

Reading Plato Through the *Menexenus*

I begin with the current critical agreement that Plato did indeed write the *Menexenus*. There was not always such agreement; but it was not the style of the dialogue that called it into question, nor ancient aspersions on its authenticity. This dialogue just did not seem (to many) the sort of thing Plato, our Plato, would write. It is so wildly anachronistic, so full of obvious historical distortion, and so lacking in philosophical meat. Never mind that Aristotle twice refers to it as one of Plato's works.

We are largely past those doubtful days, and there has even arisen something of a *communis opinio* about a general interpretation of the dialogue (while important details remain critically unsettled): Plato gives us in the *Menexenus* a parody of contemporary rhetoric, revealing it as facile, shallow, and destructive of the sort of political excellence it aims to celebrate, and even create in its listeners. That parody points, by contrast, the superiority of what Plato/Socrates has to offer over rhetoric: philosophy, dialectic, the truth, etc. – even though this dialogue does not give us much of that superior mode.

From that consensus this paper moves forward. Does recognition of the *Menexenus* as a legitimate entry in Plato's oeuvre require that we somehow change our view of what Plato does? If we agree that Plato can write a dialogue like this, do we have to reassess what Plato does elsewhere? That question is too large for full treatment in this paper, but I will approach it by refashioning it into a slightly more manageable one: are there aspects of the Platonic corpus that become clear(er) to us when we see them writ large in the *Menexenus*? I answer in the affirmative, and proceed to examples, hoping to set us on a path toward new ways we might read Plato through the *Menexenus*.

The points of contact between *Menexenus* and other dialogues are several, some of them well noted. The treatment of rhetoric in *Menexenus* has been connected to treatments in *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, and *Apology*, and often recognized as a concrete exclamation point to those more theoretical discussions. Aspasia, and her role in *Menexenus*, recalls Diotima in *Symposium*, as well as Lysias in *Phaedrus*, Solon in *Timaeus*, and, at a more fundamental level, Socrates throughout the corpus. The use of Aspasia invites us to look more carefully at the choice of Plato's other mouthpieces. The historical distortions and anachronisms in *Menexenus* are the most blatant in the corpus, but not unique. They might contribute to the debate about Plato's use of history: in that respect, I argue that *Menexenus* differs from other dialogues in degree not kind.

Two broader issues have received less attention. First, one of the great attractions and bedevilmings of Platonic scholarship: when can we take Socrates and/or Plato seriously? When and how can we detect irony, and to what effect? *Menexenus* accuses Socrates of poking fun at the orators (235c6) and Socrates himself refers to his speech as playing around (236c9). The fantastic in the speech leads most to judge it as less than serious, at least until the final sections, where the exhortation and consolation strike many as a shift into a more seriously philosophical register. How do we assess that shift (if it really exists), and can we learn from *Menexenus* about the shifting tones in other dialogues, about the limits of Socratic and/or Platonic irony?

The second issue: where is the philosophy in *Menexenus*? We are familiar with the idea that Plato was staking out his own philosophical turf in opposition to the popularity of poets, politicians, and, as in this dialogue, orators. But we usually expect more from Plato: not just the attack ad, but the explication of his own policy as well. Some find a program of sorts in the closing sections of the speech; but that is a stretch, motivated by a desire to make *Menexenus* more like other dialogues. Once we take *Menexenus* as an exposé of the weakness in rhetoric, we might be more willing to recognize the variety of functions of other dialogues.

In sum, while the evidence of one dialogue cannot, of course, overwhelm the evidence of the corpus, the *Menexenus* is just odd enough that, given proper attention, it might ever so slightly shift our views of what Plato was up to.

Bibliography: These relatively recent works (especially the Trivigno article) point to almost all relevant work.

Monoson, S. Sara. *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy*. (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2000).

Pradeau, Jean-Francois. *Plato and the City: A New Introduction to Plato's Political Thought*. Trans. Janet Lloyd (Exeter: Univ of Exeter Pr, 2002)

Trivigno, Franco V. "The Rhetoric of Parody in Plato's *Menexenus*." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 42.1 (2009) 29-58.