
NIJMEGEN, Postweg 152

G. J. M. Bartelink


This book, originally a University of London Ph.D. thesis (1958), gives a critical survey of the work that has been done on the stylometry of Plato. B., who is well-known to the world as the author of *A Word Index to Plato* (Leeds 1976), has not done any new research himself, but he has checked existing data on a large scale. It is certainly useful for specialists to have all relevant, and many irrelevant, stylometrical data between two covers rather than as a set of Xeroxes, and examined and corrected too! But for the layman, a warning is in order: B.’s results are marred in that he, although critical of some of his predecessors (especially, and rightly so, of Lutoslawski and von Arnim), is often not critical enough of others. Also, he is not free from prejudices himself.

The net result of all this labour spent from 1867 onwards is meagre. There is a last group (‘III’) consisting of, in alphabetical order, Criti. Lg. Phlb. Plt. Sph. Ti. and a small group preceding it (‘II’), in probable order of composition R. Prm. Tht. Phdr. That much was suspected by Campbell in 1867 and established by 1888, when C. Ritter wrote the first book on the subject, and despite B.’s claims to the contrary, we have hardly advanced since then. There is no evidence whatsoever for a late group (‘Ib’) among the works preceding II. The list given by B. on p. 252, with many cautions and provisos, is the result of wishful thinking—I will come back to this problem below. As for III, B. is confident that the study of clausulae has proved that the right order is Ti. Criti. Sph. Plt. Phlb. Lg. I agree that Plt. Phlb. Lg. are the last of the three, but on B.’s own showing (p. 206), the statistic significance of the data is not big enough to exclude before them the order Sph. Ti. Criti., suggested by the study of hiatus (p. 165 with adjustments for hiatus after xál and περί and hiatus between clauses). Since I intend to deal with this problem elsewhere, I shall not go into the matter any further in this review.
Let me give an example of lack of criticism. B. spends nineteen pages (136-152) on the studies of Natorp, which are based on the number of words used in each work that are, in the Platonic corpus, not found outside that work. Natorp split the dialogues into three groups according to the number of such unique words divided by the length of the work. The group with the highest score, called ‘C’ by Natorp, consisted of Plt. Lg. Phdr. Criti. Ti. in that (ascending) order. It so happens that four of these works are contained in III, and the reader is taken step by painstaking step through all the calculations and permutations that Natorp applied to arrive at a more or less acceptable order of all the dialogues. But the basic assumption is fallacious: vocabulary is a function of subject-matter, and out-of-the-way topics require a specialised vocabulary, the diaeretical method of Plt., the endless legal specifications of Lg., the rhetorical terminology of Phdr., the Atlantis story of Criti., the physiology of Ti. Natorp’s group C has nothing to do with chronology, apart from the fact that late in his writing career Plato covered entirely new ground more often than before. Had B. been more critical and more aware of the basics of stylometry, he would have said so, and mentioned Natorp’s studies, if at all, in a footnote.

Prejudice and lack of criticism conspire to create the illusion of a ‘transitional’ subgroup Ib. In many works of reference, Ib and II are lumped together as ‘middle period’, and it is often said, quite falsely, that the existence of the middle period has been established by stylometric research. In B.’s book, Ib makes its first appearance on p. 46, where in a report of the research of E. Walbe (on the frequency of παξ and its compounds) it is said that “those works already placed rather later than the rest [in I] by previous investigations, Euthd., Crat., Symp., Phdo, Menex., ... generally display the highest figures ... The exceptional points are the low frequency in the Lys. and the high one in the Euph.” This is typical of Ib data or what passes for them: unlike the hard data for II and III, they always miss out on essential dialogues and always bring in undesirables.

Let us now work backwards to see exactly what these ‘previous investigations’ have shown. On p. 34 two instances of δνως, otherwise restricted to II and III, are recorded for Euthd. and Cra. respectively, but both of them are textually uncertain (the one from Euthd. is a superfluous conjecture by Bessarion). The table on p. 29 shows a roughly equal frequency of μενοι and ταινων for Smp. and Ly., as in Tht. and Phdr.: this is rather like basing relative order on