

Stylistic Characterization in Plato: Nicias, Alcibiades, and Laches

David Sansone

IN A CLASSIC ARTICLE, to which my title pays tribute, Daniel Tompkins seeks, and finds, evidence of stylistic characterization in the speeches that Thucydides puts into the mouths of Nicias and Alcibiades.¹ By thoroughly examining levels of sentence complication in Nicias' speeches and the frequency of sentence-initial καί in the speeches of Alcibiades Tompkins arrives at the well-founded conclusion "that Thucydidean speakers are more individualized by their styles than has been thought" (214). Even as one is convinced by Tompkins' demonstration, however, the style of each of the speeches in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is recognizably Thucydidean, no matter the identity of the speaker.

By contrast, everyone who reads Plato's *Symposium* is well aware that Plato uses stylistic characterization to distinguish the interlocutors in that dialogue.² And yet there is a perplexing paucity of detailed studies, like that of Tompkins on Thucydides, devoted to an examination of the way in which Plato individualizes his characters using stylistic means. To be sure, a great deal of attention has been paid to the style of Plato—or rather, to acknowledge the title of Holger Thesleff's important monograph, the styles of Plato.³ While Thesleff recognizes that Plato

¹ D. P. Tompkins, "Stylistic Characterization in Thucydides: Nicias and Alcibiades," *JCS* 22 (1972) 181–214 [hereafter 'Tompkins'].

² See, for example, Bury's discussion, in the Introduction to his commentary, of the stylistic peculiarities that characterize the first five speakers in *Symp.*: R. G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato*² (Cambridge 1932) xxiv–xxxvi.

³ H. Thesleff, *Studies in the Styles of Plato* (Helsinki 1967) = *Platonic Patterns*

regularly uses characterization by means of style, especially in the works of his early and middle periods, he devotes only a couple of cursory pages (160–164 = 132–135) to identifying the styles associated with each of the many interlocutors. Thesleff distinguishes ten “generic classes of style” (63 = 51), but individual interlocutors are not characterized by adherence to one or another of these generic styles; instead, each employs a range of styles.⁴ Likewise, the importance of ‘character’ to the way Plato structures the argument in his dialogues has been the subject of a valuable study by Ruby Blondell.⁵ But just as Thesleff does not seek to define the specific style of individual speakers, Blondell makes no attempt to investigate whether Plato has used stylistic characterization to individualize the personalities of Socrates’ various interlocutors.⁶ None of this is intended as

(Las Vegas 2009) 1–142, with copious earlier bibliography. Compare D. A. Russell, *An Anthology of Greek Prose* (Oxford 1991) xviii, “No Greek prose writer is Plato’s equal in versatility or originality. He has ‘styles,’ not ‘a style,’ and can change from one to another with consummate skill.”

⁴ So, for example, to take the interlocutors who will be the focus of discussion below, according to Thesleff, *Studies* 163 = 134, both Laches, identified as an “impetuous soldier of reputation,” and Nicias, a “dignified general of reputation,” are characterized by an adherence to styles 1 (“colloquial”), 2 (“semi-literary conversational”), and 3 (“rhetorical”), while Laches also exhibits “touches” (see 95 = 83) of styles 4 (“pathetic”) and 7 (“historical”); Alcibiades (“intelligent, practical, and intense; reckless”) is characterized by styles 1 and 4, with touches of 3. The speech of Lysimachus in *Lach.* (“circumstantial old man”; style 2 with touches of 3) is given as a sample text to illustrate style 2 (67 = 54). For a detailed list of the markers Thesleff associates with each style see 80–94 = 65–81; for a stylistic conspectus of *Lach.* see 117–118 = 99–100; for *Symp.* see 135–138 = 113–115.

⁵ R. Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues* (Cambridge 2002).

⁶ Blondell’s detailed description of Socrates’ character (67–80) adverts only briefly to the verbal style with which Plato invests him: “his discourse is marked by a homespun style; he avoids technical terminology; and he makes notorious use of analogies from everyday life” (76). More recently, the title of a recent collection of papers edited by Gabriele Cornelli (*Plato’s Styles and Characters: Between Literature and Philosophy* [Berlin 2016]) raises hopes that the relationship between style and character will be subjected to detailed examination. The two topics, however, have been assigned separate sections in the

criticism of either Thesleff or Blondell, to both of whose monographs I am greatly indebted. Rather, their examinations of, respectively, style and character accentuate the need for detailed studies devoted to addressing the question of whether Plato, who paid close attention to both, might have employed the one to help convey the other.

In what follows I have taken as my point of departure Tompkins' method of examining the style of Nicias and Alcibiades' speeches in Thucydides and extended it to Plato, inasmuch as Nicias is an interlocutor also in *Laches* and Alcibiades in *Symposium*.⁷ Now, while Tompkins was able to compare the two men's styles directly, since he was investigating comparable speeches delivered under similar circumstances appearing within a single literary work, a direct comparison will not be possible in the case of Plato's Nicias and Alcibiades. For one thing, the two characters appear in different works, written, presumably, at different times.⁸ For another, the nature of their discourse differs considerably, one being an emotional encomium de-

volume and, apart from some discussion by Silvio Marino (241–252) and Esteban Bieda (253–262) of the medical style of Eryximachus and the Gorgianic style of Agathon in *Symp.*, none of the papers engages in sustained investigation of stylistic characterization in Plato.

⁷ Alcibiades is, of course, also an interlocutor in the two Platonic dialogues named after him; see D. Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis 2002) 10–20. I have ignored those dialogues, however, because of uncertainty regarding the authenticity of the one and certainty regarding the inauthenticity of the other. Also, neither dialogue contains extended utterances by Alcibiades that are comparable to what is found in *Symp.* Likewise, Alcibiades' brief contributions to the discussion in *Prot.* (336B–D, 347B, 348B) are of little value for a study of this nature.

⁸ It is generally agreed that *Symp.* was composed in the late 380s: K. J. Dover, "The Date of Plato's *Symposium*," *Phronesis* 10 (1965) 1–20; H. Thesleff, *Studies in Platonic Chronology* (Helsinki 1982) 117, 135–136 = *Platonic Patterns* 266, 283–285. The usual assumption is that *Laches* is among the early, 'Socratic', dialogues (e.g. R. G. Hoerber, "Plato's *Laches*," *CP* 63 [1968] 96–97; W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy IV Plato the Man and his Dialogues: Earlier Period* [Cambridge 1975] 67–70), but this dating (and even the authenticity) of the dialogue is questioned by Thesleff 210–214 = 357–361.

livered by an inebriated komast, the other a series of thoughtful responses to Socrates' attempt to discover a definition of courage. In an effort, then, to avoid seeming to compare apples and oranges, I will compare Alcibiades' speech with the speeches of the first five encomiasts in *Symposium* (178A–197E) and I will compare the continuous utterances of Nicias with those of Lysimachus, Laches, and Socrates in *Laches*.⁹ In other words, I will compare the style of Nicias with that of three other interlocutors in *Laches* and the style of Alcibiades' speech with that of the other speeches in *Symposium*.¹⁰ Still, it will be seen that the general distinction that Tompkins reveals between the style of the Thucydidean Alcibiades and that of the Thucydidean Nicias holds for the styles of their Platonic counterparts as well.

Alcibiades

As Tompkins has shown, while Thucydides presents a Nicias whose speeches are characterized by sentences exhibiting a high level of complexity, the style of his Alcibiades is notable for parataxis. Specifically, the frequency of initial $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$ in the speeches of Alcibiades is significantly higher than in the other speeches in Thucydides, as well as in samples of other prose texts.¹¹ According to Tompkins' figures, the proportion of initial $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$ in the two speeches of Alcibiades is 0.368 and 0.318; this compares with a

⁹ In order to minimize the discrepancy between dialogue and extended speech, in constructing the Tables below I have considered only continuous utterances of three or more sentences in the case of the interlocutors in *Laches*. My definition of 'sentence' agrees with that of Tompkins 186–188 nn.19–20, namely any length of text beginning and ending with one of the following marks of punctuation in the OCT (in this case Burnet's): a full stop, a raised dot, a question mark.

¹⁰ I have excluded Socrates' encomium (*Symp.* 199C–212C) from the comparison, since much of it is in the form of dialogue, first with Agathon and then with Diotima; the matter is further complicated by the difficulty of distinguishing the style of Socrates from that of Diotima.

¹¹ See the tables in Tompkins 206–207. The samples include two substantial Platonic passages, from *Charmides* and Book 1 of *Republic*, with a proportion of initial $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$ of 0.124 and 0.062, respectively.

figure of 0.146, which is the proportion of initial $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$ in the seven speeches of Nicias in Thucydides.¹² Plato's Alcibiades also is given to the use of initial $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$ and to parataxis in general, as had been recognized by Sophie Trenkner, who includes portions of Alcibiades' encomium of Socrates in her study of "le style $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$."¹³ She does not, however, consider that Plato is using this paratactic style as a means of characterizing Alcibiades specifically; rather, she includes these passages among others in Plato and Xenophon that contain vignettes illustrative of Socrates' character. As we will see, however, this somewhat demotic style of discourse is consistent with other features that Plato uses to convey Alcibiades' flamboyant personality, a personality cultivated to project both privilege and an affinity with *hoi polloi*.

	Number of sentences	Number of initial $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$	Proportion of initial $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$
Agathon 194e–197e	64	3	0.047
Pausanias 180c–185c	74	4	0.054
Phaedrus 178a–180b	30	3	0.100
Eryximachus 185e–188e	39	4	0.103
Alcibiades 214e–222b	136	21	0.154
Aristophanes 189c–193d	67	12	0.179

TABLE 1: Frequency of $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$ in initial position in six speeches in Plato's *Symposium* as a function of the number of sentences

	Number of words	Number of $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$	Frequency of $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$
Eryximachus	992	95	10.442
Aristophanes	1535	113	13.584
Alcibiades	2485	171	14.532
Agathon	1059	68	15.574
Pausanias	1576	97	16.247
Phaedrus	727	41	17.732

TABLE 2: Frequency of $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$ in six speeches in Plato's *Symposium*

¹² Tompkins gives only the figures for the individual speeches of Nicias, from which I have derived the proportion for Nicias' speeches in total. In *Lach.* the proportion for Nicias is 0.067 (3 occurrences in the 45 sentences considered; see n.9 above).

¹³ S. Trenkner, *Le style $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$ dans le récit attique oral* (Assen 1960) 7 n.3.

	Number of καί	Number of initial καί	Proportion of initial καί
Pausanias	97	4	0.041
Eryximachus	95	4	0.042
Agathon	68	3	0.044
Phaedrus	41	3	0.073
Aristophanes	113	12	0.106
Alcibiades	171	21	0.123

TABLE 3: Frequency of καί in initial position in six speeches in Plato's *Symposium* as a function of the frequency of καί

First, however, we need to demonstrate that Plato has indeed portrayed Alcibiades in *Symposium*, as Thucydides had portrayed him in his history, as an adherent of a paratactic style, at least in comparison with the other guests at Agathon's soirée. Table 1 adopts the procedure used by Tompkins for the speeches in Thucydides and applies it to the speeches in Plato's *Symposium*.¹⁴ We will not be surprised that the figures are generally lower than those for the speeches in Thucydides, given that, "compared to Thucydides, other authors use initial καί infrequently."¹⁵ What emerges from these figures is that, in comparison with the other speakers, Alcibiades shares with Aristophanes a greater tendency to use initial καί. This is not because of a particular attachment to the use of the word καί in general, as can be seen from Table 2. Alcibiades' use of καί, on average once every 14.532 words, falls near the middle of the spectrum, between the extremes of Phaedrus, the devotee of Lysianic rhetoric, and Eryximachus, whose speech is littered with polysyndetic strings of items.¹⁶ Table 3 takes account of the relative frequency of καί in the six

¹⁴ See above for the definition of 'sentence' used, for an explanation of the exclusion of Socrates' speech, and for the reference to Tompkins' tables.

¹⁵ Tompkins 206; cf. K. Dover, *The Evolution of Greek Prose Style* (Oxford 1997) 69–75, with Figs. 4.1 and 4.2.

¹⁶ See e.g. *Symp.* 188A τὰ τε θερμὰ καὶ τὰ ψυχρὰ καὶ ξηρὰ καὶ ὑγρά, καὶ ἀρμονίαν καὶ κρᾶσιν; 188C καὶ περὶ γονέας καὶ ζῶντας καὶ τετελευτηκότας καὶ περὶ θεοῦς.

speeches, from which we can see that Plato's Alcibiades, like Thucydides', is significantly more likely to use *καί* as a sentence connector than his fellows. That he and Aristophanes are the symposiasts who use initial *καί* most frequently can be accounted for, in part, by the fact that their speeches contain a much greater amount of narrative. But Sophie Trenkner notes other features of Alcibiades' speech that are markers of what she terms "le style *καί*," such as the accumulation of synonyms and, at the same time, a naïve indifference to repetition.¹⁷

There is yet another stylistic feature that the Platonic Alcibiades—but not, of course, the Thucydidean—shares with Aristophanes, and that is the frequent use of colloquial turns of phrase. Individual colloquialisms in Alcibiades' speech have been noted by other critics. For example, when Alcibiades describes the indescribable *sophrosyne* of Socrates by saying *πόσης οἴεσθε γέμει ... σωφροσύνης* (216D), Kenneth Dover characterizes the manner of expression as "somewhat colloquial."¹⁸ Similarly, Alcibiades' use of the intensifier *θαυμάσιον ὅσον* (217A) to convey the extent to which he prided himself on his own good looks is included in Dorothy Tarrant's list of colloquialisms in Plato.¹⁹ One might also note the expression *τί τὸ πρᾶγμα* (217C), which occurs only here in Plato but is common in comedy.²⁰ It is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify such

¹⁷ Trenkner, *Le style καί* 70, quoting 219C (*περιεγένετό τε καὶ κατεφρόνησεν καὶ κατεγέλασεν τῆς ἑμῆς ὥρας καὶ ὑβρίσεν*), and 62–63, quoting 220C (*συννοήσας γὰρ αὐτόθι ἔωθέν τι εἰστήκει σκοπῶν, καὶ ἐπειδὴ οὐ προυχῶρει αὐτῷ, οὐκ ἀνίει ἀλλὰ εἰστήκει ζητῶν ... ἄλλος ἄλλω ἔλεγεν ὅτι Σωκράτης ἐξ ἑωθινοῦ φροντίζων τι ἔστηκε ... ἐφύλαττον αὐτὸν εἰ καὶ τὴν νύκτα ἔστηξοι. ὁ δὲ εἰστήκει*) and commenting that this is plainly an instance of deliberate "μίμησις du style du récit oral."

¹⁸ K. Dover, *Plato: Symposium* (Cambridge 1980) 168.

¹⁹ D. Tarrant, "More Colloquialisms, Semi-Proverbs, and Word-Play in Plato," *CQ* 8 (1958) 159, where Tarrant also notes Alcibiades' *οὐκ ἂν φθάνομι* (214E) as colloquial; cf. P. T. Stevens, *Colloquial Expressions in Euripides* (*Hermes Einzelschr.* 38 [1976]) 24–25. In *Lach.* the title character, but not Nicias, uses the expression *θαυμαστὸν ὅσον* (184C2).

²⁰ *Ar. Ach.* 767, *Vesp.* 395, *Av.* 1171, *Lys.* 23, *Thesm.* 73, *Ran.* 438, 658, *Eccl.*

expressions so as to compare their frequency among various interlocutors. There is, however, one feature that is generally considered colloquial that can be readily quantified and that illustrates dramatically the way Plato has chosen to characterize Alcibiades, namely the use of demonstratives in *-ί*.²¹ In *Symposium* only three words appear with this deictic suffix, but its distribution, given in Table 4, is revealing. As we can see, over half the occurrences in *Symposium* of words with the demonstrative suffix *-ί* are in the mouth of Alcibiades, despite the fact that his speech occupies only about 15% of the dialogue. Interestingly, the distribution is echoed, on a smaller scale, by the appearance of another marker of informal speech, namely oaths.²² Of the six occurrences of oaths used as intensifiers in *Symposium* half belong to Alcibiades (214D, 215D, 219C, where we find the unparalleled *μὰ θεούς, μὰ θεός*); the others are spoken by Apollodorus (173A–B) and Socrates (202C, 206A).

	νυνί	οὐτοσί	οὐτωσί	Total
Apollodorus (173A2, 185C5)	1	0	1	2
Aristophanes (193A2)	1	0	0	1
Eryximachus quoting Phaedrus (177C3)	0	1	0	1
Socrates (177E2, 201A4, 201A6, 213D2)	0	2	2	4
Alcibiades (212E8, 213B9, 213E2, 214E10, 215C2, 215E1, 215E7, 218C9, 219B7, 221D1, 223A9)	2	6	3	11
				19

TABLE 4: Distribution of demonstratives in *-ί* in Plato's *Symposium*

311, 394, 1071, *Plut.* 264, 335, fr.129 K.-A.; *Men. Sam.* 662; *Lucian Dial. meretr.* 5.1, 5.3.

²¹ G. Setti, "Il linguaggio dell'uso comune presso Aristofane," *Museo italiano di ant. class.* 1 (1885) 117–118; Dover, *The Evolution of Greek Prose Style* 63–64.

²² Dover, *The Evolution of Greek Prose Style* 62–63. See the valuable database available on the website *The Oath in Archaic and Classical Greece* (www.nottingham.ac.uk/Classics/Research/projects/oaths), housed at the University of Nottingham. Figures for the distribution of oaths in *Symp.* are drawn from the database.

Nicias and Laches

There can be little doubt, then, that Plato has employed his prodigious verbal technique to enhance his portrayal of Alcibiades' colorful personality. The personality of Nicias, by contrast, is more muted, but we can see that, in his case as well, Plato has used stylistic means to distinguish him from the other interlocutors in *Laches*, in particular the title character. The contrasting personalities of Nicias and Laches are frequently noted in discussions of the dialogue.²³ But little effort has been made to investigate whether Plato has used stylistic means to differentiate the two generals. In his study of the styles of Plato Holger Thesleff quotes *Laches* 194C–196C as a “sample text” to illustrate the “colloquial style.”²⁴ Thesleff describes this passage as a “lively polemic between Nicias and Laches ... with interjected remarks by Socrates,” but he does not note the distribution among the interlocutors. In fact, Nicias' style, both here and throughout the dialogue, is marked by an avoidance of colloquialisms, in contrast to the more informal styles of Socrates and, especially, Laches. We saw above that Alcibiades, in *Symposium*, is characterized by the use of oaths and demonstratives in -ί at a significantly more frequent rate than his fellow symposiasts. While the numbers and, therefore, the potential significance are

²³ E.g. J. M. S. McDonald, *Character-Portraiture in Epicharmus, Sophron, and Plato* (Sewanee 1931) 220–223; W. Nagel, “Zur Darstellungskunst Platons insbesondere im Dialog ‘Laches,’” in *Serta Philologica Aenipontana* (Innsbruck 1962) 119–142; P. Vicaire, *Platon: Lachès et Lysis* (Paris 1963) 8–9. Unaccountably, I. Bruns, *Das literarische Porträt der Griechen im fünften und vierten Jahrhundert* (Berlin 1896) 268, sees no evidence of individualization. Hoerber, *CP* 63 (1968) 97, finds the “dramatic clue” to the dialogue in the prevalent use of doublets or pairs, particularly the contrast between Socrates' two main interlocutors. C. Emlyn-Jones, *Plato: Laches* (London 1996) 73, compares the speeches of Nicias and Laches to the opposing pairs of speeches in Thucydides. For Nicias and Laches in Plato see Nails, *The People of Plato* 212–215 and 180–181, for Lysimachus see 194.

²⁴ Thesleff, *Studies* 65–66 = 53. Thesleff also quotes 178A–180A to illustrate the “semi-literary conversational style” (67 = 54) and 183D–84A to illustrate the “historical style” (76 = 61); these are monologues by, respectively, Lysimachus and Laches.

lower in *Laches* than in *Symposium*, we find that these colloquialisms are almost entirely absent from the speech of Nicias. For, while Laches employs oaths as intensifiers on five occasions and Lysimachus and Socrates once each, Nicias avoids them entirely.²⁵ And on only one occasion does Nicias resort to using a demonstrative in -ί, in a particularly testy retort to Laches;²⁶ shortly before, Laches had accused Nicias of speaking nonsense.²⁷

Among the markers of colloquial style that Thesleff identifies in *Laches* 194C–196C are the use of the intensifiers πάνυ and σφόδρα.²⁸ Their distribution, however, shows that they are more at home in the mouth of the impetuous Laches than the more restrained Nicias. For, while Laches uses πάνυ fifteen times (= every 125 words), Nicias uses it on only six occasions (= every 212 words), and Nicias uses σφόδρα only once (= every 1274 words) to Laches' five (= every 376 words). On one occasion Laches even combines the two, responding to a question posed by Socrates by saying πάνυ γε σφόδρα (198C). The only other interlocutors in Plato who give that reply are Ctesippus (*Euthyd.* 299B), Meno (*Meno* 82B), and Callicles (twice: *Grg.* 491E, 495C).

Thus far we have considered the style of Nicias only in negative terms, as displaying an avoidance of features found in

²⁵ Laches: 190E4, 192E5, 193D10, 195A6, 197A1; Lysimachus: 181A4; Socrates: 194D3. The data are taken from the University of Nottingham database. When counting oaths, demonstratives in -ί (next note) and the intensifiers πάνυ and σφόδρα (below), I have considered the entire dialogue, not only continuous utterances (see n.9). In Burnet's text of *Laches*, Nicias speaks a total of 1274 words, Laches a total of 1882.

²⁶ ἡγήσῃ σὺν τούτῳ, ὃ Λάχης...; (195C10). Laches (194B1, 200C5) and Lysimachus (179A2, 201B8) use such demonstratives twice each, Socrates once (186C5).

²⁷ ληρεῖ (195A6). In his note on this word Vicaire, *Platon: Lachès et Lysis* 48, characterizes the speaker: "Lachès, de caractère vif, ne s'embarrasse pas de circonlocutions."

²⁸ See n.24 above. For the colloquial character of these adverbs see H. Thesleff, *Studies on Intensification in Early and Classical Greek* (Helsinki 1954) 56–80 and 92–111.

the speech of other interlocutors in *Laches*.²⁹ We are able, however, to identify positive features in the style of Plato's Nicias by again adopting the procedure followed by Daniel Tompkins. In his study of the style of the Thucydidean Nicias Tompkins shows that Nicias exhibits a notably higher degree of sentence complication than the other speakers in Thucydides and that his style is characterized by a much greater frequency of abstract terms and impersonal verbs.³⁰ When we compare the discourse of Nicias with that of his fellow interlocutors in *Laches* we find that he uses abstract terms and impersonal verbs twice as often as Laches and Socrates, while his use of sentences with three or more levels of complexity is significantly more frequent than that of Laches.³¹ Further, this characterization of Nicias as someone especially given to abstract expression and to complex sentence-structure is supported by a comparison of his style with that of the interlocutors in *Symposium*. Table 5 adapts the table found on pages 189–191 of Tompkins' article and applies its categories to continuous utterances of three or more sentences spoken by Laches, Nicias, Lysimachus, and Socrates in *Laches*. As we can see, while Socrates and Laches are portrayed by Plato as using abstracts and impersonals at rates comparable to each other, Nicias is distinguished by a significantly higher rate of use.³² His average, 0.467, is even higher than the average Tompkins found for the Thucydidean Nicias (0.358), while the figures for Socrates (0.235) and Laches (0.224) are similar to those found in the speeches of Cleon (0.200) and Pericles (0.222) in Thucydides.

²⁹ It is, of course, legitimate to define a style as much by what it avoids as by what it embraces.

³⁰ Tompkins 184–188 (sentence complication) and 189–193 (abstract terms and impersonal verbs). For the sake of consistency, I have adopted Tompkins' method of determining sentence complication as well as his definition of abstract terms, namely "nouns and neuter adjectives, which, with the verb 'to be' expressed or understood, take the infinitive" (189).

³¹ See n.9 above for the restriction to continuous utterances of three or more sentences in *Laches* and for the definition of 'sentence'.

³² In this regard the style of Nicias is similar to that of the cautious and tentative Lysimachus. For a characterization of Lysimachus' style see Emlyn-Jones, *Plato: Laches* 57.

When we compare also the speakers in *Symposium* (Table 6) we find that Plato has indeed invested Nicias with an unusual fondness for abstract expression. Of the ten speakers considered, only the physician Eryximachus is more given to the use of abstract expression.

	Lysimachus	Socrates	Laches	Nicias
1. Abstract terms				
ἀγαθόν	0	0	1	0
ἄμεινον	0	0	1	3
ἀναγκαῖον	0	1	0	0
ἀνάγκη	0	1	0	4
ἄξιον	0	0	1	0
δεινόν	0	1	0	0
δῆλον	1	4	0	1
δίκαιον	0	2	0	0
καλόν	1	0	0	0
μέρος	1	0	0	0
πρᾶγμα	0	0	0	1
χαλεπόν	0	0	1	0
Total	3	9	4	9
2. Impersonal verbs				
δεῖ	0	3	1	3
διαφέρει	0	0	0	1
δοκεῖ	8	5	4	3
ἔξεστι	0	0	1	0
ἔστι	2	0	0	0
ἔστιν ὅπως	0	0	1	0
εὖ ἔχει	1	0	0	0
μέλει	2	0	1	0
οἶόν τε	0	1	0	0
πειστέον	0	1	0	0
πλεονεκτεῖ	0	0	0	1
προσῆκει	0	0	0	2
συμβαίνει	0	0	1	0
χρή	9	4	4	2
Totals				
impersonals	22	14	13	12
abstracts	3	9	4	9
both classes	25	23	17	21

Number of sentences	64	98	76	45
Average number of abstracts and impersonals per sentence	0.391	0.235	0.224	0.467

TABLE 5: Impersonal verbs and abstract terms causing subordination in four speakers in Plato's *Laches*

Phaedrus (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.067
Aristophanes (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.075
Agathon (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.188
Alcibiades (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.213
Laches (<i>Lach.</i>)	0.224
Socrates (<i>Lach.</i>)	0.235
Pausanias (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.365
Lysimachus (<i>Lach.</i>)	0.391
Nicias (<i>Lach.</i>)	0.467
Eryximachus (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.641

TABLE 6: Average number of abstracts and impersonals per sentence in six speeches in *Symposium* and in continuous speech of four speakers in *Laches*

It may be no accident that the language of the valetudinarian Nicias resembles that of the good doctor. There is yet another stylistic feature that Nicias and Eryximachus share, a feature that likewise marks them out as speakers who prefer to express themselves in abstract terms. In *Laches*, Nicias' speech is characterized by a fondness for using neuter adjectives as abstract nouns.³³ Friedrich Solmsen has examined this phenomenon and its efflorescence in the second half of the fifth century, especially in the work of Thucydides.³⁴ It is not a locution specifically char-

³³ τὸ ὑγιεινόν 195C8, τὸ νοσῶδες 195C8, τὸ ἄφοβον 197B1–2 and 197B4, τὸ ἀνδρεῖον 197B2. Significantly and characteristically, the only such expressions used by the more practically minded Laches in the sentences examined are τὸ ἱππικόν (191B5–6) and τὸ δολιτικόν (182D8, 191B6); Socrates once uses τὸ ὑγιεινόν 198D5) while Lysimachus offers no instances.

³⁴ F. Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment* (Princeton

acteristic of the Thucydidean Nicias;³⁵ rather it is one of the linguistic developments of the late fifth century that is particularly visible in Thucydides' writing.³⁶ And it appears in profusion in the speech of Eryximachus in *Symposium*.³⁷ It seems, then, that Plato has taken pains to portray Nicias as au courant with the intellectual and linguistic fashions of contemporary medicine, fashions that are not reflected in the speech of the hard-nosed military man Laches.³⁸ This is consistent with the image of Nicias as presented by Thucydides, which is that of a man who is remarkably willing to speak of his personal illness both in an official dispatch and in a speech to his troops and who on occasion employs metaphors from the realm of medicine. In his letter to the Athenian people sent from Sicily Nicias says that he is unable to remain in his post "because of a disease of the kidneys" (διὰ νόσον νεφρῆτιν, 7.15.1), using a word found elsewhere only in the medical writers before Plutarch picks it up in his *Life of Nicias* (17.3). He refers again to his medical condition in his final address to his troops (7.77.2). In an earlier speech Nicias had addressed the prytanis, exhorting him to prove to be the physician (ιατρός, 6.14) to an ailing city. Simon Hornblower

1975) 110–125.

³⁵ Although in Thucydides Nicias does use τὸ φοβερόν (7.63.3; cf. τὸ ἄφοβον, n.33 above) and τὸ ναυτικόν (7.63.4).

³⁶ Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments* 83–125, entitles the chapter in which he discusses the phenomenon "Experiments with the Greek Language." Solmsen's decision (7–8) to omit discussion of the Hippocratic Corpus is unfortunate but understandable given the difficulty of dating the individual works in the Corpus. The use of neuter adjectives to express abstraction is very common among the medical writers. For example, in one paragraph alone of an early treatise (*On the Nature of Man* 3) we find τὸ θερμόν, τὸ ψυχρόν, τὸ ξηρόν, and τὸ ὑγρόν three times each, as well as τὸ ισχυρότερον and τὸ ἀσθενέστερον once each.

³⁷ τὸ ὑγιές ... καὶ τὸ νοσοῦν 186B5, τὸ ἀνόμοιον 186B6, τὸ ὑγιεινόν 186B7 and τὸ νοσῶδες 186B8 (cf. n.33 above), τὸ ἱατρικόν 186C3, τὸ ὄξυ καὶ βαρὺ 187B1 and 3, τὸ ταχὺ καὶ βραδύ 187B7–8.

³⁸ For a curt characterization of the two men cf. Nagel, in *Serta Philologica Aenipontana* 127: "Nikias ist eben der Theoretiker, Laches aber der Praktiker."

notes that this metaphor lends support to Kenneth Dover's suggestion that Nicias' description, earlier in the same speech, of the city as μετέωρος (6.10.5) may have "a medical flavour."³⁹ Further support for Dover's understanding of μετέωρος may be found in Nicias' unusual choice of expression when he describes himself in his address to his troops, in the very sentence in which he refers to his illness, as in the same precarious situation (αἰωροῦμαι, 7.77.2) as the common soldiers.

The aspects of the style of the Platonic Nicias that we have considered—avoidance of colloquialisms and a preference for abstract expression, including use of neuter adjectives in place of abstract nouns—portray him as a thoughtful and well-educated gentleman, as does the last to be considered, the level of sentence complication in his discourse. This is the main feature of Tompkins' study of the style of the Thucydidean Nicias.⁴⁰ Tompkins shows that the speeches of Nicias exhibit a notably higher proportion of sentences with three or more levels of complexity than the speeches of the other speakers in Thucydides. In fact, of the eight speeches with the highest proportion, five are delivered by Nicias. (The other three are spoken by anonymous Spartans, Corinthians, and Syracusans.) Following the procedures adopted by Tompkins, I have examined the level of sentence complication in the continuous utterances of the four interlocutors in Plato's *Laches*, as well as in the six encomia in *Symposium* (Table 7).⁴¹ The findings are not as dramatic, nor is the distribution as broad as it is in Thucydides, where the proportions range from a low of 0.067 to a high of 0.615 (in both cases the speakers are anonymous Spartans). Still, the distinction between Nicias and Laches (and the Alcibiades of *Symposium*) is

³⁹ S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides III* (Oxford 2008) 329, citing *HCT*, where Dover translates "in a delicate position." In this speech Nicias refers to the literal plague (νόσος, 6.12.1) of 430 B.C. as recent, although it occurred over a decade earlier.

⁴⁰ See Tompkins 184–188 for definitions (which I have followed) and statistics for all the speeches in Thucydides.

⁴¹ Is it characteristic of poets generally, or does it reflect Plato's disdain for them, that they are portrayed as being less inclined to express themselves using complex language and (Table 6) abstracts and impersonals?

notable and is consistent with the way in which Plato has characterized these men in other ways. In particular, the Platonic Nicias, like his counterpart in Thucydides, is marked by a verbal style that prefers subordination to parataxis and abstract expression to a more concrete way of speaking.

Agathon (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.062
Aristophanes (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.075
Alcibiades (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.110
Laches (<i>Lach.</i>)	0.118
Eryximachus (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.128
Lysimachus (<i>Lach.</i>)	0.172
Pausanias (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.176
Phaedrus (<i>Symp.</i>)	0.200
Nicias (<i>Lach.</i>)	0.200
Socrates (<i>Lach.</i>)	0.204

TABLE 7: Proportion of sentences with three or more levels of complexity in six speeches in *Symposium* and in continuous speech of four speakers in *Laches*

Conclusions

In the context of the dialogue *Laches* it is not surprising that Plato has chosen to underline the differences in character between Nicias and Laches by endowing them with contrasting verbal styles. What is perhaps surprising is the way in which the stylistic characterization of Nicias and of Alcibiades in *Symposium* accords with the characterization of those men as speakers in Thucydides. It is possible that Thucydides was personally familiar with the speaking style of both Nicias and Alcibiades from having heard them in the Assembly and perhaps elsewhere. Plato too may have had personal acquaintance with Alcibiades, who was still alive when Plato was in his early twenties. But Plato was too young to have formed much of an impression of Nicias, who was put to death in Sicily in 413, or of Laches, who died in 418 at the battle of Mantinea.⁴² It may be a mistake, however, to imagine that Plato has based his stylistic characterizations on

⁴² The date of Plato's birth, traditionally 428/7, is uncertain; Nails, *The People of Plato* 10–20, argues instead for 424/3.

direct personal acquaintance with the manner of speaking of the historical individuals who populate his dialogues. After all, the interlocutors in Plato's dialogues with whom their author had the longest and most intimate personal relationship are his brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, whose conversation with Socrates occupies the last nine books of the *Republic*.⁴³ And yet Plato does not seem to have gone out of his way to differentiate them stylistically, even though he was more familiar with their personal styles of speaking than he was with anyone else's.⁴⁴ If there was anyone whose verbal idiosyncrasies Plato could have enshrined in his dialogues it was Glaucon and Adeimantus. That he has not done so suggests that fidelity to the actual speaking style of real individuals was not his intention.

Was he, then, influenced in his characterization of Nicias and Alcibiades by having read Thucydides? There is no direct evidence for Plato's acquaintance with Thucydides' history, although similarities between Plato's *Menexenus* and the funeral oration Thucydides puts into Pericles' mouth may be indicative of familiarity.⁴⁵ Even if Plato knew Thucydides' history and paid close attention to his characterization of individual speakers, however, that would have no bearing on the way Plato has individualized Laches, to whom Thucydides has given no speeches. I propose, instead, that Plato (and perhaps Thucydides?) has in-

⁴³ For Glaucon and Adeimantus see Nails, *The People of Plato* 154–156 and 2–3. Plato's acquaintance with his brothers naturally began before he met Socrates and continued well after Socrates' death, since both brothers are present in the frame-dialogue of *Parm.*, set ca. 382 (Nails 308–309).

⁴⁴ Admittedly, this claim is based only on a general impression and not on any detailed examination of the style of the two brothers. If such an examination were to be undertaken, which would be most welcome, it might falsify this claim. Blondell, *The Play of Character* 219–223, discusses the way in which Plato has distinguished Glaucon and Adeimantus on the basis of their intellectual characteristics, but does not mention verbal style; she argues that Plato has minimized their distinctiveness, particularly in contrast to the more memorable personalities of Cephalus and Thrasymachus in Book 1, for legitimate purposes connected with the philosophical program of *Resp.*

⁴⁵ See C. H. Kahn, "Plato's Funeral Oration: The Motive of the *Menexenus*," *CP* 58 (1963) 221–223.

vested certain of his speakers with specific linguistic markers—parataxis, colloquialism, oaths, abstract expression, sentence complication—that are indicative of certain personality types. In the case of Alcibiades we may not be entitled to speak of a ‘type’. His unconventional personality, notable for its affected populism, opportunistic ambitiousness, and hints of dark secrets connected with the profanation of the Mysteries, was too well known to be easily categorized; Plato’s portrait of him in *Symposium*, enhanced by conspicuous verbal mannerisms, conveys all of that and more, and is memorable for its vividness and individuality. Nicias and Laches, however, are a different matter. It may be felt that Plato’s characterizations of the two generals are too convincing to be portrayals of stock characters, but it is the mark of genius to invest with verisimilitude what would appear in the hands of less skillful writers as mere caricatures. Plato shares that genius with Cervantes, Shakespeare, and P. G. Wodehouse. In the case of Nicias and Laches we are presented with two military men of very different outlooks, on whose characters the progress of Plato’s argument depends.⁴⁶ The former is familiar both with Socrates’ dialectical procedures (*Lach.* 187E–188B) and with his identification of virtue and wisdom (194D), as well as with the manner of speaking of contemporary medical theorists and with the kind of sophisticated verbal discriminations associated with Prodicus (197D). Laches, on the other hand, has nothing but contempt for such linguistic nonsense, which he considers more appropriate to the likes of a sophist than to “a man whom the city considers worthy of directing its affairs” (197D).

Interestingly, the contrast between these two men is marked in the dialogue by their very different attitudes toward music and, specifically, toward the figure of Damon.⁴⁷ Nicias attests to

⁴⁶ See especially M. C. Stokes, *Plato’s Socratic Conversations: Drama and Dialectic in Three Dialogues* (Baltimore 1986) 36–113, along with the works cited in n.23 above.

⁴⁷ For Damon see R. W. Wallace, *Reconstructing Damon: Music, Wisdom Teaching, and Politics in Perikles’ Athens* (Oxford 2015), *testimonia* A2 (*Lach.* 180C–D), 12

Socrates' concern for the education of the young by telling Lysimachus approvingly that Socrates introduced Agathocles' pupil Damon to him as a music teacher for his son.⁴⁸ Later, Socrates tells Laches that the linguistic nonsense that he so disparages comes from Damon, "who often associates with Prodicus."⁴⁹ Later still, when Nicias has been reduced to aporia in his attempt to define courage, Laches mocks him, saying sarcastically that he had high hopes Nicias would hit upon a successful definition of courage with the help of the wisdom derived from Damon.⁵⁰ Undeterred, Nicias responds that he will persist in the pursuit of a definition, with the help of Damon and others (200B), which he will be happy to share with Laches, who seems to be in need of instruction. It is clear that Plato has portrayed Nicias as a representative of the type who follows the latest intellectual developments purveyed by the sophists. But the repeated introduction of the specific figure of Damon, the sophist most famous for his theories about music, seems entirely gratuitous. It is, of course, possible that the historical Nicias was in fact a follower of Damon, and that the historical Laches was notable for his distaste for the theorizing of the man from Oa. But even if this is the case, Plato will have known about these men's sentiments only in general terms, and he will have used his skills in characterization, including linguistic means, to clothe

(197D), 13 (199E–200A), 14 (200B), and T. Lynch, "A Sophist 'in disguise': A Reconstruction of Damon of Oa and his Role in Plato's Dialogues," *Études platoniciennes* 10 (2013) <http://etudesplatoniciennes.revues.org/378>.

⁴⁸ *Lach.* 180D. That Damon's teacher is named is significant in view of the importance attached elsewhere in the dialogue to identifying "good teachers" (185B and E, 186A, 189A, 201A) as guarantors of successful education.

⁴⁹ *Lach.* 197D. Lynch, *Études platoniciennes* 10 (2013) §16, notes that Socrates refers to Damon as "my companion (ἑταῖρος)," the same expression he uses at *Hp.mai.* 282C in reference to Prodicus.

⁵⁰ τῆ παρὰ τοῦ Δάμωνος σοφία, 200A. The article seems to have the force, "that Damon of yours." Elsewhere (180D1, 197D2 παρὰ Δάμωνος, 200B5 μετὰ Δάμωνος) Damon's name is anarthrous. At 200B6 Nicias turns Laches' use of the article back on him, saying that Laches mocks the man, "without ever even having laid eyes on "that Damon" (οὐδ' ἰδὼν πόποτε τὸν Δάμωνα)."

the bare bones in living flesh. As it happens, in the case of Laches we in fact have evidence that seems to suggest, in general terms, a reason for his distaste. In Aristophanes' *Wasps*, Laches' canine avatar, Labes of Aixone, is accused of stealing and devouring a cheese.⁵¹ In defense of Labes' acknowledged felony Bdelycleon claims that the dog deserves forgiveness "because he does not know how to play the kithara" (κιθαρίζειν γὰρ οὐκ ἐπίσταται, 959). Zachary Biles and Douglas Olson explain that Bdelycleon here is "arguing for the defendant's lack of social polish as a mitigating factor."⁵² That the dog's lack of social polish should be expressed in terms of ignorance regarding music is interesting in light of Laches' contempt for Nicias' devotion to Damon and in particular in light of Laches' comments at *Laches* 188C–D. There Laches says that the truly musical man, who produces the most beautiful music (ἁρμονίαν καλλίστην), does so not using a lyre or childish instruments (οὐ λύραν οὐδὲ παιδικὰς ὄργανα) but by harmonizing his words and his deeds.

It seems, then, that Plato has used the historical figures of Laches and Nicias as representatives of contrasting types—on the one hand the follower of the sophists and their theoretical studies of everything from music and medicine to ethics and, on the other, the "unmusical" man who regards such airy pursuits as irrelevant to the real business of life—and presented those types as convincing individuals by, inter alia, putting into their mouths the kind of speech that such men can be expected to use. Plato may have been influenced by a similar contrast of characters from a tragedy that he had likely seen in his youth, Euripides' *Antiope*.⁵³ In the play the twins Amphion and Zethus

⁵¹ Ar. *Vesp.* 895. Aixone was Laches' deme; at *Lach.* 197C he declines to respond to Nicias' comment, lest he be accused of seeming to be a typical Aixonian. (The scholiast ad loc. says that members of that deme were ridiculed in comedy as βλάσφημοι.)

⁵² Z. P. Biles and S. D. Olson, *Aristophanes: Wasps* (Oxford 2015) 365.

⁵³ The exact date of *Antiope* is uncertain, but it is undoubtedly one of Euripides' late plays; Christopher Collard considers that it dates from near 410 B.C.: C. Collard, M. J. Cropp, and J. Gibert, *Euripides: Selected Fragmentary Plays*

debate the merits of the active life versus the life of the intellect. The former is in fact a musician who is criticized by his brother the herdsman, in terms similar to those used by Laches, for wasting his time engaging in subtle intellectual exercises;⁵⁴ instead he is encouraged to exert himself by playing the beautiful music of hard work.⁵⁵ We may be reminded of Laches' comment (188C–D) that the truly musical man produces the most beautiful music with his deeds, which harmonize with his words. Unlike the *agon* in Euripides' tragedy, the discussion in *Laches* is carried out not by opponents as different as a herdsman and a cerebral musician (who happen, however, to be brothers) but by a pair of military men, both presumably fine embodiments of the very virtue, courage, that they prove unable to define. Their shared status as generals, however, only serves to highlight their contrasting personalities, which Plato has further communicated to his readers both by what they say and by how they say it.

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Department of the Classics
University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign
Urbana, IL 61801
dsansone@illinois.edu

II (Oxford 2004) 269. Plato's acquaintance with the play is certain, as his *Gorgias* is the source for some of the fragments (184–186, 188 Kannicht).

⁵⁴ κομψὰ ... σοφίσματα, fr.188.5. The only character in *Lach.* who uses the word σοφίσματα and a word related to κομψός is Laches, in both cases as terms of disparagement. At 183D7 he uses σοφίσματα to refer to the silly, ill-fated contrivance of Stesilaus' combination of spear and pruning-hook; at 197D7 he dismisses the sophisticated Prodician verbal discriminations that Socrates attributes to Nicias by saying that such things are more suited to the subtle reasoning of a sophist (σοφιστῆ τὰ τοιαῦτα μᾶλλον κομψεύεσθαι) than to a statesman.

⁵⁵ πόνων εὐμουσίαν / ἄσκει, fr.188.2–3; for the text see E. K. Borthwick, "Two Textual Problems in Euripides' *Antiope*, Fr. 188," *CQ* 17 (1967) 41–42.