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## Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Cultural Memory: Rereading Plato's *Menexenus* and Isocrates' *Panegyricus*

**ABSTRACT.** The rivalry between Plato and Isocrates has begun to receive scholarly attention, primarily because both Plato and Isocrates used the term *philosophia* to describe their occupation. However, the efforts to distinguish their respective uses and definitions of the term typically ignore the performative dimension of both Plato's and Isocrates' writings and their relationship with other discourses of Athenian public culture. This essay argues that both Plato and Isocrates constructed the domain of philosophy by performing the speech genres constitutive of Greek cultural memory. To support this claim, I offer a reading of Plato's *Menexenus* and Isocrates' *Panegyricus*, both of which were crafted in response to the same historical event, the Peace of Antalkidas. The essay demonstrates the distinct ways in which Plato and Isocrates appropriated generic conventions of the Athenian funeral oration and panegyric in order to construct the identity of a "philosopher" vis-à-vis his polis and to model the relationship between students of "philosophy" and discourses of their culture.

The rivalry between Plato and Isocrates, two prominent Athenian educators of the fourth century BCE, has begun to receive more attention from historians of philosophy, classical philologists, and rhetoricians. While Isocrates never openly mentions Plato's name in his extant writings and Plato invokes Isocrates in the *Phaedrus* in a rather benign tone, the extent of the antagonism between the two authors can be gleaned from many allusions, veiled attacks, and even parodies.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Western intellectual tradition aligns Plato with "philosophy" and Isocrates with "rhetoric," both Plato and Isocrates used the term *philosophia* to describe the kind of knowledge they professed.<sup>2</sup> Because Plato and Isocrates struggled over the ownership of the term the meaning of which was still in flux at the time, scholars have expended much effort on settling down their respective definitions of the word. However, content-based comparisons of their distinct versions of *philosophia* highlight topical similarities and



differences between the two authors but often neglect the performative dimension of both Plato's and Isocrates' writings and their relationship with other discourses of Athenian public culture.<sup>3</sup> This essay seeks to complicate the traditional distinction between Plato and Isocrates by considering how each constructed the domain of philosophy by *performing* the speech genres constitutive of Greek cultural memory.<sup>4</sup> I argue that *both* Plato and Isocrates advanced their versions of "philosophy" by presenting their writings as timely appropriations of and reflections upon the shared discursive legacy of Athenian democracy and the Greek world.

To support this argument, I offer a reading of their published responses to the same historical event, the Peace of Antalkidas (387 BCE). Negotiated at the end of the Corinthian War by Sparta whose leaders wished to secure their dominance in the Greek world by making the Persian King the arbiter of disputes among Greek city-states, the treaty was one of the lowest points in the history of democratic Athens. Despite their rivalry, Plato and Isocrates shared a distrust of democratic politics and fashioned their respective educational programs as alternatives to the political status quo. It is not surprising that the occasion furnished elite critics of the current regime with an excuse to attack the wrongs of Athenian democracy as well as to display their insight into the political culture of their contemporaries.

Plato's reaction, dramatized in the dialogue *Menexenus*, is rendered through Socratic imitation of the Periclean funeral oration. Published around 386 BCE, it mentions the treaty at the end of the Corinthian war, even though the dialogue is set around the time of the first year of the Peloponnesian War. Long considered an anomaly among Plato's dialogues, *Menexenus* uses dialogic elements to frame the Socratic recitation of the funeral oration that took place more than thirty years earlier. What exactly Plato hoped to achieve by using the form of *epitaphios logos* is still a point of contention among scholars; however, many agree that *Menexenus* serves as both a condemnation of Athenian democracy in its current state and an indictment of the very language that perpetuates the vanity and insolence of Athenian citizens and the Athenian foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> Isocrates' *Panegyricus*, published around 380 BCE, also employs a bit of discursive dissembling, since it is ostensibly composed for a pan-Hellenic festival, not as a funeral speech or a political counsel. *Panegyricus* has invited less controversy over its author's motives, since the themes of pan-Hellenism and the war against the barbarians, which it explicitly advocates as a response to the current state of division among the Greeks, are present in many of the speeches composed throughout Isocrates' long career.<sup>6</sup>

Still, confining the import of these two compositions to political commentary is limiting, just as it is limiting to contrast Plato the master of Socratic elenchus and Isocrates the master rhetorician. By reading *Menexenus*



and *Panegyricus* side by side, this essay will not only demonstrate the distinct ways in which Plato and Isocrates appropriate the generic conventions of the Athenian funeral oration and panegyric to criticize Athenian democracy, but also show how their acts of *mimesis* construct the identity of a philosopher vis-à-vis his polis and suggest distinct models of relationship between students of “philosophy” and discourses of their culture.

## I.

Plato shows Socrates in the act of reciting a funeral oration and provides a framing of the recitation in the form of Socrates’ exchange with a wealthy young Athenian named Menexenus. I should like to argue that the latter not only signals to the reader the ironic distance between Socrates and the speech he is about to recite, but also indicates why Menexenus would want to listen to Socratic imitation, rather than to the author of the speech, Pericles’ mistress Aspasia. Whereas the recitation can be seen as a parody of the Athenian funeral oration and of rhetoric as a discourse of democracy in general, the dramatic framing implicitly conveys the model of the relationship between teachers and students of philosophy as well as the proper attitude to the study of texts.

The dialogue begins, as do so many of Plato’s dialogues, with Socrates running into one of the young, wealthy, and politically ambitious Athenians. Upon hearing that Menexenus is returning from the Council Chamber, Socrates immediately inquires whether the young man is leaving behind his education (*paideusis*) and “philosophic studies” (*philosophia*) to pursue “better” matters (*ta meidzo*) such as governing (*archein*). Greeting the youth in such a manner and addressing him playfully *o thaumasie* (my wonderful youth), Socrates signals his motive for the ensuing encounter (to bring the youth back into the fold of philosophical learning) and indicates his own role with respect to the education of future leaders (that of an older friend, adviser, and possibly lover). The readiness and delight with which Menexenus acknowledges Socrates’ authority to counsel him imply that their relationship had been established already.<sup>7</sup>

Menexenus’ piece of news—that the Council is still in the process of selecting a speaker to deliver an oration for the dead—prompts Socrates’ critical pronouncements about the funeral oration genre and his following re-presentation of it. Socrates states that he finds the genre of *epitaphios logos* wanting on at least three grounds. First, the orators impart grandeur to the deeds of ordinary men who hail from the ranks of the poor and the uneducated: “For a man obtains a splendid and magnificent funeral even though at his death he be but a poor man; and though he be but a worthless fellow, he wins praise” (234C). Second, funeral orations are “prepared long beforehand,” a practice that suggests artificiality and rigidity of compositional conventions employed by orators as well as their disregard for the reality of



the moment. Finally, orators seduce their audiences into identifying with the constructed splendor of the City and thereby render their listeners vain and insolent. Socrates' ironic testimony about the effects of such speeches is most vivid:

Every time I listen fascinated I am exalted and imagine myself to have become all at once taller and nobler and more handsome. . . . And this majestic feeling remains with me for over three days: so persistently does the speech and voice of the orator ring in my ears that it is scarcely on the fourth or fifth day that I recover myself and remember that I really am here on earth, whereas till then I almost imagined myself to be living in the Islands of the Blessed. (235C)

If Socrates himself is able to shake off the rhetorical intoxication only after several days, Plato's readers may conclude that ordinary Athenians most likely never come to their senses and continue to live under the spell of such rhetoric. Menexenus appreciates Socratic irony and instantly recognizes this leitmotif of Plato's anti-rhetorical polemic: "You are always toying (*prospaidzeis*) with the orators, Socrates" (235C). The suggestion of playfulness is amplified when Menexenus begs Socrates to recite a specimen of funeral oration after his mentor declares that it is not difficult to praise Athenians among Athenians. Socrates agrees only after expressing his reluctance at repeating the oration that Pericles' consort Aspasia had composed. In consenting to reproduce the speech, he likens his performance to an erotic favor: "Nay, then, I must gratify you; for indeed I would almost gratify you if you were to bid me to strip and dance, now that we two are alone" (236C-D). This comic gesture signals an ironic distance between the performer and the genre performed.

The recitation of the oration by Socrates, then, is set up as a pedagogical display of the very rhetorical principles and themes that Socrates criticizes in his exchange with Menexenus. Socrates dutifully follows the generic conventions: he emphasizes the theme of Athenian autochthony, praises the city's political organization (*politeia*), and recounts its exploits "in the cause of freedom" from the mythical times of Amazons to the most recent events of the Corinthian War.<sup>8</sup> Socrates' mastery of all the key commonplaces illustrates his claim that "praising Athenians among Athenians" is nothing special, while his act of distancing himself from the speech by attributing it to Aspasia and reciting it in private (rather than at a public gathering) suggests that his own hands remain clean.

Socrates' playfulness at the outset of the dialogue makes for a poignant contrast with the pathos of the speech itself. However, Socratic recitation is not a simple act of repetition of well-worn formulae of praise, despite Socrates' earlier claims about the extreme formality, stylistic ostentation, and disregard for truth typical of *epitaphios logos* and rhetoric in general. Indeed,



these critical claims become fleshed out precisely thanks to the intentional exaggeration of commonplaces, stylistic pomposity, and the discrepancy between the unmitigated praise of Athenians and its current historical situation. Socrates' parody at once recalls the familiar themes and language of *epitaphios logos* and objectifies them to the point where they appear almost absurd.

The commonplace of autochthony, according to which the ancestors of Athenians sprang from the soil of Attica, had become by the fourth century BCE a conventional proof of the inborn nobility of the democratic polity as a whole, thus melding together the aristocratic ideal of *eugeneia* (good birth) and the democratic norm of equality (*Ober Mass and Elite*). In Socratic rendition, the themes of autochthonous origins and the political equality it had traditionally authorized receive an ironic twist. After reiterating the myth of autochthony and praising the land itself, Socrates proceeds by "eulogizing" the civic organization of the Athenians: "One man calls it 'democracy,' another man, according to his fancy, gives it some other name; but it is, in very truth, an 'aristocracy' backed by popular approbation" (238D). Socrates insists on the term "aristocracy," because, he explains, "kings we always have; but these are at one time hereditary, at another selected by vote" (238D). This deliberate confusion of aristocracy and democracy exaggerates the convention of democratic political rhetoric to appropriate value terms such as *eugeneia* for the description of the citizen body as a whole. In such a regime, Socrates points out, "the man that is deemed (*doxas*) wise or good rules and governs" (238D-E). The use of the word "*dokein*" (to esteem) and its cognate *doxa* (reputation) signals to Plato's readers that wisdom and goodness of elected leaders are appearances, just as the nobility of the demos that votes for them is a rhetorical construct.

The artificiality of the language of praise and its ritualistic indifference to truth is highlighted by Socrates' use of a pompous non-sequitur:

For a polity is a thing which nurtures men, good men when it is noble, bad men when it is base. It is necessary, then to demonstrate that the polity wherein our forefathers were nurtured was a noble one, such as caused goodness not only in them but also in their descendants of the present age, amongst whom we number these men who are fallen. (237C)

It is the orator's task to eulogize the dead regardless of their actual contributions to the polis and to praise the past in similarly unequivocal ways.

The distortions of Athenian history in the *Menexenus*, then, illustrate the implied Socratic charge of indiscriminate praise heaped on the city by orators. As Lucinda Coventry points out, the two main methods of exaggeration in the historical survey are the treatment of motives and claims to success (8). Athens is portrayed as always acting on behalf of its own freedom and the



freedom of other Greeks from the time of the Persian Wars to the Peace of Antalkidas (239B, 245C). The Athenian aggression is downplayed while the aggression of other Greeks against Athens is explained by their jealousy and envy (242A). Thus, Athens engaged Sparta at Tanagra in 457 BCE “in defense of the liberties of Boeotians;” the second Sicilian expedition in 413 BCE was organized “for the freedom of Leontini” (242A-243A). The Athenian alliance with the Argives, the Boeotians and the Corinthians against Sparta in the Corinthian War is portrayed as a gesture of compassion for the weak (244E).

Similarly, Athenian minor military victories are amplified (242B) while war losses and internal political upheavals become incongruously transformed into praiseworthy advantages (243A, 243D-244A). The exaggeration becomes particularly obvious when Socrates declares that external enemies were unable to defeat Athens in the Peloponnesian War, and that it was internal strife that brought down the polis. Immediately after that, however, he extols the peaceful manner in which the oligarchic coup was resolved, saying: “After these happenings, when we were at peace and amity with other States, our civil war at home was waged in such a way that—if men are fated to engage in civil strife—there is no man but would pray for his own State that its sickness might resemble ours” (243E).

The most recent events of the Corinthian War are cast in terms of helping the weak and needy city-states, while Athens’ reliance on Persian help to defeat the Spartan fleet and rebuild the city walls is explained away as a minor tactical maneuver that did not disgrace its ancestral pledge to fight the Barbarian (245A). In a similar vein, Socrates lauds Athenians’ initial refusal to accept the terms of the Peace of Antalkidas, claiming: “So firmly rooted and so sound is the noble and liberal character of our city, and endowed also with such hatred of the barbarian, because we are pure-blooded Greeks, unadulterated by barbarian stock” (245 C-D). The eventual agreement to the terms of the treaty, forced by a naval blockade that cut off Athens’ food supply, receives approbation as a peace more favorable than the one at the end of the Peloponnesian War, because the city was able to retain its walls, its ships and its colonies. Socratic irony here underscores what he sees as confusion of values in a democracy: the reluctance to accept the peace is praised on the basis of the Athenians’ inborn nobility, whereas the decision to agree to its conditions is condoned because of material advantage. The ritualistic exhortation to the children and parents of the fallen Athenians at the end of the speech (246B-249C) appears all the more incongruous precisely because it follows the improbably laudatory depiction of the Peace of Antalkidas.

Given his distaste for political flattery exemplified by orators, Socratic mimesis of Aspasia’s speech can be seen as a veiled attack on the democratic politics and rhetoric of the Athenians of the early fourth century. The language of praise is the ultimate example of how rhetoric creates confusion between



real and apparent values, and how such discourse leads to the corruption of both the demos and its leaders. Furthermore, the dialogue's historical setting in the first year of the Peloponnesian War amplifies Socrates' indictment of the genre by showing the dire historical consequences of a foreign policy underwritten by self-congratulatory rhetoric. In the fourth century many elite rhetoricians unfavorably compared the present state of Athenian democracy to its heyday in the Periclean era.<sup>9</sup> By recounting the events that occurred after his own trial and death, Socrates implies that the degeneration of Athens was due precisely to the seeds of confusion and complacency sown during Pericles' rule.

While the preceding analysis confirms the claim of Socrates' (and Plato's) condemnation of democracy and its discourse, the role of Socratic recitation must also be examined in the context of Plato's attempts to describe "philosophy" in relation to other discourses of Athenian public culture. As Andrea Nightingale has shown in her study of Plato's appropriation and critique of various contemporary genres from oratory to comedy, Plato often defines philosophy by showing what it is not. Similarly, he constructs philosophical identity by pointing out its difference from other professions that traffic in wisdom: poets, politicians, and, of course, orators. As one of the earlier dialogues, *Menexenus* does not contain explicit statements about philosophy (as does the *Republic*, for example), nor does it specify the requirements for claiming philosophical status. However, thanks to the framing dialogue as well as Socratic parody of the funeral oration, we get a glimpse of Plato's early efforts to imagine a philosophical way of life.

Let us return to the relation between "the Aspasian oration" and the exchange between Socrates and Menexenus. I have argued that this conversation alerts the reader to the way in which Socrates distances himself from the speech he is about to recite. By enumerating his objections to the genre Socrates no doubt admonishes Menexenus to bear these criticisms in mind even as the youth attends to Socratic performance. Indeed, Socrates agrees to repeat the oration he had learned from Aspasia only after he has openly condemned its techniques and objectives. This tactic is similar to the famous scene in the *Phaedrus* where Socrates covers his head to signal the distance between his performance and his identity.

In contrast with the *Phaedrus*, in the *Menexenus* Socrates does not follow the recitation with a more "authentic" Socratic speech; instead, the difference between the Socratic point of view and that of the object discourse is implicit rather than explicit. The oration in the *Menexenus*, despite its monologic form, is thoroughly dialogical thanks to Socrates' parodic appropriation of the conventions of *epitaphios logos*. As the preceding analysis of the oration has shown, Socrates draws the reader's attention to ethical and political deficiencies of the genre in particular and of democratic rhetoric in general



by exaggerating, in his own performance, the language and commonplaces of praise. As such this parody has "an effect similar to that of Socratic elenchus, where Socrates leads his interlocutors to acknowledge the unrealized implications of their beliefs and to recognize that they are committed to the views which they try to reject" (Coventry 2).

In the *Menexenus*, however, the youth is not goaded by Socrates to state and then question his own beliefs. It is not Menexenus who is being interrogated, but the connection between rhetorical instruction and political leadership, symbolized, respectively, by the figures of Aspasia and Pericles. If Plato defines philosophers by contrasting them with orators and politicians, Socrates' mentioning of Aspasia is likely to be a strategy for defining philosophy by deprecating rhetorical instruction. As a metic and a woman, Aspasia of Miletus was not formally admitted to citizenship, yet her advice on speechmaking shaped the public rhetoric of powerful men like Pericles. As a consort of Pericles, Aspasia fared even worse than non-citizen sophists who offered their instruction in exchange for money, because she traded both her intellectual property (skill in oratory) and her body.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not Plato endorsed his contemporaries' low opinion of women, the mention of Aspasia serves to stigmatize the profession of rhetorical instruction by its association with a person of lower social status just as sophists are associated with non-citizen merchants in other Platonic dialogues. Plato's Socrates, by contrast, refuses to implicate himself in any system of material exchange, even though his conversation with Menexenus suggests that their relationship is based on *charis*, the trading of favors.

In addition to her suspect status, Aspasia's method of instruction, too, presents reasons for distrusting professors of rhetoric. Instead of teaching Socrates the principles of composition (which he apparently extracts from the speech on his own), Aspasia forces him to memorize it: "I learnt it, to be sure, from her as she went along, and I nearly got a flogging whenever I forgot" (236C).<sup>11</sup> Repetitive automatism is a charge that Plato leveled on poets throughout his career, presenting their mimesis as unreflective reiteration of poetic formulae.<sup>12</sup> Here, it is rhetorical composition that is targeted in a similar way. Aspasia herself is guilty of repetition, having created her funeral oration out of "sundry fragments," some of them taken directly out of the speech she had composed for Pericles (236B). The implication of this pedagogy is transparent: it asks the recipient of rhetorical instruction simply to accept the "product" without understanding how it is put together, whether it is good, and what might be its consequences. The fact that it was Pericles who received this kind of instruction, then, should alarm any thinking person, given the disastrous outcome of the Peloponnesian War.

Socrates thus constructs a complex ratio in which he and Menexenus are juxtaposed with Aspasia and Pericles. At the beginning of the dialogue,



Menexenus is shown as an eager youth whose family desires for him a career in politics. When Socrates inquires whether Menexenus is ready to abandon philosophy for “higher” pursuits, his irony serves as a goading device, designed to make the young man question his political ambition. The recitation of Aspasia’s speech, in turn, makes Menexenus skeptical about purveyors of rhetorical skills. By framing the Aspasian oration in a critical manner and by providing an unflattering portrait of his teacher’s instructional methods, Socrates draws a contrast between himself and professors of rhetoric. By showing Plato’s readers the consequences of Aspasia’s influence on the Periclean leadership, Socrates serves them with a dilemma, as it were: follow the likes of Aspasia and end up like Pericles, or, follow someone like me and reap the moral benefits of a philosophical life. At the end of the dialogue, as Menexenus thanks Socrates for his performance, he also makes it clear that he will not become Aspasia’s student: “I have met with Aspasia many a time, Socrates, and I know well what she is like” (249D). The ambiguity of this remark—it is not clear whether Menexenus refers to Aspasia as a famous speech teacher or as a famous courtesan—validates Socrates’ earlier strategic conflation of the two professions.

Still, the youth is hungry for more speeches as long as it is Socrates who utters them (249E). The dialogue ends with Socrates’ promise to continue reporting other political speeches to his student. This form of transmission, if its model is parody or irony, suggests that whichever specimen of public oratory Socrates chooses to recite, it will be re-accentuated to bring out his objections to its style, content, and most importantly, its effects. Whatever ethical problems the genres of Athenian public culture may have in store, they will not pass unnoticed by Socrates or his students. In other words, Socrates is able to defuse the spell of rhetoric by engaging in its critical re-presentation.

The *Menexenus*, therefore, dramatically foreshadows Plato’s attitude toward oratory and his description of a philosophical way of life articulated more fully in other dialogues. In the *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates advises Hippocrates on the appropriateness of listening to a sophist as long as one does it not for the sake of acquiring technical proficiency (*epi technei*) but for the sake of a gentleman’s education (*epi paideiai*) (321b).<sup>13</sup> The distinction is being drawn between passive reception of model speeches and critical awareness, exemplified by Socrates. It is instructive that Plato employs the term that describes the love of listening in two opposite senses. In the *Republic*, those who passively submit to the spell of poetic or rhetorical performance are called “the lovers of sights and sounds” (*philekooi kai philotheamones*). These persons are unworthy of the title “philosopher” because their eyes and ears delight in appearances, “but their mind is incapable of seeing and delighting in the beautiful itself” (476B). On the other hand, the term “the lover of listening” (*philekoos*) is used positively when it refers to someone who is fond



of listening to a particular type of speaker—namely, Socrates himself (*Lysis* 206C).

Socrates, Plato's model of a philosophical martyr, in the *Menexenus* appears as a jester, whose imitation of the funeral oration underscores his function of a critic of Athens' complacency and ignorance. This depiction goes hand in hand with Plato's account of Socrates' trial in the *Apology*, where the philosopher defends his unique service to the city by comparing himself to a gadfly attached to a lazy thoroughbred horse (30E). The attitude of attachment coupled with antagonism characterizes Socratic forays into other genres of Athenian culture, inspiring young men like Menexenus to do the same.

Although by the end of the *Menexenus* neither Socrates nor his interlocutor has arrived at a definition of philosophy (or rhetoric), they have reached an agreement to study political speeches together. Their relationship, implicitly juxtaposed with the relationship between Aspasia and Pericles, is distinguished by a mutual interest in speech, politics, and culture. Thus Plato demarcates the province of philosophy while indicating that philosophy is a purely educational pursuit, rather than the one that promises students political prominence in exchange for money. Most important, philosophy of this sort offers a promise of liberating oneself from a bondage to one's cultural context by rendering cultural memory, in its various discursive instantiations, a mere substratum of true knowledge.

## II.

Like Plato, Isocrates capitalizes on the historical exigency of the Peace of Antalkidas as a low point in Athenian history to intervene rhetorically into the foreign affairs of his polis. Like Plato's Socrates, Isocrates sets up his intervention as an imitation of an epideictic genre. Instead of choosing a genre that praises "Athenians among Athenians," however, Isocrates calls his discourse a *panegyricus*, an oration composed for a pan-Hellenic audience. In the course of this lengthy "speech" he not only invokes traditional commonplaces of praise similar to those used in the *Menexenus*, but also offers a counsel to his compatriots and other Greeks "on the war against the barbarians and on concord among ourselves" (3). In so doing, Isocrates repeatedly draws attention to the complexity of his compositional task and to his status as a citizen-educator. *Panegyricus* has been traditionally classified as one of Isocrates' political discourses as distinct from his more pedagogically inflected pamphlets *Against the Sophists* and *Antidosis*. I suggest, however, that it too provides a politically charged dramatization of "philosophy" that is likely intended as Isocrates' anticipation of competing appropriations of the term and as a defense of his discursive pedagogy from Plato's attacks.

Isocrates' strategy in the *Panegyricus* is multi-layered. In addition to a lengthy invocation of mythical and historical events that constitute the



shared past of the Greeks, it involves a series of implicit and direct rebuttals to his unnamed competitors and critics. Before proceeding with the actual speech of praise and counsel, he engages in what seems like an excessive self-advertisement. First of all, by selecting the title *Panegyricus*, Isocrates in all likelihood emphasizes that his audience includes citizens from all of the Greek city-states that come together during pan-Hellenic festivals, rather than merely his fellow Athenians. To address such a diverse audience on a topic of mutual concord, especially in the wake of the suspicion sown among its members by the treaty of Antalkidas, is no small feat. Isocrates thus sets himself above his rivals who have failed to capture the greatness of the pan-Hellenic theme and the urgency of the occasion:

I am, in truth, not unaware that many of those who have claimed to be sophists have rushed upon this theme, but I hope to rise so far superior to them that it will seem as if no word had ever been spoken by my rivals upon this subject; and, at the same time, I have singled out as the highest kind of oratory that which deals with the greatest affairs and, while best displaying the ability (*epideiknuousi*) of those who speak, brings most profit (*ophelousin*) to those who hear; and this oration is of this character. In the next place, the moment (*hoi kairoi*) for action has not yet gone by, and so made it now futile to bring up this question; for then, and only then, should we cease to speak, when the conditions have come to an end and there is no longer any need to deliberate about them ... But so long as conditions go on as before, and what has been said about them is inadequate, is it not only our duty to scan and study this question, the right decision of which will deliver us from our mutual warfare, our present confusion, and our greatest ills? (*Panegyricus* 3-6).

Besides advertising the speaker's rhetorical prowess, this passage contains the kernels of arguments repeatedly advanced by Isocrates in defense of his version of philosophy. First, he stresses that the type of oratory he models deals with "the greatest affairs," not with disputes in law courts. This distinction is emphasized again later, when Isocrates addresses his critics directly, arguing that they judge "the most ambitious oratory by the standard of the pleas made in the petty actions in the courts" (11). Rather than offering flattery to the audience, Isocratean speeches offer help in the form of advice. Over and against Plato's suggestion that epideictic rhetoric in the hands of orators and their politically ambitious students is but an instrument of ingratiation, *Panegyricus* claims to present a counter-example that disproves the charge of oratory's failure as an instrument of social criticism.

The mention of *kairos* (the appropriate moment) is also highly important for Isocrates. Pointing out that *his* discourse is crafted not only for a festive



display, but also for a particular historical moment, Isocrates affirms the legitimacy of oratory as a vehicle of political deliberation. Establishing the situational appropriateness of the speech guarantees that it will be judged not only on its stylistic merits but also on its promise to offer sound counsel. In addition, *kairos* requires more than the acquisition of technical skills, because unlike the predictable genre of court oratory, political deliberation is carried out within the realm of contingency.<sup>14</sup>

As if answering Socratic objection that his choice of genre implicates him in a recitation of well-tread commonplaces, Isocrates insists that a well-educated speaker does not need slavishly to follow what has been said before:

For the deeds of the past are, indeed, an inheritance common to us all; but the ability to make proper use of them at the appropriate time, to conceive the right sentiments about them in each instance, and to set them forth in finished praise, is the peculiar gift of the wise (*ton eu phronounton*). And it is my opinion that the study of oratory (*ten peri tous logous philosophian*) as well as the other arts would make the greatest advance if we should admire and honor, not those who make the first beginnings in their crafts, but those who are the most finished craftsmen in each, and not those who seek to speak on subjects on which no one has spoken before, but those who know how to speak as no one else could. (9-10)

The Greek version of the passage uses the term *philosophia* to describe the kind of study of discourses that Isocrates advocates. Although this description falls short of a full definition, it nevertheless proclaims that philosophy in Isocrates' sense deals not with uncritical imitation of model speeches, but with careful scrutiny of all discourses that pertain to political and cultural matters.

To illustrate his point about the need to understand the workings of discourse in relation to audiences and situations, he offers a meta-commentary on his own strategy of reconciling Athens and Sparta: "The man who does not aim merely to make an oratorical display, but desires to accomplish something as well, must seek out such arguments as will persuade these two states to share and share alike with each other, to divide the supremacy between them, and to wrest from the barbarians the advantages which at present time they desire to seize for themselves at the expense of the Hellenes" (17).

In other words, to promote a pan-Hellenic alliance under the leadership of Athens, the author must carefully negotiate a path between the lore of the Athenian ancestral claims to *hegemonia* and the divisive legacy of the Peloponnesian War. It is not enough to appeal to the practical interest of this mixed audience by rehearsing "the misfortunes which have come upon us from our mutual warfare and the advantages which will result from a campaign against our natural enemy" (15). Isocrates cannot simply repeat the *topoi* of Athenian speeches in praise of the city. He needs to mold them and other serviceable linguistic resources into a pan-Hellenic logos.



In addition to establishing his status as a citizen and an educator of note, Isocrates defends cultural validity of speech genres of Athenian democracy which in Plato's rendition are objectified as ritualistic commonplaces. In contrast with Plato's portrait of democratic imitation as a mind-numbing memorization, Isocrates' pamphlet showcases a different kind of appropriation—not a satirical mimicry but a creative reworking of the tradition. At the same time, Isocrates introduces speech genres of the Greek culture as words that have been transmitted many times and therefore do not properly belong to the speaker alone—a condition that makes them the property of the entire Greek world. When describing the good deeds of Athens towards other Greek poleis, Isocrates urges, one must choose “not those which because of their slight importance have escaped attention and been passed over in silence, but those which because of their great importance have been and still are on the lips and in the memory of all men everywhere” (*Panegyricus* 27).

Thus marking the living discourses from which he constructs his *logos* Isocrates draws attention to their role in cultural reproduction. Whereas in his introductory remarks he refers to “philosophy” as a study of oratory (9-10), in the body of the speech Isocrates extends the domain of *philosophia* to the sum total of cultural institutions. As Athens' gift to humanity, philosophy has established a variety of institutions including pan-Hellenic festivals, “has educated us for public affairs and made us gentle towards each other,” and “has distinguished between the misfortunes that are due to ignorance and those which spring from necessity” (47). The fact that Athens has given special honor to eloquence distinguishes her as the most philosophical city, indeed a teacher of the rest of the world (50).

It is significant that Isocrates mentions cultural achievements before he enumerates joint military victories of Athenians and Lacedaemonians, especially if one compares this praise of culture with Socrates' mock praise of the “firsts” bestowed upon Athenians by the gods: “And they set in order our mode of life, not only in respect of daily business, by instructing us before all others in arts, but also in respect of the guardianship of our country, by teaching us how to acquire and handle arms” (*Menexenus* 238B). The latter suggests that the primary source of Athenian pride is the ability to use force, not civilized accomplishments. The deeds celebrated by skilled orators are military in nature, and hence the language of praise does nothing besides confirming the pride of victory or alleviating the pain of defeat. Such *logoi*, on Plato's reading, cannot educate Athenians let alone other Greeks, because they only further the confusion among values and lead to false pride. A wise person, therefore, cannot identify with these discourses.

In contrast with Platonic/Socratic satirical treatment of the resources of Athenian identity, according to which true wisdom and true self-understanding must be sought beyond cultural conventions, Isocrates argues that both wisdom and civic identity depend upon cultural memory. Consequently, a



person who can harness the civilizing power of speech in all of its diversity can profess philosophy.

Clearly, Isocrates appoints himself to a position of cultural stewardship.<sup>15</sup> It is because of this relationship between the author's constructed identity and his linguistic capital that Isocrates devotes much time to justifying even archaic narratives as important symbols of shared cultural heritage. Isocrates concedes that the most ancient of these accounts, such as the story of goddess Demeter's gifts to the city, may be suspect because of its archaic status (*Panegyricus* 30). But, as he explains, the value of this myth, demonstrated by its transmission via the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and various mystic rites that carried on into the fourth century BCE, is more important than the historical truth of the account (30-31). The author's voice connects such "archaisms" to the *kairos* at hand and thereby disputes their merely ritualistic nature pointed out by Socrates in the *Menexenus*. The divine benefaction toward Athens is a traditional story transmitted through sacred rituals and poetic performances. In Isocrates' hands, however, the narrative of the city's noble origins and the gifts it shared with the rest of the Greeks is invested with contemporary significance: "And is it not more fitting to exercise faith (*pisteucin*) about the things of which the oracle of Apollo speaks definitively," he asks, "and on which many of the Greeks agree, and when the words spoken long ago accord with the deeds of today, and the present events tally with the statements of the old?" (31). A rhetorical question transforms the archaic discourse into a plea for unity in the face of political discord and moral defeat. Isocrates thereby displays his sense of *kairos* by integrating the old genre describing the city's beginnings into a counsel meant to effect change in the present. Whereas incongruities between events and their descriptions in the *Menexenus* suggest that the language of praise is a dangerous fiction, Isocrates seizes upon winged words of popular mythology to reassert a sense of community among the Greeks.

The task of this magnitude, especially given Isocrates' mixed audience, is daunting. As the narrative continues, conjuring both archaic myths and recorded accounts of not-so-distant Persian Wars, Isocrates labors to transcend the current animosity between Athens and Sparta and to alleviate the bitter memory of the Peloponnesian war. In contrast with Socrates' Aspasian oration, he does not ignore the feud itself or eschew the unflattering topic of comparison between imperialistic policies of Athens and Sparta (120-128). The language of praise, then, plays only part in his appeal to shared identity, as can be seen from Isocrates' address to Spartan members in his audience:

For it is not with the intention of stigmatizing the city of the Lacedaemonians in the eyes of others that I have spoken as I have about them, but that I may induce the Lacedaemonians themselves, so far as it lies in the power of words to do so, to make



an end of such a policy. It is not, however, possible to turn men from their errors, or to inspire in them the desire for a different course of action without first roundly condemning their present conduct; and a distinction must be made between accusation, when one denounces with intent to injure and admonition, when one uses like words with intent to benefit. (129-30)

Here, the author is conscious of balancing between the anti-Spartan bias current in the speeches of contemporary Athenian rhetors and the detached (and often pro-Spartan) tenor in the writings of democracy's elite critics. In addition, Isocrates subtly points out a contrast between the rhetoric of petty accusation, common in Athenian law courts, and the rhetoric of wise counsel, the type of discourse associated with a more "philosophical" approach. In so doing the author maintains his persona as a critic of internal political order and as an ambassador of good will on behalf of his polis. As Josiah Ober summarizes Isocrates' stance,

Rather than speaking as a rejectionist critic, exterior to the democratic polis community, who seeks to demonstrate why democracy is a hopeless enterprise, Isocrates takes for himself the role of a concerned member of both the democratic and the critical communities, who seeks an appropriate means to reintegrate the interests of the upright individual and his polis. (*Political Dissent* 272)

To close the gap between the demos and the elites and between Athens and Sparta, Isocrates invokes the Greeks' common cultural enmity towards the Barbarians, which for generations has been sustained by the communal experience of *hearing ancestral epea*:

So ingrained in our nature is our hostility to them that even in the matter of our stories we linger most fondly over those which tell of the Trojan and the Persian wars, because through them we learn of our enemies' misfortunes. . . . Moreover, I think that even the poetry of Homer has won a greater renown because he has nobly glorified the men who fought against the barbarians, and that on this account our ancestors determined to give his art a place of honour in our musical contests and in the education of our youth, in order that we, hearing his verses over and over again (*akouontes tōn epōn*), may learn by heart the enmity which stands from of old between us and them, and that we, admiring the valour of those who were in the war against Troy, may conceive a passion for like deeds. (*Panegyricus* 158-159)

The commonality of the Greeks, on this account, has little to do with ethnic kinship. Rather, it is based on enactments of collective memory exemplified by festivals and rituals. In direct contrast with Socrates' inflated



reference to “pure-blooded Greeks unadulterated by the barbarian stock” (*Menexenus* 245D), Isocrates explicitly confirms in the *Panegyricus*, “the name ‘Hellenes’ suggests no longer a race (*tou ghenous*) but an intelligence (*dianoia*), and . . . the title ‘Hellenes’ is applied to those who share our culture (*paideusis*) than to those who share a common blood” (50).

It is instructive that Isocrates uses oral metaphors to describe the role of poetry and oratory in cultural reproduction and to convey the idea of an education he himself professes. Elsewhere, in an advice to his pupil Demonicus, he suggests: “Apply your life’s leisure time to a fondness for listening (*philekoian*) to discussion, for in this way you will easily learn what is discovered by others only with difficulty” (*To Demonicus* 18). The word *philekoia*, fondness for listening, is the same term Plato applies to the different kinds of listeners: on the one hand, there are those who delight in rhythms and tunes without understanding their impact; on the other, there are people like Socrates and some of his more astute followers, who know how to listen. Isocrates, it seems, advocates the latter sort of listening himself. He does not, however, deny the constitutive role of culturally significant speech in a philosophical way of life.

Isocrates presents a speech of admonition, directed at a broad Greek audience, in order to facilitate a renewed alliance between Athens and Sparta. Acting as a political and cultural emissary, he relies to a certain extent on the traditional themes of a festival speech while stressing the historical moment as the exigency behind his composition. At the same time, Isocrates engages in a polemic against his rivals and critics. Using both direct and indirect methods of argument, Isocrates defends his civic role as a professor of eloquence, the status of his knowledge, and the goals of his discursive education. His distinct vision of philosophy, then, takes shape via a performance of a wise counsel and a defense of the discursive and cultural context in which philosophy becomes possible.

### III.

Both *Menexenus* and *Panegyricus* criticize Athenian democratic ideology by showing how Athens has fallen short of its own ideals, encapsulated in the discourse of funeral oration and panegyric. On Socrates’ ironic interpretation of *epitaphios logos*, the language of praise, in its indiscriminate application, is an instrument of false consciousness that obscures historical reality and impedes moral reasoning, leading his compatriots to a life of perpetual political and ethical confusion. Isocrates, on the other hand, appropriates the language of praise as a goading device to strengthen the commitment of his polis to a pan-Hellenic ideal. Both Plato and Isocrates, then, stake their positions as members of a critical intellectual community over and against demagogic orators. However, as this essay has suggested, they are also carving out their



place in the educational scene vis-à-vis other purveyors of language and wisdom.

To do so, both Plato and Isocrates engage in reinterpretation of poetic and oratorical speech genres to demonstrate the advantages of their respective educational endeavors. They display their mastery over cultural memory by integrating performance of these genres into their writings. The manner in which they exhibit their skill as interpreters of the common cultural capital, however, points to very distinct attitudes toward the tradition. Socrates, whose imitation of Aspasia's oration is carried out in private for the benefit of a solitary student, is someone who willingly places himself on the margin of his polis. His performance of *epitaphios logos* engages the tradition but does not invite the student's identification with it. Instead of political empowerment (of the sort provided by Aspasia to Pericles), Socrates offers Menexenus a relationship of intellectual companionship uncontaminated by political interest and mercantile exchange. Philosophy, according to this model, is not completely separate from language and culture, yet its goals are inimical to those perpetuated by practitioners of democratic politics and their rhetorical instructors.

Like Plato's Socrates, Isocrates wishes to distance himself from the mainstream politics of his contemporaries and from the teaching of the so-called "sophists" whose expertise fuels petty litigation in Athenian law courts. However, this rejection of the status quo is balanced in Isocrates by a commitment to his polis as a cultural and intellectual center of the Greek world. Isocrates' cultural politics is continuous with his intellectualization of the sources of Greek identity and his vision of philosophy as the highest version of this identity. To a modern reader, Isocrates' defense of the cultural value of stories comprising the shared past of the Greeks may seem lacking in wit and critical distance when compared with Socrates' scathing irony in the *Menexenus*, just as Isocrates' chest-thumping claims to political importance may seem overbearing when contrasted with Socratic self-effacement. It would be a mistake, however, to downplay the extent to which Isocrates' *philosophia* is both a response and a challenge to Plato's critique of their shared cultural memory.

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## Notes

1. For reconstructions of an intellectual agon between Plato and Isocrates, see Howland's "The Attack on Isocrates in the *Phaedrus*" and De Vries's "Isocrates' Reaction to the *Phaedrus*." For comparisons of Plato and Isocrates



in the context of Athenian democracy, see Morgan, "The Education of Athens: Politics and Rhetoric in Isocrates and Plato" and Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*. For a discussion of Plato and Isocrates with regard to the question of *techne*, see Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom* and Haskins, "Paideia versus Techne."

2. Although many refer to Isocrates' profession as "rhetoric" despite his reluctance to use the term, some have argued that Isocrates belongs to the canon of philosophy because his discourse-friendly articulation of the term "philosophy" anticipates important twentieth-century developments in philosophical thinking. See especially Schiappa.

3. See, for example, Nehamas on Plato's labors of distinguishing "philosophy" from "sophistry," Timmerman, "Isocrates' Competing Conceptualization of Philosophy," and Rummel, "Isocrates' Ideal of Rhetoric." On limitations of a content-based approach to interpreting Plato's texts, see Press, "Plato's Dialogues as Enactments." For a particularly promising example of scholarship that addresses the complex relationship of Plato (and, to some extent, Isocrates) to various genres of Athenian and Greek culture, see Nightingale's *Genres in Dialogue. Plato and the Construct of Philosophy*.

4. I use the term "performance" with Bauman's definition in mind: "a mode of communication, ... the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content" (3).

5. For studies that read the *Menexenus* as a clear demonstration of Plato's animosity towards popular democracy in general and Pericles' legacy in particular, see Coventry, Kahn, Loraux, Monoson, and Yunis. Some scholars interpret the dialogue as a funeral oration that was meant to honor Socrates himself (Stern), or as an attempt to influence specific policies in Athens (Iluby). On how the dialogue illustrates the use of epideictic in Plato, see Duffy. On how the *Menexenus* exemplifies the ritual function of epideictic rhetoric, see Carter.

6. On the pan-Hellenic strand in Isocrates, see Perlman. On the evolution of Isocrates' attitude to Athens' foreign policy, see Thompson. On Isocrates' diplomacy as evidenced in his notion of *eunoia*, see de Romilly.

7. It is, perhaps, not a mere coincidence that *Menexenus* is also featured as one of Socrates' interlocutors in another dialogue, *Lysis*. In addition, Monoson argues that the implicit characterization of the youth in the *Menexenus* suggests that he is indeed an astute listener who is capable of appreciating Socrates' irony (509 n6).

8. On the genre of funeral oration as a site of the "invention" of Athens, see Loraux. For a critique of historiographies of classical funeral oration, see Poulakos, "Historiographies."



9. See Ober, *Mass and Elite*, 320-21.
10. For a reconstruction of the life and influence of Aspasia of Miletus, see Glenn. For Plato's appropriation of the feminine, see DuBois.
11. Coventry suggests that as Socrates' instructor, Aspasia compares unfavorably with Diotima, a priestess whom Socrates introduces in the *Symposium*. Aspasia, as Socrates reveals, grew angry with him because he had difficulty *memorizing* her speech; Diotima, on the other hand, was upset at his difficulty in *understanding*.
12. See Ilavclock, *Preface to Plato*; Ilaskins, "Mimesis between Poetics and Rhetoric."
13. Garver argues that the distinction between craft and wisdom offered by Socrates to Hippocrates serves as a basis for understanding Aristotle's theory of rhetoric as well.
14. Poulakos points out that for Isocrates "the highest level of instruction pertains to 'knowing' what particular things to apply to what occasion" (*Speaking* 97). On the interplay of *kairos* and generic conventions in Isocrates, see Ilaskins, *Logos and Power*, ch. 3.
15. Some scholars find this aspect of Isocrates' pedagogy particularly troublesome. See Too (especially ch. 6) and Livingstone.

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