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## **Orality, Textuality, and the Interpretation of the Platonic Dialogues**

Most Platonic dialogues are set in fifth-century Athens and are, in effect, textual representations from a fourth-century perspective of the social and political elite of the democratic, imperial city in conversation with Socrates. They call into question the cultural attitudes, values, and institutions of their fifth-century participants almost as phenomena from another age—an age of orality, in contrast to the world of textuality in which fourth-century readers were at home.

Many specific features of the conversations depicted in the dialogues are those of “orality.” For example, the defensiveness and offensiveness of so many of Socrates’ interlocutors are largely a result of the face-to-face contact and competitiveness typical of an oral culture. Socrates’ personal charisma, which so fundamentally overwhelms his interlocutors and actually inhibits their progress, imposes itself precisely in the physical presence of others, who consequently fail to benefit from their conversations. In face-to-face encounters it becomes impossible for those who converse with him to think for themselves, let alone to know themselves. Socrates defeats his own purposes, like a teacher so overwhelmingly forceful that students cannot think for themselves but are either paralyzed or led willy-nilly to adopt the master’s formulations.

Paul Ricoeur and Harry Berger, Jr., suggest that when oral communications are textualized the texts become autonomous. They are taken over by readers and made their own in a process of interpretation in which “the intentional control of speakers” and, for that matter, of an author is reduced and the amount of unintended meaning increases with each instance of readerly appropriation. Perhaps the major benefit of the Platonic texts is that they enable fourth-century and later readers, free from the structural, institutional, and psychological realities of oral culture, to appropriate their textualized oral discussions in ways that are, by definition, impossible for actual, face-to-face discussants in a traditional oral culture., thus making productive interpretation possible. The dialogues’ textuality, however, and the role of the reader in shaping their meanings call into question the approaches of both ancient and modern readers who think that they know “what Plato said” and find his doctrines in the dialogues, especially in the views of Socrates, whom they take as a mouthpiece for Plato. This textuality makes problematic the assumption by scholars such as Paul Friedländer and Leo Strauss and his followers that the dialogues exist to imitate, in Aristotelian fashion, Socrates’ actions, and that “we” readers (or a select few of us) have only to “listen” to him properly in order to learn the truth, be it Socrates’ or Plato’s; it also casts doubt on Derrida’s attack on *Phaedrus* and Platonic dialogue generally as privileging face-to-face conversation over writing. In critiquing fifth-century oral culture from a fourth-century textual perspective, the dialogues, precisely through their textuality, show the failure, not the privileging, of face-to-face oral conversations.