LACHES BEFORE CHARMIDES
FICTIONAL CHRONOLOGY AND PLATONIC PEDAGOGY

Despite long overdue scholarly discontent with the nineteenth century dogma that his dialogues are best understood in terms of Plato’s intellectual development, its most recent rival suffers from a similar disability. Christened “fictive chronology” by Charles Griswold Jr. in 1999, an ordering of the dialogues in relation to their dramatic dates replaces a story about Plato’s with another about Socrates’ development: both stories suffer from a characteristically modern and un-Platonic concern with time, change, and Becoming. The persistence of attempts to outflank Platonism by historicizing Plato is an interesting phenomenon in its own right: in addition to revealing the enduring influence of evolutionary patterns of thought, its latent cause with respect to Socrates is the influence of Leo Strauss, principal twentieth-century critic of the developmentalist reading of Plato and inventor of its Socratic counterpart. In any case, the research of Debra Nails has now allowed Catherine Zuckert to produce a comprehensive reading of all the Platonic dialogues based on fictive chronology while Laurence Lampert (2010) has recently applied the principle in detail to Protagoras, Charmides, and Republic.

Before this new form of chronological over-determination becomes a twenty-first century dogma, Laches and Charmides will here be used to illustrate both the inadequacy of ordering the dialogues by fictive chronology and the merits of replacing an admittedly out-dated developmentalist approach with a new

For Mrs. Appleyard’s youngest daughter: Rosamond Kent Sprague. Except where noted, all translations from Lach. and Charm. are hers; citations of the text are based on Burnet 1900-07. Thanks are also due to Jonathan R. Bruno, Tom Brickhouse, Dimitri El Mur and an anonymous reader; the latter’s suggestions and criticisms were very helpful.

1 Among many others, see Rowe 2007, 48-51, 248. Gould 1987 is a good example of a “developmentalist” reading of Lach.

2 Griswold 1999, 386-90 especially 387.

3 Strauss 1966 and Strauss 1989, 103-183, especially 154: “The individual Platonic dialogue is not a chapter from the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences or from a system of philosophy, nor is it the product of an occasion or the relic of a stage of Plato’s development.” Strauss’s account of Socratic “development” is usefully summarized at Zuckert 1996, 132-64.


5 See Zuckert 2009, 8-19, especially 9 n. 19.
conception of Platonic pedagogy based on a more natural conception of reading order.⁶ The threshold form of my thesis is that *Charmides* must not be read in isolation from *Laches* on the basis of fictive chronology (Sections 1-3) while its more developed form (Sections 3-5) uses the reading order hypothesis to show that *Laches* actually precedes *Charmides* on pedagogical grounds despite fictive chronology.

Section 1. Fictive Chronology and the *Charmides*

Consistent with the moderation of her path-breaking book,⁷ Zuckert avoids the worst ramifications of considering *Charmides* and *Laches* in accordance with fictive chronology. Given the dates of Potidaea and Delium (*Charm.* 153a1 and *Lach.* 180b1-2), she naturally considers *Charmides* prior to *Laches* but despite a considerable chronological interval between the two dramatic settings, she nevertheless manages to preserve the traditional and indeed obvious juxtaposition of the two (cf. Nails 2002, 311-2) by discussing *Laches* immediately after *Charmides* (Zuckert 2009, 237-58). But this chronological juxtaposition is only made possible by her decision to ignore the possibility that any of the conversations depicted in *Gorgias*,⁸ the pair of *Hippias* dialogues,⁹ and the *Republic*,¹⁰ take place before *Laches*. It should be noted that Nails classified these four as “Dialogues with Problematic Dramatic Dates” (Nails 2002, 324-7); the presence of Plato’s masterpiece among them should probably be taken as a *reductio ad absurdum* on the entire enterprise.¹¹ But Zuckert’s decision to preserve, within the context of fictive chronology, the *Charmides*/*Laches*

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⁶ See Altman 2010; the influence of e.g. Kahn 1996 qualifies the use of “new.” For an early application of Kahn’s “prolepsis” (Kahn 1996, 48 and Kahn 1981) to *Charm.,* see Van Der Ben 1985, especially 95 and 98-9 n. 14.

⁷ Her independence from Strauss is particularly praiseworthy; see 224 n. 16, 299, 354 n. 136, 363 n. 153, and 493.

⁸ Although the only attested visit of Gorgias to Athens was in 427 B.C. (i.e. between Potidaea and Delium) other indications suggest a later date or rather a hopeless muddle where fictive chronology is concerned; see Nails 2002, 326-7.

⁹ These dialogues are considered at Zuckert 2009, 257-77, i.e. the fourth part of Chapter 4. The conversations with Hippias refer to the visit of Gorgias to Athens (see previous note and Nails 2002, 313.

¹⁰ Zuckert 2009, 301-2 n. 43; for similar passages, see 353 n. 134 and 487 n. 8.

¹¹ Nails 2002, 324: “The version of *Republic* that has come down to us is not a seamless dialogue, and it was not edited from the standpoint of dramatic date; thus there would be jarring anachronisms if any of the candidate specific dates between 432 and 404 were assigned definitively.” To preserve the possibility that Plato was concerned with fictive chronology, Nails revives the fiction of an independent *Thrasymachus* (see Kahn 1993) and suggests that we are confined to an unedited version of *Rep.*