mock the Thessalian gently and point out how empty his claim to knowledge is. It is, however, one thing to cast an imaginary, hypothetical cross-examiner in the role of scapegoat or buffer, and quite another to use an actual interlocutor for such purposes. But is Meno's slave an actual interlocutor? The wealthy Thessalian Meno certainly must have had a great many slaves, yet assuming that the attendant of the *Meno* ever existed is tantamount to believing that Socrates' demonstration on the slave actually took place. Whatever his historical reality, the slave *is* presented in the dialogue as a flesh-and-blood figure, and this is, it seems, because Plato does not want to have Socrates use a hypothetical interlocutor in his experiment. An imaginary respondent would make the demonstration of recollection too cumbersome, and the role of Meno's "mirror" would be much less effective.[38] This allegedly real, randomly chosen slave is, in essence, a disposable interlocutor, a mere empty vessel who is used as a tool to teach his master a lesson. It is difficult to conceive that Socrates would ever make use of a freeborn interlocutor — even if he were a very young and uneducated boy — in quite this way. Not only is Meno's attendant an empty cipher or vessel because he is a slave, but the converse is also true: he is a slave precisely because at this point in the dialogue Plato needs a living cipher.

We have come full circle: the slave with the fullest role in a Platonic dialogue is a shadowy figure, with no more substance or presence than the attendant who makes way for Socrates to sit on the bench. Meno's slave speaks up during an important passage of the dialogue, but his physical presence and his very participation in the conversation call attention to his virtual absence as an individual of any kind. Slaves in Plato's dialogues — with the possible exception of the benign jailer of the *Phaedo* — are marginal figures with marginal roles to play. Some are comic stereotypes and most are simply silent errand runners, but all are less than full-fledged human beings. There is, then, no gap between Plato's theoretical approach to slaves as evinced in the proposed legislation of the *Laws* and the presentation of actual slaves by Plato, the literary artist, in his dialogues.

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exchange with the seemingly ignorant philosopher, teasing and teaching him at the same time.

38 Woodruff (above, n. 37), 44 n. 47 notes that in the *Hippias Major* the imaginary questioner is dropped in dense passages where he would obstruct the argument.