

The Trial of Socrates

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*The Apology of Socrates is Plato's account of Socrates' defense of himself in a court of law.
The present work is a poetic interpretation of Plato's account.*

Part 1: Socrates' Defense

Socrates defends himself in a court of law before about 500 people, including a judge and his accusers: Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon.

1.
Though I am old, I've never been
Within a court of law before;
It's hard to win against some men,
But their false words I can't ignore.
Though absent men began this fight,
I'll bring their claims into the light.
2.
"That Socrates, a wise old man,
Investigates the earth and sky;
He'll make you godless if he can;
His flimsy reasons please don't buy."
Yes, many make such baseless claims
And go about destroying names.
3.
Please disregard my humble speech—
The simple truth is what I tell;
You've gathered round me to impeach
My character, as you know well.
Decide if what I say is just,
For fancy words are heaps of dust.
4.
O men of Athens, quell your shouts;
Don't think of me as vain or proud;
Let honest words remove your doubts
As I present my case unbowed.
The god at Delphi verifies
The words I'm speaking are not lies.
5.
You surely know Chaerephon, too;
He went to Delphi and inquired;
The priestess there reveals what's true
And speaks the words as she's inspired.
"Whose wisdom is unparalleled?"
"That Socrates can't be excelled."
6.
What did Apollo mean by this?
The god does not speak falsely, now;
I thought that something was amiss,
For he asserts I'm wise, but how?
My wisdom isn't great or small—
I do not think I'm wise at all!
7.
With these strong doubts within my mind,
I looked for men reputed wise;
I sought the wisest of mankind,
And such they were in human eyes.
But questioning with little tact,
I soon found out they sorely lacked.
8.
I tried to show one pol that he
Was not as wise as others said;
Though proud enough, he couldn't see
By flattery he was misled.
He didn't like my boorish truths,
For he was mocked by several youths.
9.
And when I left that angry guy,
I realized the god was right;
The god made me a nagging fly
To pester smugness with my bite.
I know I don't know anything—
This is the truth to which I cling.

10.
I found that men of high repute
Were not as wise as simple chaps,
That lowly men were more astute
Than famous men with knowledge gaps.
But I continued with my quest
To put all wisdom to the test.

11.
I went to see a poet next,
To ask him what his verses meant,
But as he read, he seemed perplexed—
He didn't know his words' intent.
The poets write as prophets do—
Not grasping what they hear or view.

12.
I thought the craftsmen must know more
Than others who are not as skilled;
I found they have a knowledge store,
For they know how to weave and build.
Beyond their narrow specialty,
They're just as lost as you and me.

13.
The god's own message seems to be
That human wisdom comes to naught;
I represent all men, you see—
A great exception I am not.
If any think that they are wise,
I test and prove them otherwise.

14.
In service to the god I live,
Though earning only hate from men;
My time to all I freely give;
I cower not, I have thick skin.
The proof of my sincerity:
I live in simple poverty.

15.
When I put people to the test,
The idle youths all did the same;
Then people saw me as a pest
And placed on me the guilt and blame.
Their slander fell on eager ears,
As it has done for many years.

16.
You claim that I corrupt the youth
And don't revere the gods, like you;
These accusations mock the truth;
Your words of slander misconstrue.
O men of Athens, rein your ire,
For I can sense a growing fire.

17.
Meletus says that I alone
Corrupt the youth, but no indeed!
I'll let it be my cornerstone
That only few can really lead.
As few can tame a wild beast,
The rest will be inept, at least.

18.
And it would be the greatest gift
If only I corrupted men;
If all the others can uplift
Our youths, then let the schools begin!
But my accusers do not care
About our youths or if they err.

19.
You say I don't believe in gods,
But do believe in daemons and
Some others, such as demigods;
This is the claim, I understand.
But I will prove I do believe
And my accusers are deceived.

20.
As for my proof, would you persist
In claiming that some things relate
To horses, but no steeds exist,
Although related things have weight?
If foals and reins can't be dismissed,
We know that horses must exist.

21.
If daemons are the gods' own seed,
Then who would claim that daemons are
Unless he firstly does concede
That gods exist, and pass that bar?
But I believe that daemons live
And that the gods are causative.

22.
If I'm condemned, it won't be by
Specific people with their claims,
For hate and envy underlie
The defamation of my name.
Though I'm condemned, this will not end—
With many more you will contend.

23.
When death has come to walk near you,
Don't fear or question what will come;
Seek justice till your days are through;
Be brave although you may succumb.
Face danger and remain in place;
Avoid dishonor and disgrace.

24.
Philosophy is my own work,
And I inspect myself each day;
I serve the god and never shirk;
I'd be remiss to disobey.
If I did not fulfill my role,
Then you could justly sift my soul.

25.
O men of Athens, is not fear
The mask of wisdom that men wear?
And men feel wise to engineer
All sorts of ways to quell despair.
But it's not wise to fear the end,
For it could be a welcome friend.

26.
O men of Athens, why should I
Select an evil that is sure
Instead of choosing here to die,
For death might be a good or cure?
It's ignorant to think you've got
The greatest wits when you have not.

27.
O men of Athens, I shall choose
To follow god instead of you,
For I am bound, though men refuse,
To test all things and seek the true.
I cannot change my task or fate—
I'll warn, assess, and agitate.

28.
And are you not ashamed to seek
For riches, fame, and glory first?
Without real wisdom, fame is weak;
Without the truth, all glory's cursed.
Just seek perfection of the soul;
This must be your pursuit and goal.

29.
You must regard your soul with care
And not prefer your flesh or wealth;
If you choose truth, it won't ensnare;
It will direct to peace and health.
Yes, virtue is the source of joy;
It brings a wealth that doesn't cloy.

30.
If you assert you care for these—
The truth and wisdom that I praise—
I'll sift and prove you, as I please,
To search out all your hidden ways.
But if you choose what's truly base,
I will reproach you to your face.

31.
O men of Athens, murmur not—
The evil men can't harm the good;
Though I may die, if it's my lot,
I'll speak the truth because I should.
If you convict and throw the blame,
You'll hurt yourselves and taint your name.

32.
Your judgment cannot harm me now,
By exile, death, or heavy fine;
I will not fear nor wipe my brow;
To me, your insults are benign.
Meletus and Anytus fail
To harm me though they both assail.

33.
I'll make a firm defense for you
Lest you should hurt yourselves with hate;
Your slander here is nothing new;
Your lack of justice weaves your fate.
The god chose me to wake you up,
But envy stirs a bitter cup.

34.
Replacing me would be a task
That would be hard for you to do;
The god might send one if you ask,
But you still fear what would ensue.
To you I am the god's own gift;
If you condemn me, who will sift?

35.
From early life, I heard a voice;
A godly spirit spoke to me;
Opposing every harmful choice,
It guards me from what I can't see.
This spirit never goads or leads,
But it prevents unwanted deeds.

36.
This voice kept me from public life,
For politics is not my field;
Opposing you would have made strife,
But private life was like a shield.
I simply would have bit the dust
If I had fought for what is just.

37.
My goal in life is to reject
All actions that are less than good;
The just and holy I elect—
For these two things I've always stood.
I do not fear the government,
Though I must often voice dissent.

38.
I don't take money for my speech;
I don't refuse the rich or poor;
I am not greedy like a leech;
To all I open wide my door.
If any say they have received
Some secret lore, don't be deceived.

39.
You know why some obtain delight
To linger with me every day?
They love to hear the frauds put right
And see their faces in dismay.
I've been enjoined by deities
To keep on sifting such as these.

40.
O men of Athens, do not doubt
That seers, priests, and dreams tell me
To question fully those with clout;
This urgent task I will not flee.
The words I speak are wholly true
And hold up under close review.

41.
If I corrupt the youth this way,
Then those who were deceived by me
Should now arise, accuse, and say
They were misled, as they now see.
If I have wronged them, they would scold
And punish me for what I've told.

42.
But many youths are present here,
As Plato, Crito, and the rest;
Meletus could have them appear
And put a "knife" into my chest.
And if I have no righteous case,
Then they can put me in my place.

43.
But they all sympathize with me;
They're ready to assist my plea;
As many others clearly see,
They would reproach your enmity.
They know Meletus is untrue;
His hate and envy are undue.

44.
Though I may be condemned today,
I won't parade my wife and friends;
It simply isn't my own way
To rouse emotions for my ends.
Although these actions may enrage,
I won't seek pity at this stage.

45.
I don't think it's becoming here
To supplicate at my old age;
Although I may seem cavalier,
I am not loath to turn the page.
Yes, some commit a shameful deed
When stooping low to beg and plead.

46.
Some culprits think that they will ail
If they are put to death by men,
But that they'll live forever hale
If they achieve a legal win.
Such people bring this city shame;
They tarnish Athens' ebbing fame.

47.
Those people should take all the blame,
Instead of those who calmly wait;
Their dramas are an ugly game,
And sometimes judges take the bait.
Such cowardice does not befit
A man, though judges may acquit.

48.
O men of Athens, should a judge
Decide a case by means of laws?
Or should some favors make him budge,
As culprits flee the deathly jaws?
It is not right—he should be loath
To take a bribe or break his oath.

49.
I won't behave in such a way
To ruin justice by my acts;
If I did so, I'd prove today
An unbeliever by these facts.
O men of Athens, please discern
That justice is my first concern.

50.
I am a strong believer in
The gods—more than Meletus here,
And more than many other men,
So let me make my purpose clear.
I'll let the god and you preside;
My fate is what you will decide.

Part 2: After the Verdict

The votes are cast, and Socrates is found guilty by a majority of the votes.

51.
O men of Athens, I'm not grieved
At these events, for I received
A vote of guilt, as I believed,
And thus your aims have been achieved.
But I did not expect to see
The end determined just by three.

52.
If three had changed their guilty votes,
Then I would soon have been released;
But this decision now connotes
My options quickly have decreased.
Although Meletus is perplexed,
He will prepare the sentence next.

53.
But now it's clear to everyone,
Had not Meletus' helpers come,
Meletus would have been undone
By hefty fines, a massive sum.
If he had not obtained the votes,
A thousand drachmas—yet he gloats!

54.
I have neglected money's charms
And all the things that men pursue,
Like leading, speaking, mansions, farms;
With all these things, wealth does accrue.
But I taught people to take care
Of justice, self, and city square.

55.
O men of Athens, what should I
Award myself as just deserts?
A good reward would satisfy,
Though my proposal disconcerts.
I should receive my rightful plumes
Within the Prytaneum's rooms.

56.
I should receive a daily sum
To speak within the public square;
The people's questions I would plumb;
To me, this small reward seems fair.
Your benefactor I would be
To help improve society.

57.
Perhaps you think I'm acting proud
In this, a case of life and death;
But I'm not able or allowed
To stretch my time or catch my breath.
I think I could persuade those here
If I had more time to appear.

58.
I don't believe that I have hurt
On purpose anyone I've met;
So I won't act now to subvert
My own good morals with your threat.
I don't believe that I should earn
A punishment from this concern.

59.
But should I choose to do some time
Within a prison or a jail?
Or should I owe a hefty fine
And wait till friends can pay my bail?
A fine would be the same as jail—
I'd be confined to no avail.

60.
Or should I go away from here?
Perhaps an exile would please you?
But if my words don't make me dear
To Athens, what would others do?
A fine life it would be to go
Throughout the land and mischief sow!

61.
And some will say, "Why can't you live
A quiet life without debates?"
Myself I never would forgive
If I opposed what god dictates.
The unexamined life is not
Worth living, nor is it my lot.

62.
If I were rich, I'd pay a fee—
I'd pay a large, substantial sum;
I'd not be harmed, but be set free,
But as it is, I may succumb.
A fine of thirty minas for
My punishment—I can't pay more.

Part 3: After the Sentencing

The judges sentence Socrates to death.

63.
O men of Athens, you will see
Chastisement from your enemy;
They will believe that you killed me,
A wise old man, with cruelty.
Your acts and name they will defame;
You will be scolded, to your shame.

64.
If you had waited for my death,
You might have saved yourselves some stress;
I'd soon have breathed my final breath,
For I am old, but you transgress.
This is for him who vilifies,
For him who longs for my demise.

65.
I have not been convicted through
A lack of arguments, but by
A lack of words with which to woo
Your sentiments before I die.
I did not think it was my place
To move you with a tearful face.

66.
Yet I'm not sorry for my fate
Nor for defending my life thus;
I did not then incorporate
Fair words that are quite frivolous.
I did not use all methods to
Escape the sentence planned by you.

67.
Though it's not hard to outrun death,
Depravity runs faster still;
Though one may keep one's living breath,
It's harder to restrain the ill.
And though the slower has caught me,
The faster one you cannot flee.

68.
And I depart, condemned to die,
But you're condemned by verity;
And justice soon will amplify
The pain for your barbarity.
My sentence I will not arrest;
I feel that things are for the best.

69.
O men of Athens, I predict—
As men near death are wont to do—
The young men here will soon afflict
Your lives as I did hitherto.
And all these youths, whom I restrained,
Will set on you when they're unchained.

70.
You think that you will be set free
From needing to inspect your mind;
Although I'll be an absentee,
Your many foes won't be so kind.
They'll make you even more displeased,
And they won't quickly be appeased.

71.
This shameful method to escape
Your troubles is not good or just;
Your life is not in splendid shape,
For you'll receive what we've discussed.
Yes, that is what you will go through,
And now I take my leave of you.

72.
To those who voted to acquit,
I would converse with you a while;
I should reveal and now admit
What happened ere I came to trial.
This morning, something strange occurred:
I left my home quite undeterred.

73.
The deity who guides my choice
Was silent when I left my place;
It didn't warn me with its voice
That I'd encounter some disgrace.
It has not yet opposed me here,
Though seeming evils do appear.

74.
So what could be the cause of this?
Is this a blessing that I gain?
The lack of signs I can't dismiss;
My destiny I won't disdain.
I do believe I've met some boon
On this momentous afternoon.

75.
To die must now be one of these:
Annihilation could be fate;
To have no sense, to be at ease,
Or else the soul moves through a gate.
So death could be a darkness vast,
Or else the soul could be recast.

76.
If death is like an endless sleep—
A sleep without a dream of fear—
Then it would be a boon to keep
That peaceful state, that rest austere.
I don't think rulers would decline
A peaceful rest that's so divine.

77.
If death is, on the other hand,
A passage to another place,
Or to a better mystery land,
Then that is something I'd embrace.
If I could meet some judges there,
They'd be more righteous by compare.

78.
No price would be too high to meet
Some demigods and heroes there;
I'd suffer death or full defeat;
All worldly goods I would not spare.
To speak with Homer like a friend
Would be a gift without an end.

79.

And I could meet with other dead—
Those who were killed unjustly here;
Comparing hardships, naught unsaid,
Their love and friendship would endear.
I'd like to question famous men
To find if they were wise within.

80.

If what they say is true indeed,
Then life in Hades is not bad;
To follow where the dead ones lead
Is not to die or to go mad.
To be immortal is a joy
That nothing ever can destroy.

81.

O judges, you should keep your hope
And meditate on truths like this;
The gods aid men and help them cope;
To good men nothing falls amiss.
This death to me is not by chance—
Past my old cares I will advance!

82.

O judges, please reproach my sons;
Please pain them all as I pained you;
If hope for wealth and fame outruns
Plain virtue, judge them all anew.
If they think they are something great,
Then let your justice set them straight.

83.

But now it's time for me to leave,
And I will die, but you will live;
There is no need for you to grieve;
All hate and envy I forgive.
And who goes to the better place?
God only knows what we will face.