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George Grote

Excerpt

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P L A T O .

CHAPTER XXXI.

MENEXENUS.

IN this dialogue the only personages are, Sokrates as an elderly man, and Menexenus, a young Athenian of noble family, whom we have already seen as the intimate friend of Lysis, in the dialogue known under the name of Lysis.

Sokr.—What have you been doing at the Senate-house, Menexenus? You probably think that your course of education and philosophy is finished, and that you are qualified for high political functions. Young as you are, you aim at exercising command over us elders, as your family have always done before you.^a

Menex.—I shall do so, if you advise and allow me, Sokrates: but not otherwise. Now, however, I came to learn who was the person chosen by the Senate to deliver the customary oration at the approaching public funeral of the citizens who have fallen in battle. The Senate, however, have adjourned the election until to-morrow: but I think either Archinus or Dion will be chosen. *Sokr.*—To die in battle is a fine thing in many ways.^b He who dies thus may be poor, but he receives a splendid funeral: he may be of little worth, yet he is still praised in prepared speeches by able orators, who decorate his name with brilliant encomiums, whether deserved or not, fascinating all the hearers: extolling us all—not merely the slain warrior, but the city collectively, our ancestors, and us the living—so admirably that I stand bewitched when I hear them, and fancy myself

Persons and situation of the dialogue.

Funeral harangue at Athens—Choice of a public orator—Sokrates declares the task of the public orator to be easy—Comic exaggeration of the effects of the harangue.

^a Plat. Menex. p. 234 B-C.^b Plat. Menex. p. 235 A-B.

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MENEXENUS.

CHAP. XXXI.

a greater, nobler, and finer man than I was before. I am usually accompanied by some strangers, who admire as much as I do, and who conceive a lofty estimation both of me and of the city. The voice of the orator resounds in my ear, and the feeling of pride dwells in my mind, for more than three days; during which interval I fancy myself almost in the islands of the blest. I hardly come to myself, or recollect where I am, until the fourth or fifth day. Such is the force of these orators.

Menex.—You are always deriding the orators, Sokrates.^c

Sokrates professes to have learnt a funeral harangue from Aspasia, and to be competent to recite it himself. Menexenus entertains him to do so.

However, on this occasion I think the orator chosen will have little chance of success: he will have no time for preparation, and will be obliged to speak *impromptu*. *Sokr.*—Never fear: each of these orators has harangues ready prepared. Besides, there is no difficulty here in speaking *impromptu*. If indeed the purpose were to praise the Athenians in Peloponnesus, or the Peloponnesians at Athens, an excellent orator would be required to persuade or to give satisfaction. But when he exhibits before the very hearers whom he praises, there is no great difficulty in appearing to be a good speaker.^d

Menex.—Indeed! What! do you think you would be competent to deliver the harangue yourself, if the Senate were to elect you? *Sokr.*—Certainly: and it is no wonder that I should be competent to speak, because I have learnt rhetoric from Aspasia (an excellent mistress, who has taught many eminent speakers, and among them Perikles, the most illustrious of all), and the harp from Konnus. But any one else, even less well-trained than me—instructed in music by Lamprus, and in rhetoric by Antiphon—would still be fully competent to succeed in praising Athenians among Athenians.

Menex.—What would you have to say, if the duty were imposed upon you? *Sokr.*—Probably little or nothing of my own. But it was only yesterday that I heard Aspasia going through a funeral harangue for this very occasion: partly suggestions of the present moment, partly recollections of

^c Plat. Menex. p. 235 C. Ἄει σὺ προσπαίσεις, ὦ Σώκρατες, τοὺς βήτορας.

^d Plat. Menex. p. 235 D.

Aristotle refers twice to this dictum

as being a true remark made by Σωκράτης ἐν τῷ Ἐπιγραφίῳ, Rhetoric, i. 9, 1367, b. 8, iii. 14, 1415, b. 30.

^e Plat. Menex. p. 236 A.

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CHAR. XXXI. ASPASIA, TEACHER OF RHETORIC.

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past matters which had occurred to her when she composed the funeral harangue delivered by Perikles. *Menex.*—Could you recollect what Aspasia said? *Sokr.*—I should be much to blame if I could not. I learnt it from herself, and was near being beaten because I partly forgot it. *Menex.*—Why do you not proceed with it then? *Sokr.*—I fear that my instructress would be displeased, if I were to publish her discourse. *Menex.*—Do not fear that, but proceed to speak. You will confer the greatest pleasure upon me, whether what you say comes from Aspasia or from any one else. Only proceed. *Sokr.*—But perhaps you will laugh me to scorn, if I, an elderly man, continue still such work of pastime.^f *Menex.*—Not at all: I beseech you to speak. *Sokr.*—Well, I cannot refuse you. Indeed, I could hardly refuse, if you requested me to strip naked and dance—since we are here alone.^g

Sokrates then proceeds to recite a funeral harangue of some length, which continues almost to the end.^h When he concludes—repeating his declaration that the harangue comes from Aspasia—Menexenus observes, By Zeus, Sokrates, Aspasia is truly enviable, if she, a woman, is competent to compose such discourses as that.

Sokr.—If you do not believe me, come along with me, and you will hear it from her own lips. *Menex.*—I have often been in company with Aspasia, and I know what sort of person she is. *Sokr.*—Well then, don't you admire her? and are not you grateful to her for the harangue? *Menex.*—I am truly grateful for the harangue, to her, or to him, whoever it was that prompted you: and most of all, I am grateful to you for having recited it. *Sokr.*—Very good. Take care then that you do not betray me. I may perhaps be able, on future occasions, to recite to you many other fine political harangues from her. *Menex.*—Be assured that I will not betray you. Only let me hear them. *Sokr.*—I certainly will.

The interval between these two fragments of dialogue is filled up by the recitation of Sokrates: a long funeral harangue in honour of deceased warriors, whom the city

^f Plat. Menex. p. 236 C. ἄλλ' ἴσως μου καταγελάσει, ἂν σοι δόξω πρεσβύτης ὄν' ἔτι παιζειν.

^g Plat. Menex. pp. 234 C, 236 C.

^h Plat. Menex. pp. 236 C, 249 C.

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directs to be thus commemorated. The period is supposed to be not long after the peace concluded by Antalkidas in 387 B.C. That peace was imposed upon Sparta, Athens, and the other Grecian cities, by the imperative rescript of the Persian king: the condition of it being an enforcement of universal autonomy, or free separate government to each city, small as well as great.¹

It had been long the received practice among the Athenians to honour their fallen warriors from time to time by this sort of public funeral, celebrated with every demonstration of mournful respect: and to appoint one of the ablest and most dignified citizens as public orator on the occasion.^k The discourse delivered by Perikles, as appointed orator, at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian war, has been immortalised by Thucydides, and stands as one of the most impressive remnants of Hellenic antiquity. Since the occasion recurred pretty often, and since the orator chosen was always a man already conspicuous,¹ we may be sure that there existed in the time of Plato many funeral harangues which are now lost: indeed he himself says in this dialogue, that distinguished politicians prepared such harangues beforehand, in case the choice of the citizens should fall upon them. And we may farther be sure, amidst the active cultivation of rhetoric at Athens—that the rhetorical teachers as well as their pupils, and the logographers or paid composers of speeches, were practised in this variety of oratorical compositions not less than in others. We have one of them among the remaining discourses of the logographer Lysias; who could not actually have delivered it himself (since he was not even a citizen)—nor could ever probably have been called upon to prepare one for delivery (since the citizens chosen were always eminent speakers and politicians themselves, not requiring the aid of a logographer)—but who composed it as a rhetorical exercise to extend his own celebrity. In like manner we find one among the discourses of Demosthenes,

¹ See respecting the character of the peace of Antalkidas, and the manner in which its conditions were executed, my History of Greece, chap. 76.

^k Thucyd. ii. 34.

¹ Thucyd. ii. 34. *ὅς ἐν γνάμῃ τε δοκῆ μὴ ἀξίοντος εἶναι, καὶ ἀξιώματι προήκει.*

though of very doubtful authenticity. The funeral discourse had thus come to acquire an established type. Rhetorical teachers had collected and generalised, out of the published harangues before them, certain *loci communes*, religious, patriotic, social, historical or pseudo-historical, &c., suitable to be employed by any new orator.^m All such *loci* were of course framed upon the actual sentiments prevalent among the majority of Athenians; furnishing eloquent expression for sympathies and antipathies deeply lodged in every one's bosom.

The funeral discourse which we read in the *Menexenus* is framed upon this classical model. It dwells, with emphasis and elegance, upon the patriotic commonplaces which formed the theme of rhetors generally. Plato begins by extolling the indigenous character of the Athenian population; not immigrants from abroad (like the Peloponnesians), but born from the very soil of Attica:ⁿ which, at a time when other parts of the earth produced nothing but strange animals and plants, gave birth to an admirable breed of men, as well as to wheat and barley for their nourishment, and to the olive for assisting their bodily exercises.^o Attica was from the beginning favoured by the Gods; and the acropolis had been an object of competition between Athênê and Poseidon.^p She was the common and equal mother of all the citizens, who, from such community of birth and purity of Hellenic origin, had derived the attributes which they had ever since manifested—attachment to equal laws among themselves, Panhellenic patriotism, and hatred of barbarians.^q The free and equal political constitution of Athens—called an aristocracy, or presidency of the

Plato in this harangue conforms to the established type—Topics on which he insists.

^m Aristotel. *Rhetoric*, i. 5, 1360, b. 31, i. 9, 1367. Dionys. Hal. *Ars Rhetoric*. c. 6, pp. 260-267.

"Nec enim artibus inventis factum est, ut argumenta inveniremus: sed dicta sunt omnia, antequam præciperentur: mox ea scriptores observata et collecta ediderunt" (Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* v. 10).

ⁿ Plat. *Menex.* pp. 237-245 C. οὐ γὰρ Πέλοπες οὐδὲ Κάδμοι οὐδὲ Αἰγυπτοὶ τε καὶ Δαναοὶ οὐδὲ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ, φύσει μὲν βάρβαροι ὄντες, νόμῳ δὲ Ἕλληνες,

συννοικοῦσιν ἡμῖν, ἀλλ' αὐτοὶ Ἕλληνες, οὐ μίσησιν βάρβαροι οἰκοῦμεν, &c.

^o Plat. *Menex.* pp. 237 D, 238 A.

^p Plat. *Menex.* p. 237 C.

^q Plat. *Menex.* pp. 238 D-239 A-245 C-D. ἡ ἰσονομία ἡμᾶς ἢ κατὰ φύσιν ἰσονομίαν ἀναγκάζει ζητεῖν κατὰ νόμον, καὶ μηδὲν ἕλλη ὑπέκειναι ἀλλήλοις ἢ ἀρετῆς δόξῃ καὶ φρονήσεως. 245 D. ὕπεν καθαροὺν τὸ μῖσος ἐντέτρεκε τῇ πόλει τῆς ἀλλοτριᾶς φύσεως (i. e. of the βάρβαροι).

best men, under the choice and approval of the multitude—as it was and as it always had been, is here extolled by Plato, as a result of the common origin.

Alluding briefly to the victories over Eumolpus and the Amazons, the orator passes on to the battles of Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea, which he celebrates with the warmth of an Hellenic patriot.^r He eulogizes the generous behaviour of Athens towards the Greeks, during the interval between the Persian and the Peloponnesian wars, contrasting it with the unworthy requital which she received from Sparta and others. He then glances at the events of the Peloponnesian wars, though colouring them in a manner so fanciful and delusive, that any one familiar with Thucydides can scarcely recognise their identity—especially in regard to the Athenian expedition against Syracuse.^s He protests against the faithlessness of Sparta, towards the close of the Peloponnesian war, in allying herself with the common anti-Hellenic enemy—the Great King—against Athens: and he ascribes mainly to this unholy alliance the conquest of Athens at the end of the war.^t The moderation of political parties in Athens, when the Thirty were put down and the democracy restored, receives its due meed of praise: but the peculiar merit claimed for Athens, in reference to the public events between 403 B.C. and 387 B.C., is—That she stood alone among Greeks in refusing to fraternise with the Persian King, or to betray to him the Asiatic Greeks. Athens had always been prompted by generous feeling, even in spite of political interests, to compassionate and befriend the weak.^u The orator dwells with satisfaction on the years preceding the peace concluded by Antalkidas; during which years Athens had recovered her walls and her ships—had put down the Spartan superi-

^r Plat. Menex. pp. 240-241.

^s Plat. Menex. pp. 242-243.

^t Plat. Menex. pp. 243-244.

^u Plat. Menex. pp. 244-245. *εἴ τις βούλοιο τῆς πόλεως κατηγορῆσαι δικαίως, τούτ' ἂν μόνον λέγων ὀρθῶς κατηγοροίη, ὡς αἰεὶ λίαν φιλοκτιρίμων ἔσται, καὶ τοῦ ἥττονος θεράπις.* Isokrates also, in the *Oratio Panegyrica* (Or. iv.), dwells upon this point, as well as on the pronounced hatred

towards *βάρβαροι*, as standing features in the Athenian character (sect. 59-184). The points touched upon in reference to Athens by Isokrates are in the main the same as those brought out by Plato in the *Menexenus*, only that Isokrates makes them subservient to a special purpose, that of bringing about an expedition against Persia under the joint headship of Sparta and Athens.

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CHAP. XXXI. POPULARITY OF THE HARANGUE.

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ority at sea—and had rescued even the Great King from Spartan force.^v He laments the disasters of Athenian soldiers at Corinth, through difficulties of the ground—and at Lechæum, through treachery. These are the latest political events to which he alludes.^x

Having thus touched upon the political history of Athens, he turns to the surviving relatives—fathers, mothers, children, &c.—of the fallen warriors: addressing to them words of mingled consolation and exhortation. He adopts the fiction of supposing these exhortations to have been suggested to him by the warriors themselves, immediately before entering upon their last battle.^y This is the most eloquent and impressive portion of the harangue. The orator concludes by a few words from himself, inculcating on the elders the duty of resignation, and on the youth that of forward and devoted patriotism.^z

That this oration was much admired, not merely during the lifetime of Plato but also long after his death, we know from the testimony of Cicero; who informs us that it was publicly recited every year on the day when the annual funereal rites were celebrated, in honour of those citizens collectively who had been slain in the service of their country.^a The rhetor Dionysius^b recognises the fact of such warm admiration, and concurs generally therein, yet not without reserves. He points out what he considers defects of thought and expression—ostentatious contrasts and balancing of antithetical clauses, after the manner of Gorgias. Yet we may easily believe that the harangue found much favour, and greatly extended the reputation of its author. It would please many readers who took little interest in the Sokratic dialectics.

When Plato first established himself at Athens as a lec-

^v Plat. Menex. p. 245.

^x Plat. Menex. pp. 245 E, 246 A.

^y Plat. Menex. pp. 247-248.

^z Plat. Menex. p. 249 A-C.

^a Cicero, Orator. c. 44, 151. "At non Thucydides, ne ille quidem haud paulo major scriptor Plato: nec solum in his sermonibus, qui *διαλογοι* dicuntur, ubi etiam de industria id faciendum fuit—sed in populari ora-

tionē, quā mos est Athenis laudari eos, qui sint in praeliis interfecti: quæ sic probata est, ut eam quotannis, ut seisc, illo die recitari necesse sit."

See Plato, Menex. p. 249 B about these yearly funereal rites, and Lysias, Epitaph. s. 80.

^b Dionys. Hal. De Adm. Vi Dic. in Demosth. p. 1027, compared with Ars Rhetoric. c. 6, pp. 260-267.

turer (about 386 B.C., shortly after the peace made by Antalkidas), he was probably known only by Sokratic dialogues, properly so called: which Dionysius specifies both as his earliest works and as his proper department, wherein he stood unrivalled.^c In these, his opposition to the Rhetors and Sophists was proclaimed: and if, as is probable, the Gorgias had been published before that time, he had already declared war, openly as well as bitterly, against the whole art of Rhetoric. But it would be a double triumph for his genius, if, after standing forward as the representative of Dialectic, and in that character heaping scornful derision on the rival art of Rhetoric, as being nothing better than a mere knack of juggling and flattery^d—he were able to show that this did not proceed from want of rhetorical competence, but that he could rival or surpass the Rhetors in their own department. Herein lies the purpose of the Menexenus. I agree with Schleiermacher, Stallbaum, and some other critics,^e in thinking that it was probably composed not long after the peace of Antalkidas, in competition with the harangue of Lysias now remaining on the same subject. Though the name of Lysias is not mentioned in the Menexenus, yet

Probable motives of Plato in composing it, shortly after he established himself at Athens as a teacher—His competition with Lysias—Desire for celebrity both as rhetor and as dialectician.

^c Dionys. Hal. De Platon. p. 762. *τραφείς μὲν ἐν τοῖς Σωκρατικοῖς διαλόγοις ἰσχυροτάτοις οὐδοῖ καὶ ἀκριβεστάτοις, οὐ μείνας δ' ἐν αὐταῖς, ἀλλὰ τῆς Γοργίου καὶ Θουκυδίδου κατασκευῆς ἐρασθεῖς.* Compare p. 761, the passage immediately preceding, and De Adm. Vi Dicendi in Demosthene, pp. 1025-1031.

To many critics Plato appeared successful in the figurative and metaphorical style—*δεινὸς περὶ τὸ τροπικόν.* But Dionysius thinks him very inferior to Demosthenes even on this point, though it was not the strongest point of Demosthenes, whose main purpose was *ὁ ἀληθινὸς ἀγών* (Dionys. *ibid.* p. 1057).

^d Isokrates, in his last composition (Panathen. Or. xii.), written in very old age, shows how keenly he felt the aspersions of jealous rivals—Sophists less successful than himself—who publicly complained that he despised the lessons of the poets, and thought no teaching worth having except his own—*ἀποδεξαμένων δὲ τῶν περιστώ-*

των τὴν διατριβὴν αὐτῶν, ἕνα τὴν τολμηρότερον ἐπιχειρήσαι ἐμὲ διαβάλλειν, λέγονθ' ὡς ἐγὼ πάντων καταφρονῶ τῶν τοιοῦτων, καὶ τὰς τε φιλοσοφίας τὰς τῶν ἄλλων καὶ τὰς παιδείας ἀπάσας ἀναιρῶ, καὶ φημι πάντας ληρεῖν πλὴν τοῦς μετεσχηκότας τῆς ἐμῆς διατριβῆς (sect. 22). That which Isokrates complains of these teachers for saying in their talk with each other, the rhetorical teachers would vehemently complain of in Plato, when he expressed forcibly his contempt for rhetoric in the Gorgias and the Phædrus. One way of expressing their resentment would be to affirm that Plato could not compose a regular rhetorical discourse; which affirmation Plato would best contradict by composing one in the received manner.

^e See the Einleitung of Schleiermacher to his translation of the Menexenus; also Stallbaum, Proleg. ad Menex. p. 10, and Westermann, Gesch. der Beredsamkeit, sect. 66, p. 134.

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CHAP. XXXI. PLATO'S RIVALRY WITH LYSIAS.

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the rivalry between him and Plato is clearly proclaimed in the Platonic Phædrus: and the two funeral harangues go so completely over the same ground, that intentional competition on the part of the latest, is the most natural of all hypotheses.

Here then we have Plato exchanging philosophy for “the knack of flattery”—to use the phrase of the Gorgias. Stallbaum is so unwilling to admit this as possible, that he represents the Platonic harangue as a mere caricature, intended to make the rhetorical process ridiculous. I dissent from this supposition; as I have already dissented from the like supposition of the same critic, in regard to the etymologies of the Kratylus. That Plato might in one dialogue scornfully denounce Rhetoric—and in another, compose an elaborate discourse upon the received rhetorical type—is noway inconsistent with the general theory which I frame to myself, about the intellectual character and distinct occasional manifestations of Plato.^f The funeral harangue in the Menexenus proves that, whatever he thought about Rhetoric generally, he was anxious to establish his title as a competent rhetorical composer: it proves farther that he was equal to Lysias in the epideiktic department, though inferior to Perikles. It affords a valuable illustration of that general doctrine which the Platonic Sokrates lays down in the Gorgias—That no man can succeed as a rhetor, unless he is in full harmony of spirit and cast of mind with his auditors; or unless he dwells upon and enforces sympathies, antipathies, and convictions, already established in their minds.^g A first-rate orator like Perikles, touching the chords of cherished national sentiment, might hope, by such a discourse as that which we

Menexenus compared with the view of rhetoric presented in the Gorgias—Necessity for an orator to conform to established sentiments.

^f Compare also the majestic picture which Plato presents of the ancient character and exploits of the early Athenians, in the mythe commenced in the Timæus (pp. 23-24), prosecuted in the Kritias (pp. 113-114 seqq.), but left by the author incomplete.

^g Plato, Gorgias, p. 510; see above, ch. xxii. p. 134.

This appears to me the real truth, subject to very rare exceptions. But I do not think it true to say, as the Platonic Sokrates is made to declare in

the Menexenus, that it is an easy matter to obtain admiration when you praise Athens among Athenians—though Aristotle commends the observation. Assuredly Perikles did not think so (Thueyd. ii. 35). You have a popular theme, but unless you have oratorical talent to do justice to it, you are likely to disappoint and offend, especially among auditors like the Athenians, accustomed to good speaking. Compare Plat. Kritias, p. 107 E.

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MENEXENUS.

CHAP. XXXI.

read in Thucydides, “adjecisse aliquid receptæ religioni.”^h No public orator ever appointed by the Senate to pronounce the funeral harangue, could have expatiated more warmly than Plato has here done, upon the excellence of the Athenian constitution, and upon the admirable spirit which had animated Athenian politics, both foreign and domestic. Plato falls far short, indeed, of the weight and grandeur, the impressive distinctness of specification, the large sympathies, intellectual as well as popular—with which these topics are handled by Perikles in Thucydides: but his eulogy is quite as highflown and unreserved.

In understanding fully the Menexenus, however, we have to take account, not merely of the harangue which forms the bulk of it, but also of the conversation whereby it is commenced and concluded. Plato, speaking always through the mouth of Sokrates, has to invent some fiction excusing the employment of his master in the unprecedented capacity of public orator. What Stallbaum says (in my judgment, erroneously) about the harangue—appears to me perfectly true about the conversation before and after it. The introductory observations, interchanged between Sokrates and Menexenus, certainly tend to caricature (as Aristophanesⁱ does in the *Acharneis* and the *Equites*) the strong effects produced by this panegyric oratory on the feelings of hearers: and to depreciate the task of the orator as nothing better than an easy and amusing pastime. To praise Athens among Athenian auditors (we are told) is a matter in which few speakers can fail to succeed, however poor their abilities. Moreover, the great funeral harangue of Perikles is represented as having been composed for him by Aspasia^k—a

Colloquial portion of the Menexenus is probably intended as ridicule and sneer at Rhetoric.—The harangue itself is serious, and intended as an evidence of Plato's ability.

^h To employ the striking expression of Quintilian (xii. 10) respecting the great statue of Zeus at Olympia by Pheidias.

ⁱ Aristoph. *Acharn.* 615, *Equit.* 640-887.

The comic exaggeration of Sokrates, in the colloquial portion of the Menexenus (235, v.c.) goes as far as that of Aristophanes.

^k By the language of Plato here, he seems plainly to bring his own

harangue into competition not merely with that of Lysias but also with that of Perikles. But we must not suppose, for that reason, that he necessarily has in view the Perikleian harangue which we now read in Thucydides, ii. 35-43: which is the real speech, reported and drest up by Thucydides in his own language and manner. Probably the Perikleian harangue was preserved separately and in other reports, so that Plato may have known