It is perhaps not entirely normal to review a paperback issuing of a book already reviewed in its hardback issuing, but Susan Sauvé Meyer’s (hereafter “SSM”) Clarendon translation and commentary of Laws 1 and 2 certainly deserves the attention of the readers of this Journal.

Although serious Plato scholars have generally been aware of the Laws, this lengthy dialogue has generally gotten much less attention than most other works of Plato, surely less than the Republic. For English-readers there have been several decent translations – T. Saunders (1970) and T. Pangle (1980) are two of the more recent. Detailed commentaries have been more scarce – L. Brisson & J.-F. Pradeau (2006) and especially K. Schöpsdau (1994-2011) have been valuable for readers of French or German, and Robert Mayhew (2008) in Clarendon for Laws Book 10. C. Bobonich has written a good deal about the Laws, including a book focusing primarily on the Laws, and an edited volume of essays. Beyond this core bibliography there is of course more, but not an overwhelming list, not the sort of bibliography one would see of the Republic.

As previous reviewers have noted, the translation is both clear and sensitive to philosophical points. A large advantage of the Clarendon format is the opportunity to defend one’s translation, and to include alternative readings of difficult passages. A sample: at 629d2 the Athenian says that stasis is πάντων πολέμων χαλεπώτατος, translated by SSM as “the hardest conflict,” by Bury (in Perseus) and Saunders as “most bitter,” and by England as “deadliest.” SSM defends her translation by contrasting chalepos with its opposite praus, and pointing out that at 630a4-5 Theognis is quoted to the effect that civil war is the most difficult to fight (p.99).

The commentary often gives succinct philosophical analyses: at 631b6-c1, the Athenian
says that a city that receives divine goods (wisdom, moderation, courage, and justice) also receives the human goods (health, beauty, strength, and wealth), “otherwise it is bereft of both.” SSM points out (p. 109) that this joins a “sufficiency thesis (possessing divine goods suffices for possessing the human ones) and a necessity thesis (possessing the divine goods is necessary for possessing the human ones.” Is it the city or individuals who receive the relevant goods? Some, e.g. Bobonich, have wanted the text to tell us that the Athenian is talking about individuals, but that’s not entirely plausible, since virtuous individuals may be ill or poor. Rather, the Athenian is talking about cities that possess the “divine goods,” without which they cannot reasonable expect to receive the “human goods.”

Another spot, a few pages along, concerns the understanding of courage, argued by the Athenian to oppose not only fear and pain, but also desire and pleasure (633c9). SSM usefully distinguishes (A) pleasant and painful experiences and (B) affective responses to the prospect of A-type experiences. It’s the B-type, the anticipations, that one must battle against, and the Athenian’s notion of appropriate training for the courage to resist is directed against those. SSM makes clear how the Athenian envisages the well-regulated drinking parties to educate participants to proper responses to the prospects of pleasure and pain.

Book II begins with a focus on the thesis that only the just are truly happy – a theme that many will remember from the Republic. Is the Athenian defending the sufficiency thesis, that “Anyone who is just is happy,” or the necessity thesis, that “Anyone who is not just is unhappy”? SSM (p. 258) does not believe that Book II provides the arguments to decide whether Plato is committed to one of these theses; rather, she believes that the Athenian is arguing that it is essential that the state teach that the just life is happiest and most pleasant.

I felt particularly enlightened by SSM’s explanation of the three choral groups: the “Chorus of the Muses,” composed of children to the age of 18, the “Chorus of Apollo,” from 19 to 30, and the “Chorus of Dionysus,” from 30 to 60. The Athenian spends much the most amount of time talking about the aesthetic virtues that are meant to emanate from the Dionysian choral groups, but SSM makes clear how those regulate the educational functions of the Chorus of the Muses and stabilize the productions of the Chorus of Apollo.

Anyone who wishes to understand Plato’s contribution to political thought must turn to the Laws as well as the Republic and Statesman (and other dialogues too). An understanding of the complex and sometimes obscure Laws is very much facilitated by this excellent translation and commentary. One shouldn’t try to read the Laws without it!

NOTES

1. Online, by D. J. Riesbeck in Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews 2016.05.23 and by N. R. Baima in Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2016.06.26; in print by M. Brumbaugh in The Classical Review July 2016, and by M. L. Bartels in Mnemosyne 70.6 (2017) 1059-1072. There may well be others.