

XENOPHON'S DEFENCE OF SOCRATES: THE RHETORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE SOCRATIC PROBLEM

The death of Socrates gave birth to an industry of biographical literature which often took the form of a defence (*apologia*) or prosecution (*katēgoria*), sometimes purporting to be the actual defence or prosecution conducted at his trial. Plato and Xenophon wrote works in his defence. Among his critics, one Polycrates had a certain notoriety. Lysias, Theodectes and Demetrius of Phalerum, orators and rhetoricians like Polycrates, were credited with further works of apology. There were doubtless many others.¹ The aim of this paper is to show that Xenophon wrote his *Defence* in the light of the rhetorical theory that required that a speaker utter words and thoughts appropriate (*πρέποντα*) to his character.²

The *Defence* deals with a specific aspect of the character Socrates revealed at his trial: his high-mindedness (*megalēgoria*). It begins,

It is also worthwhile to recall the way in which Socrates deliberated on his defence and the end of his life when he was called to trial. Others have also offered written reports about this, and all have captured his high-mindedness (*megalēgorian*). So it is clear that Socrates really did speak in this way. But they have not made this feature clear: that he had already decided that death was for him preferable to life. So that his high-mindedness appears to be something rather ill considered (*aphronestera*).

Xenophon attributes the explanation of his high-mindedness to the information given him by Hermogenes, another associate of Socrates.³ This is where he brings in 'propriety' or 'appropriateness'.

Hermogenes the son of Hipponicus was a friend of Socrates and gave such reports of him as make his high mindedness appear appropriate to his intellect⁴ (*πρέπουσαν...τῇ διανοίᾳ*).

Thus the controversy turns on the issue of propriety. Hermogenes made his high-mindedness appropriate, previous written accounts had not.⁵

I have used a mixture of my own and Loeb translations throughout.

¹ See A-H. Chroust, *Socrates Man and Myth* (London, 1957) for a study of this literature.

² For the rhetorical virtue of propriety, see also my 'Mimesis in Greek Historical Writing', *AJP* 108 (1987), 467–86. The literature on Xenophon's *Defence* is rather thin, apart from Chroust above, but see J. K. Anderson, *Xenophon* (London, 1974), pp. 37–40 for a typical treatment from the leading Xenophonic scholar, and W. K. C. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy*, iii (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 338–40, for a typical treatment from a leading historian of Greek philosophy. I have not yet seen D. R. Morrison, *Xenophon's Socratic Writings 1600–present* (Pittsburgh, 1988).

³ Xenophon's attribution of the explanation to Hermogenes need not be a fiction, even though his absence from Athens during the trial meant that he needed an eye witness of the final days to make his *Defence* credible. Guthrie (339) believes there were other sources as well, but Xenophon consistently cites H. as a source for the final days of Socrates at *Mem.* 4.8 and may have received a report from Hermogenes after he returned from Asia and settled at Scillus. M. Montuori, *Socrates. Physiology of a Myth* (Amsterdam, 1981), p. 75 n. 4 dates the work 386 B.C. on this basis. Cf. Chroust, p. 17 and n. 72.

⁴ Although the meaning of 'intent' is also possible, Xen. *Mem.* 4.8.1 uses *dianoia* in the sense of 'intellect' or 'intellectual powers' in a closely parallel context.

⁵ The significance of the reference to appropriateness is not understood. According to Montuori (p. 77 n. 7) Xenophon is saying that no one had sufficiently understood that his high-mindedness contributed to the outcome of the trial; this misses the point. Guthrie (p. 338) is

Xenophon saw *megalēgoria* (lit. 'big talk') as a fault of character associated with self praise, the antithesis of the good grace he so admired in Agesilaus of Sparta. Yet even he recognised that on certain occasions it could be appropriate.⁶ This must be such an occasion, for Socrates talks very big in the *Defence*. He refuses to admit the charges against him. On the charge of impiety, he counter claims that he is favoured by a god, an unrestrained piece of self praise that alienates the jury: those who did not disbelieve him felt jealous of his favour (10–13). He informs them that the god said that none was more just, prudent or free than Socrates, and he drives the point home with proofs (14–18). On the charge of corruption, he counter claims that he is in fact a very excellent teacher deserving of honour (19–21). After the verdict, he grandly compares himself to Palamedes, another victim of injustice, but of heroic status (26). Xenophon frankly admits that this 'big talk' contributed to his condemnation (32). It is understandable that some thought Socrates was mad to have run the risk of alienating a jury that held his life in its hands. Xenophon's concern is equally understandable. No Socratic could tolerate a view of the master that denied him plain common sense.

By the end of the fourth century B.C. the Greeks had developed a considerable body of psychological theory in association with the theory of rhetoric, and the virtue of 'propriety' was central to it. Aristotle considered rhetoric a branch of knowledge requiring a high degree of what we would call psychological insight.⁷ It involved three kinds of 'proofs' designed to persuade, the first depending on the character projected by the speaker, the second on the emotions aroused in the audience, the third on the actual arguments of the speech (*Rhet.* 1.2.3). The key to the first and second proofs was propriety. To be persuasive, the language and sentiments of the speaker had to be appropriate to the character he wished to project, the emotion he sought to arouse, and the general circumstances of the speech. Aristotle says of style in particular:

Propriety of style (*τὸ πρέπον*) will be obtained by the expression of emotion and character and by proportion to the subject matter. Style is proportionate to the subject matter when weighty matters are not treated off-hand, nor trifling matters with dignity. (*Rhet.* 3.7.1)

Historians too, who had long observed propriety in their speeches, had acknowledged the theory by the end of the fourth century.⁸

But propriety was already an issue in Xenophon's time. His contemporary, Isocrates, probably writing in the 380s, says,

Speeches cannot be successful unless they fit the occasion and are written with propriety...

closer in saying that Xenophon seeks to explain the reason for his high-mindedness, but he makes no reference to the theory of appropriateness. He finds Xenophon's picture of Socrates' degree of high-mindedness implausible (p. 339). This is a natural reaction, but Xenophon has already anticipated it by referring to the agreement of all sources on the point. He may exaggerate Socrates' high-mindedness, but his purpose in doing so is to explain it, not to make Socrates the mouthpiece for Xenophon's own admiration for him, as Guthrie alleges.

⁶ Cf. Xen. *Ag.* 8.2–3 for his view of *megalēgoria* in the context of its opposite, good grace (*τὸ εὐχάρι*). His view that it was a character fault may explain why he does not portray it in the *Mem.*, even when he deals with the trial, 1.1–2, 4.4.4, 4.8 etc. By the time of the *Defence*, it was so commonly portrayed that it had to be explained.

⁷ See Arist. *Rhet.* 3.7.1–7 for the rule of propriety. For the nature of the 'proofs' of character and emotion, *ibid.* 1.2.3–7. *Rhet.* is late enough to mention events dated to 336 B.C.: 2.23.6, 23.18, 24.8. For the centrality of propriety to later Peripatetic theory, see esp. S. F. Bonner, *The Literary Treatises of Dionysius of Halicarnassus* (Cambridge, 1939).

⁸ See my paper cited in n. 1, which argues that Duris F.1 criticised the lack of propriety in Ephorus and Theopompus, and that Callisthenes F.41 also called for the quality in speeches in history. Thucydides' reference to *τὰ δέοντα* in his own speeches may also be relevant.

...it requires a great deal of application not to miss the occasion, but to adorn the whole speech with appropriate thoughts.⁹

So that when Xenophon sets out to improve on previous accounts by making Socrates' high-mindedness appear *appropriate*, he seems to be applying rhetorical theory to the Socratic controversy. When he applies the rhetorical concept of propriety to the particular problem of Socrates' *megālēgoria*, which previous writers had failed to explain, he is emphasising his particular contribution in this area. There is a clear criticism of Plato's *Apology* here, if it is the earlier work, as commonly supposed.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus confirms that trials like those of Socrates had at any rate by his day become subjects for discussion in these rhetorical terms. In what seems to be an echo of the kind of debate of which Xenophon's *Defence* formed a part, he criticises Thucydides for crediting Pericles with inappropriate high-mindedness in his speech to the demoralised Athenians after the first invasion of Attica and the onset of plague, when they threatened to depose him.¹⁰ Socrates had been on trial for his life. According to Dionysius, Pericles was also virtually on trial for his life. Socrates' speech was literally an *apologia*. Pericles' speech is called an *apologia*. The criticism seems to be a *topos*.

Thucydides had Pericles reproach the Athenians for their lack of resolution instead of making concessions to their anger. Dionysius says these could have been *appropriate* words for the historian to utter in his own person, but in the mouth of a man on trial for his life, they were utterly *inappropriate*. His reproaches inflamed the Athenians instead of appeasing them (44). He also praised himself in the highest terms as a policy maker, a patriot, and a man above corruption (45). All this recalls the *megālēgoria* of Socrates. Indeed, Dionysius uses almost the same words of Pericles as Xenophon does of Socrates when he describes the impropriety of his high-mindedness (44):

σχῆμά τε οὐ τοῦτο τῇ διανοίᾳ πρεπωδέστατον ἦν, τὸ ἐπιμητικόν, ἀλλὰ τὸ παραιτητικόν.

It was not this attitude of reproach, but the attitude of request that was the attitude most appropriate to his intellect.

Xenophon's *πρέπουσαν...τῇ διανοίᾳ* seems to refer to Socrates' 'intellect', and Dionysius takes the same point of reference for his own imputation of impropriety. Though he uses *dianoia* to mean mere 'thought' elsewhere in the section, he makes its connexion with 'intellect' clear later when he says,

It would be remarkable if Pericles, the greatest orator of his day, had not known *what any even moderately intelligent man would have known*, that while in all orations speakers who praise their own virtues without restraint invariably exasperate their audiences, this is especially so when they are on trial in the lawcourts or in the assembly, where they face the prospect not of loss of prestige, but of actual punishment. (45)

Dionysius and Xenophon part company on only one point. Dionysius finds it impossible to believe that Pericles really spoke so inappropriately. His opinion is that Thucydides had created the impropriety, by composing a speech without consideration for the basic rule (45):

The invention of the most cogent arguments is not to be admired for its own sake, unless they be appropriate to the events, the characters, the situation and all other factors... as a defendant,

⁹ *Against the Sophists* 13, 16–17. The work is among his earliest: cf. *Antidosis* 193. For other references to propriety in Isocrates, *Paneg.* 9, *Helen* 11.

¹⁰ D. H. de *Thuc.* 43–5, referring to *Thuc.* 2.60.

Pericles should have been made to speak humbly and in such a manner as to turn away the jury's anger. This would have been the proper procedure for a historian who sought to imitate real life.

Xenophon could not accept this solution, because it was agreed by all that Socrates did display the quality of high-mindedness. He was therefore forced to search for other explanations of the apparent implausibility of a man on trial for his life who had failed to appeal to his judges. He found the answer in Hermogenes' reports. Socrates did not conform to the accepted psychology of a man on trial for his life. He preferred to die by *megalēgoria* than live by appeasement. His reasoning is spelled out (3–9). He had lived a life of perfection so far, an object of admiration to himself and his friends. The future held only the prospect of old age, decay of the senses and the intellect, loss of admiration, lack of repute. If he died easily by hemlock, his reputation would be untarnished in his own eyes and those of his friends, and they would miss him. He decided therefore to use the trial to advertise his perfection and secure that reputation forever. Anytus would endure an evil reputation in life and death for what he did, but Socrates would live on as the Socrates of the trial, glorious in memory (31–2). His reputation was assured (7, 26, 29, 34).

The existence of the Socratic literature validates his reasoning and vindicates the propriety of his *megalēgoria*. He did live on in the 'Memories' of friends like Xenophon, at the peak of his powers, his death preserving and adding lustre to his memory, untarnished as he intended.

In contemplating the man's wisdom and nobility, I cannot fail to remember him, nor to praise his memory. If a man who seeks virtue had met anyone more helpful than Socrates, I judge him covered with the greatest blessing.

The tribute that ends the *Defence* is the ultimate answer to the charge of impropriety, clear proof that his *megalēgoria* was well considered.

The *Defence* offers, as further proof of his attitude to death, his lightness of heart even after the verdict. Xenophon appears to use this section to suggest that Socrates had indeed adopted the unpleasant trait of *megalēgoria* only as a deliberate expedient for the trial, and that it was not his natural way with his friends. His reply to those who advised escape was to ask jokingly where he could find a place inaccessible to death (23). He told those who wept that they should have begun weeping long ago, since nature had condemned him to death from the moment of his very birth (27). When Apollodorus lamented the injustice of the sentence, Socrates stroked his head, and inquired whether Apollodorus would prefer him to deserve his death, and he smiled as he said it (28). He went to his death cheerful in his looks, his movements and his gait, 'very much in agreement with his words (27), an extension of the rule of propriety to physical description, which also confirmed his characteristic good humour.¹¹

The rhetorical theory behind the *Defence* leaves the historicity of Xenophon's Socrates open to question. The rule of propriety was meant to create the impression of truth to life, which allowed for a rhetorical kind of truth that took the audience as its only measure. The Socrates of literature might need to be different from the Socrates of real life if he were to convince the audience. The Socrates of the *Defence* does have eminently acceptable reasons for courting death. The poets had long agreed on the merits of an easy death over the miseries of old age.¹² The expectation of

¹¹ Cf. *Mem.* 3.10 for application of the theory to outward appearance of statues.

¹² See D. A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Bristol, 1967), Mimnermus (1) and (2), Anacreon (395).

immortality through the afterlife of the memory was conventional wisdom, endorsed by Xenophon elsewhere.¹³ The truth might have been different. Socrates' alleged belief in the afterlife of the soul might be relevant, if it could be established, but Plato's evidence is difficult to control because it is overlaid with his own beliefs.¹⁴ This may apply to Xenophon as well. He attributes the doctrine of the immortality of the soul to Cyrus at the end of the *Cyropaedia*, but not to Socrates.¹⁵ It is natural to suppose from the silence of the *Defence* that Xenophon did not believe that hope of immortality explained Socrates' *megalēgoria* in any way. If he was aware that others believed so, but did not agree with them, his silence may be eloquent. Even if he did believe it, it is just possible that the demands of propriety precluded his mentioning it. Belief in individual immortality might not convince his readers even as a part of the explanation if they did not share the belief.¹⁶

The *Defence* indicates that the Socratic problem was being discussed in the light of the rule of propriety, which was to become the basis of the Peripatetic tradition of rhetorical theory. Xenophon cannot have been the first to apply the rule in general. Lysias, the master of *mimēsis*, who was supremely able to convey the character and emotion and circumstances of the speaker by the use of appropriate sentiment and style, must have applied it to the speech of defence he wrote for Socrates.¹⁷ Xenophon might still have been the first, nevertheless, as his *Defence* implies, to explain the propriety of Socratic *megalēgoria* in particular. Diogenes Laertius says that when Lysias presented Socrates with his speech, Socrates rejected it on the grounds that it was *not appropriate* for him.¹⁸ This is meant as a paradox. Diogenes interprets the rejection to mean that it was forensic rather than philosophical, but the point may be that Lysias failed to portray the *megalēgoria* Socrates considered appropriate. Lysias had a special skill in portraying the ordinary man, and, as we have seen, the ordinary man on trial for his life did not use *megalēgoria*. The story may therefore emphasise both the unusual nature of the Socratic *megalēgoria* and its important place in any account of Socrates' defence. Xenophon acknowledges both in his *Defence*. It certainly confirms that individual authors of Socratic defence speeches had their own individual assessments of the type of speech appropriate for the character involved and the circumstances facing him. Rhetorical theory was well on the way to producing the Socratic problem.

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¹³ See Anderson, p. 39 for Xenophon's belief in the immortality of memory, based on *Mem.* 2.1.33. Cf. Pindar, *Pyth.* 1.90–100, Isocrates, *Evag.* 1–11.

¹⁴ For the views of the historical Socrates on immortality, see I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, i (London and New York, 1962), pp. 301–65; Guthrie, pp. 473–84; Anderson, p. 37; D. Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 7–11. There seems to be no real consensus.

¹⁵ Xen. *Cyrop.* 8.7.17–22. See Anderson, pp. 38–9.

¹⁶ The theory of immortality evidently failed to convince the ordinary man: at *Phaedo* 69e–70b Socrates more or less agrees with Cebes that the idea that the soul lives on after death as an intelligent and moral force would not appeal.

¹⁷ See D.H. *de Lysia* 7–9, *de Isaeo* 16, for Lysias' connexion of propriety and *mimēsis*. See D.H. *de Thuc.* 43–5, *de Comp. Verb.* 20 for his own connexion of the two concepts.

¹⁸ D.L. 2.40–1. Cf. Arist. *Rhet.* 3.7.11 for terminology.