

Henricus Aristippus

PROLOGUE TO PLATO, *MENO*

[1156]

«Poetry resembles painting. Some works will captivate you when you stand very close to them and others if you are at a greater distance. »

(Horace, *Ars poetica*, 361-362)

Therefore you should stand very close to Plato's writings, so that, by their peculiar qualities, they attract and delight you more and more. What person like you does not know, what person familiar with the Scriptures is reluctant to find out, what assiduous reader of inspired learning is in any doubt as to how deep, how subtle, and with what firmness and solidity the doctrines and sayings of Plato stand? For he illuminated the morals and wisdom of Athens, he taught the philosophy of the Academy, he brought gentleness to the Sicilian tyrant. It is from him that Aristotle derived his subtleties, and through him that Aristotle and the Lyceum developed their philosophy. The closer you come to this work, the more you admire it. For each word makes known its questions. And if you solve one, you will reel before the rising heads of the Hydra. For this man is alone in ethics, outstanding in theology: he founds all his discussions of morals on gentleness, and he buttresses those on God with solid doctrine, and from diverse beginnings he brings every discussion he embarks on to a single end. Of course, he relates all spirits to the Being above, as if he believed that everything had come from them. Therefore come close, my dear and venerable friend, and enjoy the perfume of Plato. Find new life in its savour and fill yourself with its glowing sweetness, and take this version of the *Meno* with the devotion by which you know you asked and I gave. [...] avoid thrusting alien meaning on the work through confidence in my poor abilities. Hence you will probably find the Latin somewhat rough and uncouth. For wine racked off into other vessels is often soured.

When you asked me to translate some of Plato's dialogues, I preferred to start with the *Meno*. I believed that this work on virtue would be more suitable and welcome to a pupil of virtue. For what seems more welcome that virtue to one whose attitudes, whose acts, whose strength, whose very work flourish through virtue, whose speech breathes virtue?

With what strength Plato here discusses virtue the depth of your knowledge will leave you in no doubt, when you have read and reread this little work so assiduously that it is committed to memory. And I would not want to hide from you the favours I had to ask in preferring your good. For my Lord, William, the great and glorious king of the Sicilians, ordered me to translate the works of Gregory of Naziensa, whose books equal in number the Athenian, Plato's. And I was asked by Maion, an admirable Sicilian nobleman and by Hugo Epanormitan, the Archbishop, to translate Laertes Diogenes, *On the Life and Conversation of Philosophers* into Latin. I preferred to do your commission and put these off to a more suitable time. It is obvious how much store is placed on a friend's request, when orders from one's lord are allowed to wait. What comes from the heart, is done much faster.

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