

## Foreigners as Liberators: Education and Cultural Diversity in Plato's *Menexenus*

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**Abstract:** Though recent scholarship challenges the traditional interpretation of Plato as anti-democratic, his antipathy to cultural diversity is still generally assumed. The *Menexenus* appears to offer some of the most striking evidence of Platonic xenophobia, as it features Socrates delivering a mock funeral oration that glorifies Athens' exclusion of foreigners. Yet when readers play along with Socrates' exhortation to imagine the oration through the voice of its alleged author Aspasia, Pericles' foreign mistress, the oration becomes ironic or dissonant. Through this, Plato shows that foreigners can act as gadflies, liberating citizens from the intellectual hubris that occasions democracy's fall into tyranny. In reminding readers of Socrates' death, the dialogue warns, however, that fear of education may prevent democratic citizens from appreciating the role of cultural diversity in cultivating the virtue of Socratic wisdom.

**Keywords:** *Menexenus*; Aspasia; cultural diversity; Socratic wisdom; Platonic irony

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Though in recent decades many democratic governments have adopted rhetoric and policies promoting cultural diversity, political leaders, citizens, and scholars are increasingly questioning the ideal of a culturally heterogeneous democracy. The predominant concerns are that cultural difference erodes national identity (Schlesinger 1991; Miller 1995) and threatens the moral values essential to a healthy democracy (Schmidt 1997; Huntington 2004). Numerous empirical

studies support the view that cultural diversity breeds division and conflict, finding a strong correlation between high levels of ethnic and cultural diversity and low levels of trust or social capital (*e.g.*, Costa and Kahn 2003; Putnam 2007). Democracy, it seems, falters in culturally diverse settings.<sup>1</sup>

While myriad defenses of cultural diversity exist, scholars often struggle to attenuate concerns that allowing foreign ways of life means endangering core democratic values. In this essay, I turn to ancient Greek philosopher Plato for a virtue-based defense of cultural diversity, that is, a defense of cultural diversity as good for the moral education of democratic citizens. Though Plato has long provided resources for thinking about moral education, some may wonder how Plato's dialogues could be shown to condone, much less welcome cultural diversity. After all, what reader of the *Republic* could forget Socrates' description of democracy as a "multicolored" regime so tolerant of diverse ways of life that it authorizes even the most heinous injustices, paving the way for the rise of a tyrant? Likewise, in the *Laws* the Athenian Stranger advocates founding a city far from the sea and regulating foreign visits due to the danger foreigners pose to traditional values (705a, 950a). It is problematic, however, to treat the statements of Plato's characters—even Socrates—as necessarily reflective of Plato's own views. Plucking any line of a Platonic dialogue out of its larger context is like capturing a sound bite: it can be misleading or inaccurate.

Plato's *Menexenus* provides an exemplary illustration of the problem with divorcing Plato's dialogues from their dramatic context. On the surface, the dialogue features Socrates delivering a mock funeral oration that glorifies Athens' exclusion of foreigners. The oration's

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this finding is far from consistent, and that many studies report the positive role of certain institutional arrangements in moderating the alleged negative effect of cultural diversity on democracy (Fish and Brooks 2004; Portes and Vickstrom 2015).

significant divergences from extant speeches in the Athenian funeral oratory genre suggest, moreover, that it may represent a more Platonic model. Yet in the playful conversation between Socrates and his friend Menexenus that frames the oration, Socrates insists he did not author it; rather, he claims it is the work of Aspasia, Pericles' foreign mistress. Though many dismiss the speech's attribution to Aspasia, I argue that once the injunction to imagine the oration as Aspasia's is heeded, the discordance in Socrates' rhetoric of self-sufficiency, wise leadership, and self-sacrifice for others becomes evident. Though these principles emerge as superior to Pericles' naked advocacy of expansionism, daring leadership, and imperialist conquest, by rendering Socrates' political rhetoric ironic, Aspasia's voice provokes continued examination of which principles and practices are best. Put differently, hearing the oration through her voice serves as a device for cultivating Socratic wisdom, or awareness of the limitations to one's knowledge. Close reading of the text reveals that though Aspasia's gender—the focus of other interpretations—bears some responsibility for this effect, her status as a foreigner (particularly, a *metic* or resident alien) is paramount. First, from the beginning, the dialogue not only emphasizes the treatment of foreigners, but insinuates that Socrates' primary motivation in attributing the speech to Aspasia is to incite Menexenus to think about the speech from the perspective of a foreigner. Second, as Socrates makes clear, the primary aim of funeral orations as a form of public speech is to establish Athenian superiority over foreigners. The oration he delivers is no different. The vast majority of the oration celebrates Athenian exceptionalism. Women are mentioned only twice: in the autochthony myth (237e-238a) and in the dead soldiers' address to their parents (248c-d). Aspasia's foreignness is thus more salient in interpreting the text. This is not to dismiss the importance of her gender; certainly the subordination of women in the autochthony myth is ironic when read through her gendered voice. Yet, being not just a woman

but a *foreign* woman allows Aspasia to uncover patterns of domination within Athenian society that Athenian women themselves have difficulty seeing. Her foreignness thus operates as the key mechanism in the dissonant effect her voice creates, though not to the exclusion of her gender.

Reading the funeral oration through Aspasia's voice as an immigrant contributes in three major ways to political science research. First, it helps scholars of the *Menexenus*—at a time when interest in the dialogue has surged—make better sense of why Socrates attributes his speech to the most infamous foreign woman in Athens.<sup>2</sup> Second, it contributes more broadly to Platonic scholarship, specifically on the understudied subject of interpolity relations in Platonic thought (Pangle 1998; Pangle and Ahrens Dorf 1999; Frank 2007).<sup>3</sup> Finally, and most importantly, it contributes to our understanding of the relationship between cultural diversity and democracy. In demonstrating how engagement with foreign voices can incite self-examination by exposing the limitations to one's knowledge, the *Menexenus* cautions against rejecting cultural diversity by suggesting foreigners can play a role in democracies similar to that of Socrates: the role of gadfly, stinging citizens into wakeful contemplation of themselves and thereby exhorting them to care about virtue (*Apology* 29d-31b). This insight makes the turn to Plato fruitful, as existing defenses of cultural diversity tend to focus on other benefits and hence

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<sup>2</sup> The *Menexenus* was long dismissed as inauthentic owing to its many puzzling features. Its authenticity is now undisputed. Along with the testimony of other reliable ancient sources, Aristotle twice quotes line 235d, where Socrates says it is easy to praise Athenians to an Athenian audience (*Rhetoric*, 1367b, 1415b).

<sup>3</sup> Plato is sometimes portrayed as accepting of *xenoi* (Greeks from other cities), but hostile towards *barbaroi* (non-Greeks). For instance, some argue for a Pan-Hellenist reading of the *Menexenus* (Kahn 1963, 230; Rosenstock 1994, 336). I contend that the dialogue also shows appreciation for non-Greeks. Of course, Aspasia herself was Greek. Yet as argued later in the essay, the oration aligns *xenoi* with *barbaroi*, suggesting that whatever is revealed about Aspasia qua *xenos* applies also to barbarians.

do not address adequately concerns about foreigners corrupting the virtues on which good democratic citizenship depends.

Four major reasons for supporting cultural diversity dominate the scholarly literature. First, there is the communitarian argument that democracies should protect cultural diversity because of the “right to culture,” or because belonging to a particular cultural community provides humans with a sense of belonging, security, and self-esteem—all intrinsic goods (Taylor 1994). While culture may provide these benefits, this argument “establishes why membership of one’s culture is important, but not why cultural diversity is; why one should enjoy access to one’s own culture, not why one should also have access to others” (Parekh 2002, 166). It does not explain, in other words, why one should value a democracy with a culturally diverse population over one with a culturally homogenous population. The liberal argument in favor of cultural diversity addresses this question, arguing that cultural diversity is valuable because it provides freedom of choice (Kymlicka 1995). Rather than being trapped in one’s native culture, cultural diversity allows individuals to make meaningful choices from among a marketplace of beliefs and practices, increasing their sense of autonomy. Those concerned that foreigners corrupt the cultivation of citizenly virtues may not find this approach’s privileging of autonomy convincing, however. Indeed, proponents of this argument often go to great lengths to satisfy detractors by delineating various caveats to the limits of toleration.

A third argument in favor of cultural diversity adopts the more radical position that democracy at its root entails tensions, and hence the tumult that attends encounters with foreignness enriches democracy by multiplying sites of power, action, and discourse. This argument is best elucidated in Bonnie Honig’s *Democracy and the Foreigner* (2001). According to Honig, uses of foreignness are double-edged, serving both to shore up and unsettle regimes.

For instance, the common construction of the foreigner as founder helps citizens escape the problems of violence and partiality that plague the founding of new regimes or re-founding of corrupted ones, yet it also leaves citizens uneasy about their relationship to the law and about their power to act in concert. One of the strengths of this pluralistic, agonistic approach is it acknowledges the conflict foreignness provokes and makes a case for how this persistent disruption benefits democratic politics by invigorating popular political action. In casting off the belief in universal truth predominating ordinary citizens', as well as some scholars', responses to cultural pluralism, Honig's account of foreignness leaves many behind, however.

Returning to Plato can help to bridge this gap. Plato's dialogues do not dismiss the notion of absolute moral truth or the possibility of attaining objective knowledge, but they stress the need for perpetual examination of one's beliefs while undertaking this journey. The *Menexenus* offers a rich demonstration of the value of cultural diversity in this regard, contributing to a fourth argument in favor of cultural diversity, that it fosters intellectual development. Though not advocating *cultural* diversity, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* offers a classic defense of this position. According to this view, engaging different viewpoints allows one to test one's ideas and thus to correct mistaken beliefs or reinforce true ones. Recent research in education shows it can also improve learning outcomes by enhancing creativity, problem-solving, and cognitive performance, as well as increase civic interest and engagement through heightened exposure to accounts of social injustice (Holoien 2013; Phillips 2014). While compelling, this research focuses on how diversity improves knowledge of the external world, whereas I argue that Plato stresses the value of self-knowledge. Put differently, philosophers like Mill value diversity for helping one come closer to discovering the truth, while Plato emphasizes how diversity can help one discover and appreciate the *limitations* to one's knowledge. Corroborating Roxanne Euben's

(2006) powerful illumination of the value of travel, Plato's *Menexenus* shows how encounters with different cultures within the polity can help citizens develop Socratic wisdom.

In casting Aspasia in the role of gadfly and thereby aligning foreigners with Socrates, the *Menexenus* offers a unique explanation for why cultural diversity benefits democracy yet provokes conflict. As the cave allegory in the *Republic* illustrates, few enjoy acknowledging their shortcomings, feeling epistemologically unsettled, or imagining the potential consequences of rejecting aspects of the communal life they have always known. The prisoner who is released must therefore be “compelled” to stand up and look around, an act that makes him “feel pain” so acute he will try to “flee (φεύγειν)” —just as one does when afraid. He must then be dragged out of the cave “suffering and vexed” (515c-516a).<sup>4</sup> When he returns to the darkness of the cave, his sight will seem so corrupted that the prisoners will vow to kill the man who released him (517a). They do not realize this man is, in truth, their liberator. While interpreters often identify the liberator as the philosopher, the *Menexenus* suggests a broader range of individuals can play this role to some degree. Specifically, foreigners—or those raised in a different “cave,” with its own way of interpreting the shadows—can act as gadflies. To be clear, I am not claiming Plato thinks foreigners are philosophers, though various dialogues imply philosophers could well be foreigners.<sup>5</sup> Rather, my claim is that foreigners, philosophical or not, can play the liberator's initial role of revealing the dimness of the prisoner's knowledge. This is such a painful experience that, instead of facing it, citizens will be tempted to run away—*i.e.*, to seek to silence foreigners through assimilation, marginalization, expulsion, or extermination, just as Athenians reacted to Socrates. Yet, even if its instinct is to swat at them, the democratic polity needs

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<sup>4</sup> Translations of the ancient Greek are my own.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Republic* 499c-d; *Laws* 951b; and *Phaedo* 78a.

gadflies to temper its tendency towards the intellectual hubris that leads to tyranny. As my analysis of the *Menexenus* shows, this is a reason to welcome cultural diversity.

### **Socrates' Aspasian Oration: Satirical, Serious, or Ironic?**

Despite his misgivings about democracy, Plato devoted serious study to democratic politics and life. For one, he recognized the enduring appeal of the regime “many would judge to be the most beautiful” (*Republic*, 557c). Moreover, as the dialogic nature of his writings suggests, Plato himself appreciated certain aspects of democratic discourse and politics. Though their analyses of democracy differ in important respects, Plato can be compared to French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, who centuries later observed the “providential” march of democracy and determined democracy was not devoid of good qualities, but must be educated. Likewise, Plato sought to discover how to temper democracy’s negative impulses so as to preserve its positive elements and prevent it from devolving into tyranny. As recent scholarship shows, Plato’s reflections on both the problems and potential of democracy provide valuable insights for contemporary democratic practice (Euben 1997; Mara 1997; Monoson 2000; Wallach 2001; Saxonhouse 2006).

Among the potential complications of democracy explored in his dialogues, one bears the brunt of the blame for democracy’s descent into tyranny: lack of Socratic wisdom, defined in Plato’s *Apology* as knowing the limits to one’s knowledge (21d). Various dialogues diagnose democracy as suffering from a tendency towards intellectual hubris that, if left untreated, begets tyranny. In Plato’s *Laws*, for instance, the Athenian Stranger insists the rise of “the opinion that everyone is wise in everything” is responsible for the “excessively bold freedom” that leads democracy to swing in the opposite direction, towards tyranny (701a). The Stranger’s judgment



echoes that of Socrates in the *Republic*, who describes democracy as a regime in which each person is free to “organize his life...just as it pleases him” (563d). This immense individual freedom results not merely from the rejection of a particular code of ethics, but from the rejection of expertise itself. In democracies, traditional authority figures such as fathers and teachers are treated as no wiser than anyone else (562e-563e). Instead, democratic citizens tend to practice a golden rule of intellection: respect others’ wisdom as you would have them respect yours.

However fair this may seem, democratic citizens consequently must permit behaviors conducive both to freedom and to despotism. Ultimately, such democratic “formlessness”—to borrow Arlene Saxonhouse’s (1998) term—is so paradoxical it cannot long maintain itself. Inevitably, citizens feel the need for distinctions. Set against the backdrop of the Peloponnesian War, the *Republic* reveals that democratic citizens often satisfy this need by creating categories of membership such as *metic*, *xenos*, and *barbaros*. While maintaining the illusion of democracy as an egalitarian, multicolored cloak, such categories often fuel delusions of collective superiority, encouraging the kind of imperialistic behavior that led to Athens’ downfall. Plato may thus be critical of democracy not because it eliminates difference, but because it presents socially constructed categories as “natural” (Kasimis 2016, forthcoming). In other words, democratic citizens reject the rule of the wise only to end up constructing new hierarchies—ones less supportive of freedom.

To avoid developing a love of freedom so excessive that it ushers in tyranny, democratic citizens must cultivate Socratic wisdom. That is, they must be reminded they are not wise in everything. Socrates—who compares himself to a gadfly “set upon the city by the god as if upon a great and well-born horse, who because of his great size is sluggish and needs to be

awakened”—benefits the city by helping “anyone [he] happens to meet” develop a healthy restraint on their confidence in their wisdom (29d-31b). Typically, he does this by asking questions that lead his interlocutors to *aporia* or perplexity. The hope is that by becoming aware of their ignorance on important matters, democratic citizens will be stimulated to engage in conscious reflection instead of believing all their inclinations, however despotic, are justified.

The *Menexenus* is one of the strangest dialogues in the Platonic corpus, not least because it depicts Socrates abandoning his usual mode of dialectic conversation and instead delivering an *epitaphios logos* or funeral oration. Even more unusual is that the oration he delivers is typical of the genre in its glorification of Athenians. This seems incongruous not only with Plato’s typical representation of Socrates interrogating the city’s way of life, but also with Socrates’ mockery of funeral orations in the brief exchange with Menexenus that opens the dialogue. Some interpreters resolve this puzzle by arguing that the oration is a clear satire of the archetypal Athenian funeral oration with its outrageously distorted representation of Athens as a mythical ideal come to life (Taylor 1960; Henderson 1975; Loraux 1986; Kerch 2008). The dozens of commonplaces found in the speech—more, even, than in Thucydides’ account of Pericles’ funeral oration—lend credence to this argument (Ziolkowski 1981). Against the satirical interpretation, others contend the oration is not merely a pastiche of extant funeral orations, but contains plausibly Platonic or Socratic elements. In particular, similarities between the Athens of the *Menexenus* and the ideal city of the *Republic*—namely, the city’s elevation of wisdom, virtue, and noble self-defense, in contrast to Pericles’ praise of aggressive daring to win glory for Athens (2.41)—suggest Plato is attempting to educate Athenians by offering them a serious model of the Athens towards which they should aspire (Bruell 1999; Zuckert 2009; Pappas and Zelcer 2015).

To be convincing, interpretations of the *Menexenus* must not only explain why Socrates delivers a seemingly un-Socratic speech, however, but also why he attributes it to Aspasia. Given that Aspasia was the foreign mistress of the famous statesman Pericles, some argue that the attribution simply serves to invite readers to compare Socrates' oration to Pericles' (Huby 1957, 109-110; Kahn 1963, 232). Yet, if this is true, then why does Socrates insist on her authorship from beginning to end? Moreover, does not the rarity of female characters in Plato's dialogues alone make Aspasia's presence significant? Recognizing the necessity of accounting for Aspasia's presence, recent interpretations take her role more seriously. These interpretations generally treat her either as a negative or positive figure, finding in this confirmation for the satirical and the serious readings, respectively.

For the negative interpretation, the idea of Pericles' mistress composing the oration is so absurd that it likely signifies Socrates' satirical intent, a view seemingly corroborated by Aspasia's depiction in ancient sources as a co-architect of the Sophistic movement (Bloedow 1975; Coventry 1989, 3).<sup>6</sup> While some maintain that Aspasia's role as a *hetaera* or courtesan and thus as a "buyable woman" accentuates the interchangeability of funeral orators (Henry 1995, 32-40), Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong do a better job of explaining the choice of Aspasia in particular. According to their reading, the focus of Plato's hostility is not rhetoric per se, but the power of women and foreigners (1995, 17-22). Their argument partially rests on ancient disparagement of Aspasia for using her exotic Eastern charms to seduce powerful men into committing political ruin.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the meaning of her name, Aspasia was not "welcomed"

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<sup>6</sup> Though commonplace, the assumption of simple Platonic hostility towards the sophists should also be questioned (LeMoine 2015).

<sup>7</sup> According to Plutarch (*Lives*, Vol. I), it was rumored that Aspasia emulated Thargelia, a renowned *hetaera* who spread sympathy for Persian interests by seducing powerful Greek men.

by most Athenians, but rather was treated with suspicion. As C. Jan Swearingen writes, “To look upon the figure of Aspasia is to look upon the growing distaste the Athenians harbored toward Pericles’ foreign imports, including the sophists, Aspasia herself, and rhetoric” (1999, 40). Jarratt and Ong argue that Plato betrays his sympathy with these popular sentiments of distaste towards the political influence of foreigners, and foreign women especially, through the oration’s myth of autochthony, which subordinates the role of women and conceals and silences foreigners.

There are two reasons to question this interpretation. First, the satirical reading cannot explain aspects of the oration that some interpreters argue are Platonic. If Socrates evokes Aspasia to cast aspersion on the oration he is about to deliver, then why does that oration depart in significant ways from the standard tropes of Athenian funeral oratory? Second, Plato’s subscription to the ideas presented in the funeral oration should not be presumed. Indeed, in giving a foreign woman credit for a myth that subordinates foreigners and women, Plato defies the silencing the myth endorses. Socrates’ hesitancy towards repeating Aspasia’s speech also indicates his sympathy for the plight of foreigners and women: “But possibly my teacher will be angry with me, if I deliver her speech (ἂν ἐξενέγκω αὐτῆς τὸν λόγον)” (236c). The phrase translated as “deliver her speech” contains the verb ἐκφέρω, which means “carry out of” and, with regard to women, “bring to the birth.” Given Socrates’ common metaphor of himself as a midwife, Socrates is suggesting Aspasia will be angry with him if he decides when, where, and to whom to beget her *logos*.<sup>8</sup> As a foreigner and a woman, Aspasia was barred from delivering the funeral oration. Socrates thus fears angering her by making free use of her words and ideas. His reply that he could repeat Aspasia’s speech “εἰ μὴ ἀδικῶ γε (if I am not wrong)” carries a

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She was blamed, particularly, for the Samian War. On her responsibility for the Peloponnesian War, see Aristophanes, *Acharnians*, 526-29.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Plato’s *Symposium*, 206b-207a.

double meaning: he can repeat it if his memory does not fail him, and if he is not *a-dikos* or unjust (236b). Given that Aspasia's skill in carrying on intelligent conversation was said to have attracted many prominent intellectuals including Socrates to Pericles' home, and that Aeschines' dialogue *Aspasia* even depicts her as a Socratic philosopher, it makes sense to pause before concluding that Socrates attributes the oration to Aspasia to highlight the dangers of politically influential foreign women.

Against those who see Aspasia's authorship as symptomatic of the dialogue's satirical aims, others argue that she plays a more positive role, indicating Plato's intention to offer a more salutary funeral oration. Specifically, her femininity is seen to symbolize the need for a more caring, philosophic Athens (Saxonhouse 1992; Monoson 2000). As with the view of Aspasia as a negative figure, this interpretation assumes that Plato subscribes to the ideas put forth in the oration. When in his speech Socrates states that Athenians are born from the earth and nurtured by the land like a mother, these declarations are taken at face value as indications of the citizenship metaphor Plato is proposing as an alternative to Pericles', without wondering whether Plato might be skeptical of the citizenship model advanced in Aspasia's speech. Yet there is reason to think he may be. After all, the "beautiful city" of the *Republic* may not truly represent Plato's political ideal (Strauss 1978; Saxonhouse 1978; Forde 1997; Roochnik 2003; Berger 2015). That the Athens of the *Menexenus* resembles the ideal city of the *Republic* might therefore be a reason to be suspicious of it. While surpassing the satirical reading by recognizing how the speech presents a model of Athens that diverges from the Periclean model, the interpretation of Aspasia's role as positive stops short by presuming Plato applauds this new model.

Underlying both the negative and positive interpretations of Aspasia's role is the belief that the oration is in harmony with her character, such that if one conceives of Aspasia as a

negative figure then the oration must be a negative model (satirical) and if one views her as a positive figure then the oration must be a positive model (serious). Yet, why should one assume such linearity? That is, why should one assume Aspasia would approve of the principles expressed in the oration, and then take this approval as a sign of whether the model of Athens offered in the speech ought to be emulated from Plato's or Plato's Socrates' perspective? After all, the *Menexenus* is hardly a straightforward dialogue. From the beginning, Socrates engages in playful double-speak. His exaltation of funeral orations strikes Menexenus as so hyperbolic that he immediately retorts, "You always make fun (προσπαίζεις) of the orators, Socrates" (235c). When pressed to deliver his own funeral oration, Socrates acts self-effacingly by admitting he can only repeat one he has heard from Aspasia, who, in an image fit for comedy, he claims nearly struck him whenever his memory failed. He is afraid, however, that Menexenus will think him foolish if in his old age he continues "to play (παίζειν)" like a child (236c). Nonetheless, he agrees to oblige him with the speech, maintaining he would "dance naked" if Menexenus requested (236c-d). Socrates' coyness persists even after Menexenus has heard the speech, as the dialogue closes with a discussion of Aspasia that insinuates Socrates and Menexenus share the tacit understanding that Socrates is the speech's true author. Additionally, Plato shrouds the entire conversation in absurdity by including references in the oration to events in the Corinthian War down to the Peace of Antalcidas of 387-386 BC, years after the deaths of both Socrates and Aspasia (245e-246a). By framing Socrates' oration in a context of irreverence, laughter, and dissimulation, Plato indicates nothing in the oration may be what it seems, including the evocation of Aspasia.

The dialogue's playfulness belies attempts to categorize the oration as either satirical or serious. This is why Stephen Salkever (1993) proposes an alternative, ironic reading of the

oration, arguing that “[i]n *both* style and substance, *Menexenus* rejects the heroic account of Athenian democracy proposed by Thucydides’ Pericles, separating Athenian citizenship from the quest for immortal glory” (1993, 133; emphasis mine). Stylistically, this is achieved by employing Platonic/Socratic irony, which through its playfulness with language works to “immuniz[e] democrats against accepting any rule or formulation as final and absolutely binding or correct” (135). Though often used in satire, irony does not necessarily expose and attack hypocrisy and injustice; rather, it simply reveals incoherence. When something is ironic “a doubling of meaning occurs, which is made visible by a tension, incongruity, or contradiction” (Griswold 2002, 88).<sup>9</sup> By conveying what is not said, irony provokes re-examination of the surface meaning. Irony is therefore more playful and ambiguous than a scathing satire, as the tenor of Socrates’ conversation with Menexenus captures. The serious reading of the dialogue treats this exchange too dismissively, presuming it merely serves to highlight the deficiencies of Athenian funeral orations before offering a Plato-approved model. The satirical reading, by contrast, treats Socrates’ mockery too seriously, ignoring his attempt to offer a better model of Athens than the Periclean model (even while holding this new model in question). The ironic reading of the oration avoids both errors, capturing the dialogue’s more nuanced approach of “serious play.”

Though Salkever alludes to Aspasia’s role in engendering *aporia*, her role is not as clear as it might be. In what way(s) does Aspasia render the oration ironic? How does this fit with Platonic or Socratic irony? As the next section demonstrates, upon closer examination various

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<sup>9</sup> Though engaging more fully with the vast literature on Platonic/Socratic irony lies beyond the scope of this article, the understanding of irony employed in this paper also takes its cues from Strauss (1978) and Rowe (1987). I disagree with Joel Schlosser’s (2014) rejection of irony as a useful concept for analyzing Plato’s dialogues. In my view, this concept fits with Schlosser’s insightful exploration of Socrates’ *atopia* or strangeness.

aspects of the text offer significant clues as to the nature of Aspasian irony. This irony involves dissonance created by hearing Socrates' oration through the voice of a foreigner—the aspect of Aspasia's identity the dialogue most underscores.

### **Breaking the Spell of Athenian Funeral Oratory**

Though Plato never speaks directly, he bears full responsibility for the choice of title, subject matter, and dramatic context. Examining these aspects of the text, it becomes clear that Plato is emphasizing the role of foreigners. As argued in this section, the prominence of the theme of foreignness signifies that Socrates' attribution of the funeral oration to Aspasia is not arbitrary. Rather, Plato is directing readers to consider the oration from Aspasia's perspective as a foreigner. As will later be seen, this device creates an ironic dissonance in the speech, helping to break what Socrates portrays as the spell of Athenian funeral oratory.

Plato conveys the importance of foreigners, initially, through the title itself, which bears the name of Socrates' only interlocutor in the dialogue, a young man named Menexenus (Μενέξενος)—literally, “remains a foreigner.” The dialogue's preoccupation with foreigners is further established through the subject matter. When Socrates meets him, Menexenus is coming from the Council Chamber, where he had hoped to learn whom they would select as orator for the upcoming funeral speech.<sup>10</sup> This revelation sets the stage for the dialogue's examination of funeral oratory, a genre tied to war with foreigners. According to Nicole Loraux (1986), the

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<sup>10</sup> If Plato intends to expose the injustices of Athens' treatment of foreigners, then Menexenus' mention of Archinus and Dion as possible choices may be hinting at such injustices. After all, following the overthrow of the Thirty Tyrants, Archinus attacked a proposal to grant Athenian citizenship to *metics*, foreigners, and slaves who had helped restore democracy. Though Dion likely refers to an Athenian ambassador to Persia identified in Xenophon's *Hellenica* (4.8.13), his name brings to mind Plato's admiration for Dion of Syracuse who, as a foreigner, would have been ineligible to deliver the oration.



annual custom developed in Athens after the Persian Wars, likely near the start of the first Peloponnesian War. This suggests it arose to give Athenians the opportunity to justify their imperial conquest of other Greek cities. The *Menexenus* is, then, a dialogue in which Socrates and Menexenus (“remains a foreigner”) examine a genre of discourse bound up with Athenian imperialism.

The discussion of funeral oratory that follows establishes what is at stake in this conversation: preventing Menexenus from becoming a citizen who harms both Athenians and foreigners. Socrates’ first observation of funeral orations is that they give indiscriminate praise to any man fallen in battle. Contrary to the typical practice of presenting the dead as beyond reproach, Socrates contends that each dead soldier “hit upon praise, even if he was worthless (φᾶῶλος)” with the orator ascribing to each man “attributes he has and doesn’t have” (234c; cf. Gorgias, *Funeral Oration*, 6; Lysias, *Oration 2*, 1; and Demosthenes, *Oration 60*, 1-3). This suggests Socrates finds disconcerting the logic expressed in a speech like Pericles’, that “the end these men have now met is what proves a man’s virtue, whether as the first indication or final confirmation” (2.42). By noting that even the worthless receive honor by dying in battle, Socrates implies that sacrificing one’s life for one’s country is not, as Pericles claims, an act of permanent redemption. Though Athenians may have regarded such praise of the dead as an effective means of exhorting the masses to go to war (Yoshitake 2010), Socrates questions the city’s decision to recruit anyone willing to sacrifice his life.

The problem, he insinuates, is that the city’s leaders use funeral speeches to manipulate ordinary citizens into fighting unjust wars. That these wars are not always just is hinted, first, through his remark that funeral speeches are always prepared long in advance. If orators draw funeral speeches from their repertoires as needed, then they need not examine the particularities

of the war at hand. The city's action in war is *a priori* assumed to be just. When war is ubiquitous, it becomes inconvenient and perhaps even perilous to reflect on the justness of each individual war. Nonetheless, by highlighting the chasm between funeral speeches and the actions they memorialize, Socrates exposes a fundamental assumption in operation: Athens is always in the right. Contrary to Pericles' insinuation that Athenians surpass Spartans because their courage consists of boldness *combined with* reflection (2.40), Plato's dialogues suggest Athenians are overly assured of their wisdom (Balot 2014, 144-48).

Socrates tries to dispel this excessive confidence and suggest Athens may have engaged in unjust wars by next illuminating the dazzling nature of funeral oratory. In Socrates' words, funeral orators "bewitch our souls" with fair and colorful words. The word "bewitch" implies that funeral orators are akin to snake charmers, producing a hypnotic effect on their audience, one even Socrates experiences: "I myself, Menexenus, feel quite nobly (*γενναίως*) arranged when being praised by them, and each time as I listen and am charmed, I am displaced, believing forthwith that I have become mightier, nobler (*γενναιότερος*), and more beautiful." Socrates observes that the foreigners (*ξένοι*) who accompany him experience a similar effect, viewing Socrates as "more solemn (*σεμνότερος*)" and believing the rest of the city to be "more wondrous" than before. So much does the speaker's voice ring in his ears, Socrates claims, "scarcely on the fourth or fifth day do I remember myself and notice that I am of earth—and in the meantime I all but believe I live on the Isles of the Blessed" (235a-c). Not only do funeral orations make the dead seem virtuous; they also transform living Athenians into god-like beings (as implied by *σεμνότερος*, commonly used in reference to gods) and Athens into the Isles of the Blessed, the eternal paradise of heroes. The purpose, Socrates makes clear, is to reinforce Athenian superiority over foreigners. This is indicated by his repeated suggestion that these

speeches cast Athenians as “nobler,” a word rooted in γένος (race or stock), along with the mention of the city becoming more wondrous in the eyes of foreigners. Funeral orators aim not just to honor the dead, but to leave the audience in awe of Athenians and their supremacy.

Socrates finds this troubling, as suggested by the critical tone Menexenus detects, but also by Socrates’ subsequent statements on foreigners. Though in the passage above he claims even foreigners cannot help but be swept up in the pro-Athenian fervor funeral orations incite, he soon admits it is not as easy to charm a foreigner as it is to charm one’s own people: “For if it were necessary to speak well about Athenians before Peloponnesians or Peloponnesians before Athenians, then it would be necessary to be a good rhetorician to persuade and win esteem. But whenever someone competes before the ones he is also praising, it is no great thing to seem to speak well” (235d). He later repeats this, insisting the student of a mediocre rhetoric teacher “could still win esteem praising Athenians before Athenians” (236a).

Again, comparison with Pericles’ oration proves instructive. Near the beginning of his oration, Pericles explains why it is difficult to speak about the deeds of the dead: “For the hearer who is informed (ξυνειδῶς) and well-disposed might quickly deem the speech wanting in comparison with what he wishes and knows (ἐπίσταται) to be manifest, while he who is uninformed (ἄπειρος) might, through envy, deem it to be exaggerated, if he hears something above his own nature” (2.35; cf. Demosthenes, *Oration 60*, 23-24). From Pericles’ perspective, orators would not be mistaken in giving glorious representations of the dead. After all, everyone familiar with Athenians *knows* the dead are deserving; it is only those inferior to the dead who, out of envy, suspect exaggeration. Socrates, by contrast, emphasizes the embellished nature of these portrayals. Funeral orators transport Athenians from the real, imperfect city in which they live, enrapturing them with a substitute image of an ideal Athens. One need not be a good

rhetorician to convince Athenians that this ideal is true to reality, as people everywhere are disposed to think well of themselves. The real challenge is to persuade the enemy.

Plato thus gives prominence to foreigners from the beginning of the *Menexenus*. The title contains the Greek word for foreigner, the subject matter relates to the treatment of foreigners, and Socrates' critique of Athenian funeral oratory exposes how this genre fuels a delusion of Athenian exceptionalism that bears substantial responsibility for Athens' unjust conquest of foreign cities. Is it any coincidence, then, that after twice noting the difficulty of persuading foreigners of Athens' greatness Socrates claims to have heard a funeral oration composed by a foreigner? This is not a mere invitation to consider the oration as it would sound to a foreigner like Aspasia; it is an exhortation. Rather than treat Aspasia as an indicator of whether the oration is satirical or serious, readers should therefore play along with Socrates and pretend Aspasia composed the oration. Saxonhouse's observation about the *Republic* applies here: "We often casually say that Thrasymachus says that justice is the interest of the stronger and the character of Thrasymachus has become part of our vocabulary to describe political cynicism. But of course it is not Thrasymachus who says this; it is Socrates as *if* he were Thrasymachus" (2009, 739). Similarly, in the *Menexenus*, it is not Socrates who sings Athens' praises; it is Socrates as *if* he were Aspasia.

The next section demonstrates that, when read through Aspasia's voice, Socrates' funeral oration becomes ironic or visibly contradictory. The contradiction involves a foreigner praising Athens *for its exclusion of foreigners*. This would be self-disparaging coming from any foreigner; indeed, Socrates could have achieved this effect by attributing his speech to another famous *metic* rhetorician such as Lysias. Aspasia is an effective choice, however, for at least two reasons. First, as a native of Miletus, Aspasia's commendation of Athens' hatred of barbarians

and noble defense of Greeks lies in tension with various aspects of Milesian history, especially its relationship with Athens. Second, Aspasia's status as the *metic* mother of a famous Athenian citizen helps to illuminate tensions in the common Athenian understanding of the citizen–foreigner dichotomy. By showing how unsettled this boundary is, her voice reveals that neither Periclean nor Socratic political rhetoric is without its dangers. Insofar as both depend on strict dichotomies and unquestionable principles, they risk promoting the kind of unreflective citizenship that transforms democracy into tyranny. This is seen through an examination of the dialogue's presentation of three myths common to Athenian funeral orations: the myth of Athens as autochthonous, as a wise democracy, and as a benevolent defender of Greek freedom.

### **Socrates' Myths of Athens through Aspasia's Voice**

The oration commences with the myth of Athenians as autochthonous, or born of the earth. According to the myth, “the birth of their ancestors was not in a foreign land (οὐκ ἔπηλυς), and thus the descendants they produced did not migrate (μετοικοῦντας) to this country with their own having come from another place (ἄλλοθεν), but were autochthonous (αὐτόχθονας), living and dwelling in their true fatherland, nurtured not by a stepmother as others are, but by a mother, the country in which they lived” (237b-c; cf. Thucydides, *History*, 2.36; Lysias, *Oration 2*, 17, 43; Demosthenes, *Oration 60*, 4-5; and Hyperides, *Oration 6*, 7). For a *metic* to boast of Athenian autochthony is ironic, as Aspasia cannot share in the kinship the myth generates. It applies only to Athenians, not foreign transplants like herself. The separation of author from speech calls attention to the dismembering such myths perform. Autochthony myths generate unity by delineating “us” and “them”, a tension Aspasia's authorship amplifies. Heard through her voice, the myth's repeated use of the negative—Athenians were *not* born in a foreign land,

did *not* migrate, and were *not* raised by a stepmother—becomes more antagonistic. Indeed, a core function of these myths was to distinguish Athens from cities whose foundation stories involved immigration (Loraux 2000, 15). Aspasia’s voice reminds of the multitude of myths celebrating her native Miletus’ foreign founding and its history of peaceful interaction between Greeks and non-Greeks (Mac Sweeney 2013, 44-79). Accentuating the oppositional nature of Athenian autochthony myths, Aspasia’s authorship invites listeners to inquire whether unity is compatible with a rhetoric of hostility towards those with whom one shares the land. Through this, Socrates shows how engaging foreign voices can illuminate tensions in one’s understanding—here, tension in Socrates’ belief that telling citizens the noble lie they are born from the earth will only generate unity (*Republic* 414b-e).

Aspasia’s authorship also highlights the discrepancy between Athenian speech and deed, showing that Athenians do not practice the complete separation from foreigners their myths of autochthony preach. Amidst all the talk of mothers and stepmothers, Aspasia’s own motherhood points to the evidence that undermines the Athenians’ claim to autochthony. Though her son with Pericles, Pericles the Younger, was disqualified from citizenship under Pericles’ citizenship law of 451/50 B.C. for having a non-Athenian mother, around 430/429 B.C. he was granted citizenship. Only thus was he qualified to serve as one of the generals tried *en masse* and executed after the battle of Arginusae.<sup>11</sup> At least one Athenian citizen, then—a prominent one at that—descended from a non-Athenian. Ancient reports of other illegitimate sons being granted citizenship and of the bestowing of citizenship on large groups of foreigners during the Peloponnesian War, combined with the fact that Pericles’ citizenship law likely did not apply

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<sup>11</sup> As Zuckert notes, Aspasia “had as good if not better reasons than Socrates not simply to praise Athens,” and had reasons to be friends with Socrates given that he alone protested the trial’s illegality (2009, 826, n. 13).

retroactively, suggest Pericles the Younger was not the only Athenian citizen of mixed blood (Hansen 1991; Carawan 2008). Aspasia's voice thus serves as a bold reminder that Athenians have often favored the inclusion of foreigners, despite attempting through autochthony myths to make *metics* perpetual immigrants (Kennedy 2014). If myths of pure lineage not only spur conflict between those "born of the earth" and everyone else, but are tossed aside whenever Athenians recognize the benefits of granting citizenship to foreigners, then what good are they? Again, Socrates' engagement with Aspasia's foreign voice cautions him not to be too certain he knows what stories are best for citizens to hear.

Along with uncovering how autochthony myths help to perpetuate injustices towards foreigners, Aspasia's foreign voice reveals how these myths also harm Athenian women. This comes to light through another claim found in extant funeral orations: that Athens gave birth not only to the pure race inhabiting it for generations, but also to the human race (cf. Demosthenes, *Oration 60*, 5). According to the speech, just as we can determine if a woman is truly a mother by observing whether her body possesses nourishment for a child, the Athenian land proves herself the true mother of mankind because "she alone first brought forth human nourishment" (237e-238a). The oration follows this with a more indefensible claim: "Nay, it is more fitting to accept such a proof on behalf of the earth than on behalf of a woman: for the earth has not imitated the woman in conception and birth, but woman land" (238a). Are we to believe it is easier to ascertain from whence mankind originated than to determine which woman is the mother of a particular child? This seems to be the thrust of the argument, but it is not argued so much as proclaimed. As the *metic* mother of an Athenian citizen, Aspasia's voice makes clear that autochthony myths must substitute land for biological mother because otherwise Athenians would have to acknowledge the non-Athenian maternal origins of many citizens. Though

Pericles' citizenship law was seen as granting significant recognition to the role of Athenian women by adding the requirement of maternal descent to the existing requirement of paternal descent, Aspasia shows that such recognition is not enough to overcome the Athenian fear of foreign-born children. Ultimately, autochthony myths betray the need to circumvent the question of maternity, exposing the reality that Athenian "citizen" women essentially possess the same rights as *metic* women. Aspasia's voice thus reveals to Socrates that autochthony myths might not be in harmony with his goal of establishing a regime that recognizes the value of women (*Republic* 451c-457c).

Aspasia's unsettling of the unifying role autochthony myths purportedly play continues as she turns from the subject of nature to nurture. Speaking now of the upbringing Athens provides its citizens, Aspasia claims that Athenians hand over government posts "to those who always seem (δόξασι) to be best," noting "there is one measure, that the man seeming (δόξα) to be wise and good have power and rule" (238d). Connected to δόξα ("opinion"), the repetition of the verb δοκέω ("to seem") already points to the difficulty of discerning good leadership. This difficulty is further underscored as Aspasia again contrasts Athens with other cities:

Other cities have been constructed out of all kinds (παντοδαπῶν) of anomalous (ἄνωμάλων) human beings, so that their polities—tyrannies and oligarchies—are also anomalous. . . . But we and our people are all brothers begotten from one mother, and do not think it right to be slaves or masters of one another. Rather, our equality of birth, our natural equality, compels us to seek legal equality, and to yield to one another for no reason other than reputation (δόξη) for virtue and prudence. (238e-239a)

Echoing Pericles' celebration of the equality enjoyed in Athens (2.37), this statement would not be unsettling spoken from the lips of an Athenian male to an Athenian male audience. Yet as the



words of a foreign woman directed to a mixed audience of citizens and foreigners, the effect would be disconcerting. Aspasia's voice serves as a stark reminder that Athenians can only boast about the homogeneity and equality of their citizenry because they have excluded from citizenship the bulk of the population: *metics*, women, and slaves. Even as a relatively free foreign woman, Aspasia cannot speak in the assembly, deliver a funeral oration, or exercise any kind of direct political power, even with her reputation for political acumen. Virtue and prudence do not dominate; ancestry and masculinity do.

Though better to advocate the rule of the (democratically elected) wise than the rule of the glory-seeking, Socrates' evocation of Aspasia reveals the difficulties in determining who the wise are, challenging his own ideal of philosopher-kings asked to rule by their fellow citizens (*Republic* 473c-e). However positive an ideal, when taken not as aspiration but as achieved reality, the myth of a democratic people wise enough to yield to the leadership of the wisest tends to subvert itself. Moreover, Aspasia's voice shows this is a problem not merely for those already excluded from citizenship, but also for established Athenian citizens. The myth of Athenian democracy celebrates the soundness of the Athenians' judgment that political equality follows from natural equality. As such, it is linked to the autochthony myth. Yet, as previously demonstrated, the conception of natural equality is itself unstable, as the presence of the famously foreign mother of an "Athenian" reminds. Athenians are not all brothers of the same mother, born of autochthonous ancestors. Whatever pretensions to democracy found in the myth, it also provides justification for yielding to one citizen over another on the undemocratic grounds of superior lineage. Reading the wise democracy myth through Aspasia's voice thus brings out how this myth betrays a conception of citizenship that could destroy the meritocratic equality of opportunity it celebrates.

Aspasia's voice similarly calls into question a third myth: the myth of Athens as a benevolent defender of Greek freedom. Aspasia's account of Athenian history purports to show that Athenians performed noble deeds because "they believed it was necessary on behalf of freedom to fight Greeks on behalf of Greeks, and Barbarians (βαρβάρους) on behalf of all the Greeks" (239b). Beginning with the Persian Wars, it portrays Persia as an imperialist aggressor enslaving its neighbors one by one. Then, with dramatic flair, the oration plays up the heroism of Athenians while downplaying the contributions of Spartans. The battle of Thermopylae is not mentioned (cf. Lysias, *Oration 2*, 30-31). Aspasia's oration seamlessly transitions into the Peloponnesian War without mentioning the Athenian empire. Rather, the war is chalked up to the envy of other Greeks. There is no hint, as in Thucydides' *History* (1.23), of the growth of the Athenian empire and the concomitant fear of domination felt by other Greek states. Athens remains a hapless victim of fate, "pushed ... unwillingly" into war with other Greeks (242a). The motif of Athenian innocence persists throughout Aspasia's account of the Corinthian War, during which the oration reiterates the theme of Athens' benevolence towards other Greeks, stating, "if someone should wish to accuse our city justly, only by saying this would he accuse correctly: that she is always exceedingly prone to pity and to favoring the weak" (244e). One cannot help but wonder what the Melians would have said to this.

Here too Aspasia's voice questions whether such idealistic accounts of history promote greater justice or undermine it. First, the oration's silence on Athenian imperialism is all the more conspicuous owing to Aspasia's ties with Miletus, which defected from the Athenian-dominated Delian League during the Peloponnesian War. In effect, Aspasia blames her native city for the war rather than defending it on the grounds that it feared Athens' strengthening grip (Thucydides, *History*, 1.23). This disjunction between Aspasia's narrative and what one might

expect from a native of Miletus calls attention to the difficulty of delineating defensive and antagonistic behavior. Aspasia's foreign voice helps to remind Socrates it is not enough to urge citizens to adopt a defensive foreign policy; they must also be able to discern true threats from temptations to pursue glory.

Aspasia's authorship also underscores the difficulty of distinguishing friends from enemies. Consider her remarks on Athens' refusal to hand over other Greeks to the Persians during the Corinthian War:

So firm and sound, mark you, is the nobility (γενναῖον) and freedom of our city, and by nature (φύσει) barbarian-hating (μισοβάρβαρον), because we are purely (εἰλικρινῶς) Greeks, being unmixed with barbarians (ἀμιγεῖς βαρβάρων). For there dwell not among us those of Pelops, nor Cadmus, nor Egyptus, nor Danaus, nor the many others who are by nature barbarians (φύσει μὲν βάρβαροι), but by law Greeks (νόμῳ δὲ Ἕλληνες). Rather, we live as Greeks through and through (αὐτοὶ Ἕλληνες), not as half-barbarians (μειξοβάρβαροι), from which a pure hatred (καθαρὸν τὸ μῖσος) of foreign nature (τῆς ἀλλοτρίας φύσεως) has sunk deeply into our city. (245c-d)

Though this passage ostensibly reflects Athens' commitment to protecting the community of Greeks, it implies a tenuous division between non-Athenian Greeks and barbarians. Whereas Athenians sprang from the earth, other "Greeks" are Greeks only conventionally (*i.e.*, barbarians under Greek colonial rule) or else have become semi-barbarian by following a foreign founder and "mixing" with barbarians. The speech effectively exiles non-Athenian Greeks "to the frontiers of Greekness ... they are no longer Greeks, and the way lies clear for exclusive Athenian occupancy" (Loraux 2000, 50). Nickolas Pappas and Mark Zelcer (2013) thus observe

in the *Menexenus* a tripartite hierarchy of peoples: Athenians, non-Athenian Greeks, and barbarians.

While Pappas and Zelcer argue that by granting a “mixed” status to other Greeks Aspasia’s speech softens the difference between Athenians and other Greeks implied in the autochthony myth, it arguably re-emphasizes the gulf between Athenians and other Greeks. For one, the speech makes clear that nature is what counts and, when it comes to nature, other Greeks are semi-barbarian. If Athenians exhibit a “pure hatred of foreign nature,” then they must hate semi-barbarians. Additionally, whereas Pericles’ oration distinguishes between Spartans, who practice *xenelasia*, and Athenians, who open their city to foreigners, Aspasia’s oration reverses this characterization.<sup>12</sup> In noting that “there dwell not among us those of Pelops”—the Phrygian founder of the Sparta-dominated Peloponnese region of Greece—her speech casts Athenians as more closed than Spartans to outside influences.

Yet Aspasia’s authorship renders this claim ironic. For, if other Greeks live as half-barbarians, then Aspasia and her son with Pericles could be half-barbarian. In fact, they likely are semi-barbarian, as any Athenian familiar with the story of Miletus’ history would know the Persian conquest of Miletus during the Ionian Revolt resulted in the massacre of the men and enslavement of the women and children. This event was so painful to Athenians that they fined Phrynicus in 511 B.C. for staging his tragedy *The Capture of Miletus*, banning him from ever performing it again (Herodotus 6.21.10). As a native of a city famously conquered by barbarians, Aspasia thus denigrates both herself and her progeny in commending the barbarian-hating nature of Athenians. In this way, the illusory nature of the Greek – barbarian distinction is exposed; it is merely an Athenian construction (Hall 1989). How can Athenians hate barbarians if, according

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<sup>12</sup> For further analysis of the Athenian-Spartan distinction in Pericles’ speech, see Avramenko (2011, 87-98).

to their own understanding of what it means to be barbarian, some of their own citizens are likely barbarians? By having Aspasia voice the myth of Athens as benevolent defender of freedom, Socrates at once advocates a defensive foreign policy as the ideal and complicates it, highlighting the problematic nature of propagandist speeches that pretend as though the distinction between friends and enemies, freedom fighters and imperialists, and Greeks and barbarians is clear. In this way, Plato depicts Socrates facing the tensions in his ideas through the help of a foreign voice.

Read separately from Aspasia's voice, the three myths discussed in this section appear either to mock the folly of Athenians or to provide a nobler, more Platonic vision of Athens that might offer Athenians instruction. Yet when Socrates' exhortation to read the oration through Aspasia's voice is taken seriously, a different picture emerges. Socrates' autochthony myth with its focus on self-defense may supersede Pericles' celebration of expansionism, but through Aspasia's foreign voice the myth's dark side comes to light. As she shows, often the rhetoric of unity obscures conflict in the *polis* and in so doing contributes to it. Likewise, though Socrates' myth of Athens as a wise democracy valuing virtue and prudence offers an alternative to Pericles' warrior *ethos*, a *xenos* can remind of how the rhetoric of wisdom often conceals and thereby perpetuates ignorance. Finally, while Socrates' myth of Athens as a benevolent defender of Greek freedom improves on Pericles' acclamation of Athenian imperialism, Aspasia's Milesian voice cautions that liberator or "white knight" rhetoric can cover up shameful motives and turn friendship into enmity.

Emerging from an Aspasian reading of the three myths is thus the realization that even if Socrates' vision of Athens captures the ideal, Socratic political rhetoric may not be less harmful than its Periclean counterpart. A speech extolling unity, wisdom, and self-sacrifice for others can

have the unintended effect of promoting conflict, ignorance, and greed.<sup>13</sup> This suggests the importance in democratic regimes of sources for cultivating Socratic wisdom. Without self-examination, citizens cannot appreciate that they are imperfect beings who err in both thought and deed. This puts them at risk of believing themselves to be gods, the impulse Plato worried would transform democracy into tyranny. As the next section argues, the *Menexenus* conveys that engagement with foreigners provides a major source of provocation to wonder.

Unfortunately, difficulty lies in helping citizens see this due to their fear of education, which leads them to prefer the comfort of the city's more militant, single-voiced discourse.

### **The Benefit of Foreign Voices**

Coming to a close, the oration exhibits a marked shift in tone as it takes up a topic nearer to Socrates—virtue—and presents it, strangely, through the voices of the dead themselves. Seemingly resonant with Socratic principles, this section too becomes dissonant through Aspasia's foreign voice. This discordance surfaces from the opening lines, as the dead tell their sons the life not worth living is not the unexamined life, but that which brings shame on "one's own (τοῦς αὐτοῦ)" (246d). They then explain, "know that if we surpass you in virtue, our victory brings shame, whereas our defeat, if we be defeated, brings happiness" (247a; cf. Thucydides, *History*, 2.45 and Lysias, *Oration 2*, 71). While Socrates would likely see this emphasis on the intergenerational expansion of virtue as an improvement upon Pericles' accentuation of the expansion of the empire, a foreigner whose native city was subjugated by Athenian ancestors might wonder whether this call to "virtue" is actually an exhortation to be better imperialists. The

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<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps why Collins and Stauffer find hints that we should "hesitate in taking Socrates' conservatism as his last word," even if such a political education is "propaedeutic to philosophy" (1999, 112, 115).

dialogue's dramatic date after the resolution of the Corinthian War, which strengthened Spartan hegemony despite Athens' attempts to recapture its empire, lends confirmation to this suspicion. Aspasia as *xenos* can therefore be seen to provoke Socrates to wonder whether the rhetoric of virtue in his ideal city might encourage injustice.

Likewise, Aspasia's foreign voice reveals dissonance in the dead's address to their parents. Here, the dead counsel their parents to abide by the saying "nothing too much" for "that man who has depended on himself for everything concerning his faring prosperously, or nearly so, and does not depend on other men ... has best prepared for life" (247e-248a). Aspasia's authorship serves as a glaring reminder of how Athenians have departed from this advice. Rather than base their superiority on themselves alone, Athenians have depended on countless other cities to give them tribute and provide them military service. As a native of a city that fought the reaching grip of Athenian imperialism, Aspasia exposes the Athenians' violation of the saying "nothing too much." However much Socrates approves of this divine principle, Aspasia's voice suggests it can be twisted to mean "take control of everything before it controls you."

Following the dead's brief entreaty to the city to take care of their sons and parents, the oration closes by extolling the city for the care it provides. Specifically, the city is celebrated for standing towards the children "as a father (*πατρός*)" and equipping them at adulthood "with full military equipment" (249a). Thus, the dead conclude, the city "stands towards the fallen in the place of heir and son (*ὑέος*), towards the sons in that of father (*πατρός*), and towards the parents of the dead in that of guardian, exercising care towards all in all ways throughout all time" (249b-c). The description of the city as caregiver contrasts, as Monoson argues, with Pericles' casting of the city as a beloved. While this implies a more feminine model of citizenship, Aspasia's voice emphasizes that the "care" the city gives aims at the manly subjugation of

foreigners. It is the kind of care that prepares a man for death by “desiring him to be auspiciously equipped with arms as he begins to go to his fathers’ (πατρώων) hearth, ruling with might (ἰσχύος)” (249b). The funeral oration itself plays a role (249b). The care it provides aims to cultivate manliness, all the better to augment the city’s superiority over foreigners.

By depicting Socrates speaking the words of Aspasia speaking the words of dead Athenian soldiers, the *Menexenus* counteracts the single-voiced nature of political rhetoric. The oration says one thing through the voice of an Athenian male orator, but another through Aspasia’s voice or Socrates’. The speech’s polyvocality acknowledges the variety of individuals who comprise Athens, including those who have come before and those yet to come. It does not, like Pericles’, silence diversity in favor of imposed uniformity. As Andreas Avgousti (2015) argues, by stressing the fusion of Socrates’ and Aspasia’s voices, Plato exposes the fraudulent and unjust nature of orations like Pericles’ that cover up their diverse influences. Moving away from the propagandist nature of political rhetoric, Socrates’ evocation of Aspasia breathes life into the important questions he never felt satisfied he had answered, helping him cultivate Socratic wisdom.

The closing conversation between Socrates and Menexenus offers additional confirmation of this. Ending the oration by referring to her not just as Aspasia, but as “Aspasia the Milesian (Ἀσπασία τῆς Μιλησίας),” Socrates reminds Menexenus of its foreign authorship—once more suggesting the importance of Aspasia’s status as a foreigner. Menexenus does not seem to find her foreignness troubling; he finds it more remarkable that a woman was able to compose such a speech (249d). While this could indicate he has not learned to question his assumptions about where wisdom lies, it is likely a playful attempt to goad Socrates into admitting he composed the oration. After all, Menexenus’ insistence that he knows what Aspasia



is like and is grateful to “her or to him” who composed the oration implies he suspects Socrates is the true author—a suspicion readers likely share (249e). At this point, Socrates ceases to protest about the authorship, asking only that Menexenus not “accuse (κατερεῖς)” him so he may continue to repeat Aspasia’s speeches (249e). With Socrates’ death haunting the dialogue, Plato’s use of the word “accuse (κατερεῖς)” alludes to a similar word in the *Apology*—“accusers (κατήγοροι)”. On trial, Socrates insists he stands accused of teaching others about matters he claims not to understand (19b-20e). Could it therefore be that Socrates is asking Menexenus to acknowledge Socrates’ exhibition of Socratic wisdom or puzzlement, or not to “accuse” him like so many others of deliberately hiding his knowledge to trap others? If so, then the *Menexenus* demonstrates Socrates’ preference for perplexity over self-satisfied closure. Ultimately, the dialogue shows that Socrates’ own development of Socratic wisdom entailed experiencing the sting of foreign gadflies, a practice Plato suggests might profitably be taken up by his fellow citizens—if only they would see its benefits.

Socrates’ death serves as a powerful reminder, however, of the difficulty of convincing citizens of the benefits of engaging foreign voices. After all, Socrates struggled his entire life to help his fellow citizens appreciate his activity as a gadfly, and he was a native Athenian. Those from foreign lands face a more arduous struggle; their habits, beliefs, and interests are likely to be or to seem further removed, making their trustworthiness seem more doubtful than Socrates’. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate the potential benefit of cultural diversity. Though Plato admitted Socrates’ ultimate failure to educate the *demos*, he did not conclude Athens would have been better off without Socrates. To draw on the ship analogy in the *Republic*, just because those aboard the ship do not make use of the captain does not mean he is useless (488a-489c). Likewise, if citizens refuse to examine the contradictions foreigners help to illuminate, this does

not negate the value of foreign voices. Gadflies can lead a horse to water, but they cannot make it drink.

## **Conclusion**

In *Alcibiades I*, Socrates suggests the Delphic inscription “Know Thyself” induces us to seek self-knowledge by looking at our soul’s reflection in the eyes of another (132c-133c). In the *Menexenus*, Socrates illustrates this principle. By hearing his own version of common Athenian political myths through the voice of a foreigner, he is reminded of the limits to his wisdom. Aspasia’s voice acts, in essence, as a Socratic gadfly, helping Socrates cultivate Socratic wisdom. Such wisdom is a necessary bulwark, Plato’s dialogues suggest, against democracy’s tendency towards tyranny.

If Plato is right that democracy cannot survive without Socratic wisdom, and if foreign voices can play a role in helping citizens cultivate such wisdom, then rejecting cultural diversity is like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The gadfly’s sting brings uncomfortable tensions to the surface, so if foreigners to some extent play this role then their presence will be de-stabilizing. Yet, this may be what democratic citizens need to cultivate virtues like Socratic wisdom. Rather than turn towards political models that foster cultural homogeneity out of fear of diversity-generated conflict, the *Menexenus* reveals it would be more productive to address a core cause of conflict in culturally diverse societies: resistance to education. Though a full examination lies beyond the scope of this essay, Plato’s dialogues, which often explore the fear of education and how to overcome it, provide a helpful starting point for thinking about concrete measures to help democratic citizens learn to appreciate rather than fear foreign voices.

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