

MENEXENUS—SON OF SOCRATES

The *Menexenus* is also known as Plato's *Epitaphios* or *Funeral Oration*. The body of the work is a fictional funeral oration, composed as an example of what should be said at a public funeral for Athenians who have fallen in war. The oration is framed by an encounter between Socrates and a certain Menexenus, an eager young man who thinks he has reached the end of education and philosophy, but who is still rather young to take an active part in the city's affairs. Nevertheless, he is anxious to follow in the tradition of his family, which (Socrates tells us) has always provided someone to look after the Athenians (τινα ἡμῶν ἐπιμελητήν).¹ Menexenus' interest in public affairs has led him to attend a meeting of the Council at which a speaker was to be chosen to compose and deliver the funeral oration at the imminent public funeral. However, no final decision was reached at the meeting, and Menexenus remarks that by the time the choice is made, the speaker will have almost to improvise his speech. Socrates gently mocks Menexenus' respect for public orators, saying that speeches about a dead person follow a predictable pattern; a speaker exaggerates all a dead person's good points and minimizes all the bad, so that one who has died appears a paragon of virtue even if he was not really good for much. Socrates claims that listening to such public orations, when not only individuals but also the state is eulogized, always makes him feel that in living in Athens he is living in the Islands of the Blessed.

To show Menexenus how easy it is to compose such a speech in the conventional manner, Socrates repeats an oration he says he heard Aspasia improvise the previous day, along the lines of the one she wrote for Pericles. There follows an oration formed from a pastiche of conventional tropes, somewhat reminiscent of Pericles' Funeral Oration (or at least Thucydides' version of it) as we have been led to expect, put together, with Plato's consummate artistry, in the style of Gorgianic rhetoric.²

Cicero tells us that this oration was so well received in Athens that it was still delivered once a year, even in the first century B.C.³ It is understandable that the Athenians should find the *Epitaphios* of the *Menexenus* pleasing because it relates Athenian history in the most glowing terms possible, from its mythical autochthonous origins to the King's Peace at the end of the Corinthian War in 386 B.C. (the occasion for the public funeral in the *Menexenus*). The speech idealizes all the Athenian cruelties and defeats and minimizes any achievements and victories of their allies or enemies. It even refers to the stasis in Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War as the epitome of moderation in civil strife.⁴ Given Plato's attitude to fifth-century Athenian political history (particularly to the period of the Four Hundred and the Thirty) as evinced in the *Apology*, *Gorgias* and *Seventh Letter*, it is hard to believe he wrote his *Epitaphios* in all sincerity. It is also perplexing that he would give it a

¹ Plato's reasons for using the term ἐπιμελητής rather than ἄρχων here will be discussed below.

² See L. Méridier, *Platon*, vol. 5, pt. 1 (Paris, 1964), pp. 69–70; R. Clavaud, *Le Ménexène de Platon et la rhétorique de son temps* (Paris, 1980).

³ Or. 151. The claim may not be true, but the important point is that Cicero thought it could be.

⁴ For a full survey of historical distortions and inaccuracies see M. M. Henderson, 'Plato's *Menexenus* and the Distortion of History,' *ACD* 18 (1975), 25–46.

dramatic date of 386 B.C. and still put in the mouth of Socrates, thirteen years after he had drunk the hemlock.

The predominant solution to these difficulties has been to claim that Plato wrote the oration as a parody of contemporary rhetoric, much as he wrote the speech of Lysias in the *Phaedrus*, and, as in the case with Lysias' speech, his stylistic genius produced so subtle a parody that the speech was accepted as a genuine eulogy of Athens.⁵ In this interpretation the anachronistic reference to 386 B.C. has been explained as part of Plato's humorous purpose,⁶ as a display of his contempt,⁷ or simply as an example of his disregard for chronology.⁸ I shall argue that the anachronism was integral to Plato's intent in the *Menexenus*.⁹

The problem with viewing Plato's *Epitaphios* as out-and-out satire is that in the second part of the speech, following on the summary of Athenian history, Socrates relates the words the fallen soldiers would themselves address directly to their sons if they could, and this part of the speech is recognizably Socratic in tone, exhorting the living to virtue in terms which recall the theory of the Unity of the Virtues. Even those scholars who claim that any similarity to Socratic or Platonic philosophy is illusory recognize a change in tone in the *consolatio*.¹⁰ The problem then is to explain how Plato expected his readers to recognize the first and second parts of the same dialogue as rhetorical satire and serious protreptic respectively. The answer lies in appreciating the significance of the anachronism and its position in the oration, and in correctly identifying Socrates' interlocutor in the frame of the oration.

The anachronism has tended to receive summary treatment because Plato was never overly concerned with the accuracy of chronological details in the dramatic settings of his dialogues. Gorgias, for example, paid only one visit to Athens, in 427 B.C., and this is presumably the occasion on which the dialogue which bears his name is supposed to have taken place. Yet references to events as late as 405 B.C. have been identified in the work.¹¹ Many of the dialogues are set at a time before Plato was born or when he was still very young, so he may not have been aware that he was telescoping incidents to the extent that he was. Even if he was aware of his compression of time, the anachronisms are not so blatant as to cause severe disorientation among his contemporary readers, especially as many of them would be younger than Plato and therefore have an even hazier idea of the exact sequence of events more than a quarter of a century before they were born.

The situation in the *Menexenus*, however, is very different. The references to the King's Peace place its dramatic date shortly after 386 B.C., and the date of

⁵ Clavaud, *Le Ménexène*, pp. 37–77, gives a useful survey of modern criticism on the dialogue. Given that stylistic analysis leaves the date of the composition of the dialogue uncertain, but does not disqualify it as a genuine work of Plato (see below n. 12), arguments for or against its authenticity must hang from the plausibility of explanations for Plato's purpose in writing such a work and the perceived coherence with the rest of his corpus. Since this is so, my paper stands as an argument for Platonic authorship and I do not intend to review the various opinions in this debate further.

⁶ E. F. Bloedow, 'Aspasia and the "Mystery" of the Menexenos,' *Wiener Studien*, N.F. 9 (1975), 46–7. ⁷ G. Highet, *Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton, 1962), p. 137.

⁸ Henderson, 'Plato's *Menexenus*,' n. 2.

⁹ My conclusions on the significance of the anachronism were reached independently of those of H. S. Stern, 'Plato's Funeral Oration,' *The New Scholasticism* 48 (1974), 503–8. Stern recognizes that the oration vacillates between being Plato's oration for Socrates and Socrates' oration on a morally bankrupt Athens, but his short article does not explore all the ramifications, and he believes that Menexenus is Menexenus the cousin of Lysis (n. 2).

¹⁰ E.g., L. Coventry, 'Philosophy and Rhetoric in the *Menexenus*,' *JHS* 109 (1989), 15.

¹¹ See E. R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 17–18.

composition cannot be much later if, as is generally agreed, it is one of Plato's early dialogues.¹² Neither Plato nor his readers were likely to forget that Socrates was dead and had been for some thirteen years. Yet in the *Menexenus* he is portrayed as delivering a funeral oration over their recently deceased contemporaries. The problem is compounded by Socrates' claim to be repeating an oration he heard delivered by Aspasia only the day before, because she had died before Socrates.¹³ Plato's contemporaries, even the youngest of them, could not have remained unaware of the anachronism. The Socrates of the *Menexenus* is a shade, but this realization would not impinge on a reader's consciousness until halfway through the dialogue when Socrates completed his summary of Athenian history with his references to the Corinthian War and the King's Peace.

With this realization another chronological difficulty becomes apparent if we accept, as every reader since Wilamowitz has without question,¹⁴ that Menexenus is to be identified with the cousin of Lysis in the dialogue the *Lysis*. The Menexenus who was old enough to be present in the gymnasium and taking part in sacrifices in the *Lysis* (207A–D) and at Socrates' death in the *Phaedo* (59B) would not still be young enough in 386 B.C. to fit the demeanor of the Menexenus in the *Menexenus*. Another Menexenus, however, would. Diogenes Laertius (2.26) tells us that Socrates had a son called Menexenus, and he was only a small child, a *παιδίον*, at his father's death in 399 B.C. (*Apol.* 34D, *Phd.* 116B). In 386 B.C. he would be a good candidate for the eager young man of the *Menexenus*, showing a precocious interest in political life.

Of course, given that the dialogue opens with Socrates talking quite naturally to Menexenus and referring to a recent meeting with Aspasia, Plato's readers would at first assume that the interlocutor *was* Menexenus the cousin of Lysis, and that the meeting was to be imagined as taking place only a few years after the conversation in the *Lysis*. This assumption would be strengthened by Menexenus' report that the politician most likely to be selected to deliver the epitaphios over the Athenian dead would be Archinus or Dion, at least one of whom was active at the end of the fifth century.¹⁵ It is only with the reference to the King's Peace at the end of the summary of Athenian history that Plato's readers would realize that the meeting was meant to be taking place in the present or recent past, that the dead are those from the Corinthian, not the Peloponnesian, War and that Menexenus was the young man in their midst, the son of Socrates. Then, immediately after the reader has been jerked from the past into a present where the shade of Socrates is addressing his living son, Plato has Socrates begin his exhortation to his listeners to follow in the virtue of the dead with the remark that, 'So then, children of good men, I myself now exhort you and in time to come, wherever I meet up with any of you, I shall remind you and encourage you to be concerned to be as good as possible,' (ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν καὶ αὐτός, ὦ παῖδες ἀνδρῶν ἀγαθῶν, νῦν τε παρακελεύομαι καὶ ἐν τῷ λοιπῷ χρόνῳ, ὅπου ἂν τῷ ἐντυγχάνω ὑμῶν, καὶ ἀναμνήσω καὶ διακελεύσομαι προθυμεῖσθαι εἶναι ὡς ἀρίστους,

¹² Ibid., pp. 23–4. G. R. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato: Computer Analysis of Plato's Style* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 210–12, states that there is nothing in the dialogue to discount an early dating, but that the nature of *Mx.* makes stylistometric analysis inconclusive.

¹³ Diodorus in scholia to *Mx.* 235E.

¹⁴ *RE* Band 15.1, 858, 32–4.

¹⁵ My efforts to discover whether the careers of Archinus and Dion could have spanned the period from the Peloponnesian War to the King's Peace (making this remark, too, ambiguous) have proved inconclusive. Archinus' dated events belong to the period 405–403 B.C.; the undated items may be earlier or later. There is no one particular famous Dion of this period, and the sheer number of attestations to the name Dion in the relevant time frame is so large as to make the probability of correct identification very low. I am grateful to professor John Traill for sharing with me his expertise and the database of his forthcoming prosopography *Athenians*.

246B–C). Not only is this reminiscent of Socrates' description of his divinely-appointed mission at *Apology* 29D–30B (and note that at 31B4 he describes this as the work of a father or elder brother), but it is what he accuses rhetors and sophists of not doing; they will teach virtue only to those who pay a fee. Moreover, it was his refusal to retreat from this mission, which, he said, would be like deserting a military post (*Apol.* 28D–E), which cost Socrates his life. These are not the words of a speech composed by Aspasia for any orator to deliver. They are applicable to no-one but Socrates.

But it is precisely at this juncture that Socrates says he intends to speak in *protopoeia*.

'But on this occasion it is my duty to record the message which your fathers, at the time when they were about to risk their lives, enjoined us, in case any ill befell them, to give to those who survived them. I will repeat to you both the words which I heard from their lips and those which they would now desire to say to you, if they had the power, judging from what they actually said on that occasion. You must, however, imagine that you are hearing from their own lips the message which I shall deliver.'¹⁶

The contemporary reader, however, would realize that the change in tone which this signals is not the result of Socrates assuming a persona, but rather of him dropping the mask of a living orator at a state epitaphios. He really *is* a father who has died in the line of duty addressing his living son.

Now we are presented with unmistakably Socratic behests to strive for virtue. Taken as the words of dead Athenian soldiers to their sons, this virtue initially could be identified simply as the courage to stand fast in battle; whatever Plato thought of the policy of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, in *Apology* 28E and *Symposium* 220E–221B he held up as admirable Socrates' willingness to obey his commanders. But certain phrases in the exhortation to virtue in the *Menexenus* clearly refer to the Socratic paradox of the Unity of the Virtues, e.g. 'any knowledge, when sundered from justice and the rest of virtue, is seen to be cunning and not wisdom,' (πάσα τε ἐπιστήμη χωριζομένη δικαιοσύνης καὶ τῆς ἄλλης ἀρετῆς πανουργία, οὐ σοφία φαίνεται, 246E–247A); of a man who is self sufficient, 'this man is the temperate man and this the brave and wise man,' (οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ σώφρων καὶ οὗτος ὁ ἀνδρείος καὶ φρόνιμος, 248A). Clavaud argues that there is nothing in the *consolatio* which could not fit with banal conventional tropes used by sophists and rhetors.¹⁷ He says that Gorgias does 'not disavow' the results of the separation of knowledge from justice and the rest of virtue when he argues that a teacher should not be blamed if a pupil abuses knowledge he has gained from him (*Grg.* 456C–457C). However, Gorgias' argument does not entail the Unity of the Virtues. In fact, the doctrine is one of the 'Socratic paradoxes' because Socrates had such difficulty in getting it accepted by anybody else. Even when Protagoras asserts that virtue is one thing, and courage, justice, etc., parts of it, he immediately states that he believes it possible for a man to be brave but not just (*Prt.* 329D). Clavaud admits that in isolation the language Socrates uses about virtue in the *Menexenus* does seem Platonic, but he argues that in the context of the rest of the protreptic, where the listeners are being urged to military virtue, this resemblance has no significance. Again, Clavaud admits that in the *Crito* and *Apology* Socrates uses the same military vocabulary and expressions as a protreptic as he does in the *Menexenus* passage, but he says that in the former passages military images are used as a metaphor for the life of philosophy and

¹⁶ *Mx.* 246C, trans. R. G. Bury, *Plato IX* (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge MA, 1929).

¹⁷ *Le Ménexène*, pp. 210–14.

therefore do not provide a banal context for claims on the Unity of the Virtues. In the *Menexenus* passage, he argues, there is no transition to show that ἀρετή is to be taken as general virtue and not simply as military valor. Once we realize that Socrates is speaking in his own person, however, the metaphorical dimension is restored and the second half of Plato's *Epitaphios* is shown to be an encouragement to Menexenus to rival his father's virtue, even in the face of death, not just as a soldier but as a philosopher.¹⁸

Socrates remarks that Menexenus hopes to follow in the footsteps of his family which 'always provided some overseer for us' (ἀεί τινα ἡμῶν ἐπιμελητὴν παρεχομένη, 234B). Menexenus the cousin of Lysis came from a politically distinguished family, so this comment would not appear out of place when beginning to read the dialogue. However, the office which members of his family had filled would be that of ἄρχων. ἐπιμελητής is the term Plato used to designate the guardians at *Republic* 424B4 and is generally used by Plato to designate overseers with expert knowledge.¹⁹ The only family to provide an individual worthy of this title for Athens had been Socrates'. It would have been a commendable ambition if Menexenus had indeed been anxious to follow the tradition of his family and become an ἐπιμελητής, but his interest in the choice of orator for the state epitaphios and his implied admiration for the genre suggests he is being seduced away from the pursuit of philosophy, which would truly fit him to rule, by the power of sophistic rhetoric.

Socrates' last request at his trial in the *Apology* is that his jurors will plague his sons if they seem to be neglecting the important things and think they are good for something when they are good for nothing. This the Athenians have manifestly failed to do since at least one of them is impressed by fourth century sophistic rhetoric.²⁰ Though dead, Socrates himself is the only one who can inspire his son to acquire true virtue. According to the *Meno* (99E–100A), a man who could achieve this among the living would be like Teiresias among the dead, 'a solid reality among shadows'. In the *Menexenus*, Socrates is portrayed as having even more substance than Teiresias, for, though he is dead, he is more capable of inducing true virtue in his son than any living speaker.²¹ This fulfils Socrates' statement in *Cratylus* 398C, 'I say too, that every man who is good is more than human (δαιμονίον) both in life and death, and is rightly called a daemon.'²² In his death Socrates fulfills for others the function that his 'divine sign' had performed for him during his life.

¹⁸ In this connection, Socrates' death is in marked contrast to other Athenian soldiers. They died in battle and he in prison. They have a costly funeral at state expense and he washes himself before death to cause as little fuss as possible after his death. The Athenian dead are honoured by the elaborate, prepared speech of a 'wise man'; Socrates performs his own funeral oration in the impromptu discussion on the immortality of the soul in the *Phd.*

¹⁹ E.g., of the true statesman, *Prt.* 275E–276E; of the stewards of the Isles of the Blessed, *Grg.* 523B7; of the superintendents of specific areas, particularly education, in the *Laws*, passim. See Coventry, 'Philosophy and Rhetoric,' n. 3.

²⁰ It is interesting to note that of the four dialogues which Aristotle wrote that had the same title as a Platonic dialogue only one bears the name of an individual, the *Menexenus* (the others are the *Politicus*, *Sophistes* and *Symposium*). Perhaps Menexenus was the most, or least, philosophically inclined of Socrates' sons and as such attracted the concern of his father's disciples.

²¹ Socrates is also a Teiresias-like figure in the Sophistic Hades of the *Prt.* Plato explicitly likens Protagoras to Orpheus, a visitor to Hades, and introduces Hippias and Prodicus with the words used at *Od.* 11.601 & 582 to introduce the shades of Heracles and Tantalus. The only shade who had kept his wits in *Od.* 11 was Teiresias, and Socrates is shown as the only true philosopher in Callias' house. I am grateful to Steven Pollard for pointing this out to me.

²² After Benjamin Jowett, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds. (Princeton, 1961), p. 435.

Thus the anachronism of the *Menexenus* raises the question of who is really alive and who dead.²³ All the funeral rhetoric comes from the dead: Socrates, Aspasia, the fallen warriors. The first part of the speech repeats the type of things living Athenians like to believe about Athens—but they are manifestly false; all the good points have been exaggerated and the bad points minimized. It is just the sort of speech, as Socrates remarks at the beginning of the *Menexenus*, that an orator would make about a person who had died ‘although he who is praised may not have been good for much,’ (234C). The Athenians who gather to mourn the dead, therefore, would do better to mourn themselves, caught in a world where they choose to see false appearance rather than reality. It should be noted that when Aspasia offers to teach Socrates the sort of speech that should be made ‘concerning these very people’ (περὶ αὐτῶν τούτων, 236A–B), the reference could equally well be to the living Athenians as to the dead. Living Athenians remain in their state of ignorance because the words of the clever sophistic orators charm (γοητευοῦσιν) them, so that they do not want to break out from what is really a living death. Even Socrates says that after listening to their descriptions of Athens he is enchanted (κηλούμενος) into believing he is living in the Islands of the Blessed (a comment doubly ironic in retrospect). Just so, we are told in the *Cratylus*, the dead are charmed (κατακεκλήσθαι) into staying in the Underworld by Hades ‘the perfect and accomplished Sophist’ (τέλεος σοφιστής, 403E)—an epithet which Socrates would consider eminently applicable to Pericles, if we are to judge from *Phaedrus* 269E. Later in the *Cratylus* (404D), we are told that Hades consorts with Persephone because she is wise. This may help to explain the choice of Aspasia as the supposed composer of the oration.²⁴ She was the consort of Pericles, and a renowned intellectual female, and just as Homer tells us (in the same passage of the *Odyssey* in which he says Teiresias was the only shade to retain his wits) that Teiresias was granted his intelligence by Persephone (*Od.* 10.493–5), so it is Aspasia who grants Socrates the knowledge of ‘true’ rhetoric. This is not to say, of course, that either living or dead Socrates derived any of his wisdom from Aspasia, but her presence as a Persephone helps define the parallelism between Hades as the master of the Underworld with Teiresias its only inhabitant who retains his wits and Pericles (the sophistic rhetor par excellence) as the master of Athens (which is in fact a city of the morally dead) with Socrates the only citizen capable of seeing its true nature.

Leaving the identity of Menexenus and the dramatic date of the dialogue ambiguous during the first half of the oration puts readers off guard and presents them with the opportunity for self-examination. To what extent were they themselves charmed by the sophistic rhetoric? How much do they need Socrates as a guiding daemon?

²³ At *Phd.* 64B Socrates remarks that there is some truth in the common perception of philosophers as ‘half-dead’ (θανατώσι), but that most people do not understand in what sense this is so. At *Grg.* 493A and *Cra.* 400C he introduces the concept of σῶμα σῆμα as a Pythagorean or Orphic doctrine, but it is obviously a concept that fits his view of knowledge and the true aim of the philosophic life admirably; cf. *Phdr.* 248C–E.

²⁴ Pohlenz, Wilamowitz, Ehlers and Thurow (see Bloedow, ‘Aspasia,’ 43–8) believe Plato chose Aspasia because he wished to correct Aeschines’ literary picture of Aspasia as a member of the Socratic circle. Bloedow argues that Plato does not imbue other literary portraits with enough significance to refute them, and believes that Plato meant to criticize the historical Aspasia. However, it is doubtful that the historical Aspasia could have had so much influence on Sophistic rhetoric as to arouse Plato’s ire. Aeschines’ literary portrait and the connections of the historical Aspasia to Pericles may have suggested to Plato that he use the dead Aspasia as a Persephone-figure to heighten the dead/living reversal.

Thirteen years after his death, Plato presented Socrates as a vibrant presence still exposing the pretensions to knowledge of the orators and the complacency of the Athenians, and as the only influence who can guide his son or any young man to true knowledge and virtue. In doing so Plato showed that although the Athenians may have rid themselves of Socrates' physical presence in 399 B.C. they could not kill the questions he had posed and the truth he had revealed, and that until they followed his example they were charmed into remaining in the land of shades while Socrates lived on in the real world as a daemon to those who would listen.

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