Plato’s Meno

ROBERT G. HOERBER

“T

he Meno is pronounced a little gem by John Stuart Mill and is thought by many critics, ancient and modern, to be the best introduction to the study of Plato. One eminent scholar chooses to fancy that it is the program of the Academy.” Thus Professor Shorey introduces his brief remarks of five pages on the Meno in What Plato Said, The only Platonists of note to cast serious aspersions on the authenticity of the dialogue were Friedrich Ast and Schaarschmidt, who in the nineteenth century regarded the Meno as unworthy of Plato. Should anyone be tempted to concur with Ast and Schaarschmidt, he should reflect on Aristotle’s indirect reference to the Meno in his Politics and the direct references in his Prior Analytics and Posterior Analytics.

The terminus ante quem for the dramatic date of the dialogue is probably shortly before March 401 B.C., when Meno joined Cyrus the Younger’s expedition at Colossae. Since Xenophon describes Meno as ἔτι ἄρα ποτὲ ὁ προσωπικός while he served under Cyrus, the meeting apparently could have taken place when Meno was en route to Asia Minor. A reference to Ismenias of Thebes, however, may appear to complicate the matter. The Meno (90A) states:

...διώτερ ὁ νῦν νεωτὴ εἰληφὼς τὰ Πολυκράτους χρήματα ἵναι Θηβαῖος...

In the Republic (336A) we read:

Οἴμαι αὐτῷ Περικλῆου εἶναι ἢ Περικλῆου ἢ Ξέρκου ἢ Ἱππίνου τοῦ Θηβαίου ἢ τινος ἄλλου μέγα οἰκομένου δύνασθαι πλουσίου ἀνδρός.

1 Paul Shorey, What Plato Said (Chicago 1957) 155. The eminent scholar is Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who states: “Der Menon ist ein Programm seiner Schule; er lehrt uns zugleich das Programm kennen, das Platon nun seinem Leben gestellt hatte” (Platon: Leben und Werke [Berlin 1920] I 281). J. S. Mill’s remark reads: “In the Meno more that is characteristic of Plato is brought together in a smaller space than in any other dialogue; if the Phaedon and the Gorgias are noble statues, the Meno is a gem” (Dissertationen 3.350).


3 Cf. Aristotle, Politica 1260a14-28 with Plato, Meno 71E-73C. Also in the Analytica Priora 67a18-b11, Aristotle refers expressly to Meno 81C-E; he states at 67a21: ἀξιόλογος δὲ ὁ ἐν τῷ Μένωνι λόγος, δι’ ἡ μάθησις ἀνάμνησις. Cf. also his Analytica Posteriora 71a129 with Meno 80E.

4 Xenophon, Anabasis 1.2.6. For the fate of Meno during the expedition cf. ibid. 2.6.29.

5 Ibid. 2.6.28; cf. also the phrase ἄγένεος ὁν.
Both statements are taken usually as referring to an event in 395 B.C.; the *Meno*, moreover, designates the occurrence as "lately," while the *Republic*, whose dramatic date is approximately twenty years earlier, regards the event as a familiar fact. The difficulty arises from the assumption that there was only one such occurrence, namely that of 395 B.C. But the usual assumption is by no means final; G. C. Field may be correct in suspecting "some other occurrence of which we know nothing." The *Meno* refers to a Polycrates, but Xenophon's account of 395 B.C. mentions a Timocrates from whom Ismenias received money. The suggestion of Field, furthermore, receives some support from a recent study on a similar possible anachronism — that *Symposium 193A* probably does not refer to the dioecism of Mantinea in 385 B.C., as critics usually suppose, but to an earlier event in 418 B.C.

Concerning the date of the composition of the *Meno* the reference to Ismenias is only one of numerous factors which have occupied the attention of Platonists, whose varied conclusions should suggest the danger of dogmatism on this subject. During the nineteenth century Stallbaum, Socher, and Steinhart held that Plato wrote the dialogue

1. G. C. Field, *Plato and his Contemporaries* (London 1948) 72. Also Plato in the *Meno* (90A) may be employing the term "lately" (νεωστή) in a broad sense, as Aristotle refers to Homer as "recent" (πρόσφατος) in *Meteorologica 359b35*. An event of twenty to twenty-five years prior would be "lately" in comparison to Periander, Perdiccas, and Xerxes (*Republic 336A*).

2. Xenophon, *Hellenica* 3.5.1. The opinion of most commentators, however, may be correct, that the *Meno* (90A) refers to the sixth-century tyrant of Samos; cf. Herodotus 3.39-46. Ismenias, of course, is the democratic leader at Thebes; he assisted Anytus and the other exiled democrats at Athens in 403 B.C. — shortly before the dramatic date of the *Meno*; cf. W. R. M. Lamb, *Plato* (Loeb Classical Library) IV 334-5. For the fate of Ismenias cf. Xenophon, *Hellenica* 5.2.25-36. On Polycrates see also below, 82 note 3.