

Introduction

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Classicists might regard Aristophanes as having preserved a more lifelike picture of Athens as she was during the Peloponnesian War than Plato did but there's an important difference between them that has nothing to do with the quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Aristophanes' comedies belong to the moment for which he wrote them, and were literally intended to be prizewinners for the day. Plato managed to capture the reality of Athena's πόλις so well that he makes it easy to forget that by the time he wrote his dialogues, the Athens of his youth was only a distant memory, and he would open his Academy at around the time when the violet-crowned city, for the sake of preserving the rump of her former empire, would bargain away the freedom of the Ionian Greeks of Asia to the Persians, thereby abandoning the cause for which she had fought at Marathon. Apart from the glaring anachronism in *Menexenus*, you'd never realize that it was to this terrible moment to which his dialogues belong, and without Xenophon's *Hellenica*, we'd know very little about the King's Peace of 387.

Plato's achievement required him to stand on the shoulders of giants. By this I mean not only that he couldn't have achieved greatness without the example of Homer;²¹ rather, he depended so heavily on his predecessors that he needed their works to survive along with his, for his could not be understood without theirs. To take Aristophanes, for example, it is not just that the poet himself appears in *Symposium* or that *Clouds* plays a prominent role in *Apology of Socrates*: there are at least three passages in Plato's *Republic*, none of which mention Aristophanes by name, that require the reader's familiarity with *Frogs*, *Congresswomen*,

and *Knights* if they are to be appreciated. In fact, Plato's relationship with the Greek literature available in his day creates *the single most important question* that must be answered by anyone who sets about interpreting his dialogues in a serious way, and that means anyone who attempts to do what the myriad mysteries in Plato's dialogues will require his readers to do until the end of time.

The question is: Was Plato writing for his contemporaries, as we can be sure Aristophanes did, or was he creating what Thucydides called a κτήμα εἰς αἰεὶ when he wrote (*History* 1.22.4): "Perhaps for some listeners, this non-mythic account of events will seem unpleasant. It is enough for me if it is judged to be useful, for such things—or very similar ones—will come to be again. I have not written this book to be a prizewinner for the day but as a possession into eternity." Plato never tells us that he too intended his dialogues to be a κτήμα εἰς αἰεὶ, and it has naturally been doubted that he intended them to be, and that not only by those who regard discussions of an author's intentions with suspicion or contempt. But as deadly to any great author as is the rejection of "authorial intent," the view that Plato was writing only for a contemporary audience is particularly deadly for him, and that precisely because of the point with which I began: Plato was writing about a city whose past had already been recorded by three great historians.

Thucydides the son of Olorus is clearly by far and away the greatest of these. Unlike the case with Aristophanes, it is not a question of whether a passage or two cannot be fully appreciated without him: there are entire dialogues, *Laches* and *Symposium* prominent among them, that are unintelligible without the reader's knowledge of the events, speeches, and people he described. Any reader can appreciate the image of the rolling human ancestors, cleft in twain by Zeus, in Aristophanes' speech at Agathon's victory party. But any reader who is not aware that Plato set his *Symposium* on the eve of the departure of the Sicilian Expedition, that the drunkenness of Alcibiades was going to play just as important a role in the aftermath of its departure as he was in causing it to depart, and that the result of it all would be a catastrophe—and indeed the greatest of Attic Tragedies, played out in the Great Harbor of Syracuse—any reader unaware of this will be in no position to understand Socrates' claim at the end of the dialogue that a poet who could create a comedy could write a tragedy as well, let alone see that its truth is the key to interpreting it.

It is more economical to introduce "the shoulders of giants" with a humbler example. In *Laches*, a dialogue between Socrates and two famous

generals, Plato illuminated his dependence on Thucydides. To begin with, it is Thucydides' *History* that made Laches and Nicias "two famous generals." But the dependence goes deeper, as when Laches makes the following reply to Socrates:

Socrates: But a man enduring in war, and willing to fight, calculating reasonably, knowing, on the one hand, that others will come to his aid, and, on the other, that he is fighting against fewer and feebler men than those with whom he is, and further that he holds stronger positions [χωρία κρείττω]; would you then say that this man, enduring with this reasoning and preparation, would be braver than the one in the opposing army who is willing both to remain and to endure?
Laches: Rather the one in the opposite position, as it seems to me, Socrates.²²

Although one must also know in advance that it is "holding the high ground" that creates what Socrates calls χωρία κρείττω,²³ it is only the reader who encounters this passage with Thucydides in mind who is in a strong position to appreciate the irony of Laches' noble answer. It is because of Thucydides that we know that Laches, whose army was larger, and was being daily augmented by the arrival of allied troops, himself led his army down from the high ground before it was routed at Mantinea, where he was killed: "The generals, half-stunned for the moment, afterwards led them down from the hill [ἀπὸ τοῦ λόφου], and went forward and encamped in the plain, with the intention of attacking the enemy."²⁴ Since every reader of Thucydides knows that Laches made a strategic blunder by coming down off of that ridge, Laches' response to Socrates' question must be examined in that light.²⁵

Nicias, the other famous general, fares no better when he reaches the intersection of Plato and Thucydides. Nicias considerably understates the case by saying that it is only one's past and present that Socrates will test (*La.* 187e10–188a2): like Laches, he will also be measured against a future that he cannot see. As many scholars have noted,²⁶ the conversation in *Laches* unfolds in the shadow of Nicias' disastrous overreliance on the soothsayers in Syracuse (cf. Thucydides 7.50.4, and *La.* 195e3–196d6). Immortalized by Thucydides, Nicias repeatedly shows himself to be useful to Plato, especially after Alcibiades has spoken his last word in *Symposium*, and no matter how ineptly he may have handled the army

in Sicily, it would not have been there at all if it were not for his young and power-drunk opponent.

Although the relationship between Plato and Xenophon is the subject of this book, it begins with Thucydides in order to make a larger point. Although his value to Plato—like his status as a giant—has been vastly underestimated, Xenophon is by no means the only author on whose shoulders Plato stood. There are many others who deserve this kind of recognition but whose contributions to Plato's achievement will inevitably recede into the background as this book progresses. Because Xenophon, among other things, wrote histories, Thucydides is particularly useful for illuminating one of the ways in which Plato depended on both. But Xenophon was also a Socratic and an educator, and there were other Socratics as well, and in Isocrates, there was another great schoolteacher. The focus on Xenophon should not obscure the extent to which Plato was also in dialogue with other contemporary authors such as Isocrates, Aeschines Socraticus, or Antisthenes. What makes Xenophon a good place to begin recovering such dialogues is that all his Socratic writings survive; what makes Thucydides a good place to begin reconsidering Plato's dialogue with Xenophon is that he too provided the readers of the future with the knowledge of history upon which Plato's dialogues so frequently depend.

At this point, a reader might plausibly object: "What about the alternative possibility that Plato was basing his account on something like an oral tradition about the relevant historical events? Not everything a contemporary reader knew about Laches et al. came from Thucydides." The theoretical answer to this objection is that this book has been written by someone who regards Plato's dialogues as having been intended to be "a possession into eternity," and who has thus answered the crucial interpretive question raised above *in the affirmative*. I will be assuming throughout that Plato intended his dialogues to be what they have become and will forever remain, and thus that, along with Thucydides, Xenophon helped him to secure this amazing effect. But given Xenophon's universally recognized inferiority to Thucydides as a historian, and his rarely questioned inferiority to Plato as a writer of Socratic dialogue—and perhaps to many others including Aeschines and Antiphon—the question arises: "Why did Xenophon's writings survive?" I will be offering an answer this question, but the important point for now is not only the brute fact that Xenophon has survived, or the even more surprising fact that he was the first Greek philosopher whose writings have done so. He is also the only Athenian other than Thucydides to record the fact that he expected his

work to survive forever (*Cyn.* 13.7). The closest Plato came to stating that this was his intention as well was by building on both.

And then there is the practical answer to the objector's claim that "something like an oral tradition about the relevant historical events" is sufficient to prove that "not everything a contemporary reader knew about Laches et al. came from Thucydides." My response is that what the objector means by "a contemporary reader" has no more practical value than "an oral tradition" of which no actual evidence remains. Yes, there may well have been fourth-century readers who knew about Laches (d. 418) independently of Thucydides or about Critias or Charmides—neither of whom Thucydides mentions—without Xenophon; clearly Plato, for one, did not need to rely on Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and *Hellenica* for knowledge about his own relatives.²⁷ But Plato was not writing for himself, and without Xenophon's *Hellenica*, no reader who actually exists—or of whom any historical record remains—could have recognized that there is an anachronism in Plato's *Menexenus*, without which recognition Plato's purpose in writing it cannot be understood. Finally, the objector's "a contemporary reader" is a chimera of whom we can prove no more than we can prove about a lost "oral tradition" or about "lost Socratic works" to which Plato or Xenophon may have been responding rather than to each other. Such objections rest on an appeal to a plausible but spurious realism: they appear to be empirical and skeptically critical regarding the importance of the sources we have but in fact achieve their plausibility by hypothesizing the existence of sources that we don't. As interpreters of his κτῆμα εἰς αἰεί, we are the readers for whom Plato wrote, not the unrecoverable "contemporary reader" hypothesized by the objector, and we should not deny that Plato stood on the shoulders of giants because the interpretation of his dialogues might more plausibly have depended on the existence of ghosts.