

Apology

Plato

Rendered in blank verse by Rob Bocchino

In ancient Athens, Socrates is on trial for crimes against the city. The prosecution has just presented its case. Socrates now addresses the jury in his own defense.

Socrates. I know not, men of Athens, what you thought
On hearing my accusers. For my part,
I was, despite myself, almost convinced
By their persuasive speech. And yet that speech,
In what it told, was hardly ever true.
Of all their lies, one in particular
Stood out and caught me by surprise: that you
Should guard yourselves against someone like me,
A master in the art of speaking well.
They must have little shame; for right away
You see that what they say can't be believed.
You hear my voice and know accomplishment
In speech is something I don't have at all.
This is most shameless of them; though perhaps
They meant that I'm a man who speaks the truth.
If this is what they meant when they said "master,"
Then I agree: I am a man like that;
Though not according to their mode of speech;
For, as I mentioned, almost everything
I heard them say was false. From me, by Zeus,
You'll hear the entire truth; though not, of course,
Dressed up in words so pleasing to the ear,
And stylized in the manner they prefer;
Instead you'll hear a fragment here and there,
Plain words, the first that come into my mind;
For I trust in the justice that I speak.
Let none of you expect a different mode
Of speech from me. Indeed, for one my age
It isn't fitting (though it might seem so,
Were I much younger than I am) to play
With words in setting forth my case to you.
There is one thing I ask you, gentlemen:
As you hear my defense, you may perceive
The language that I use is like to that
You may have heard when, in the marketplace
At bankers' tables, I have questioned men.
I ask you: in this case don't be surprised
Or cause disturbance at the way I speak.
Please understand, this is my first appearance
In court of law, and I am seventy.
Therefore I am a stranger to this place,
And to the mode of speech accepted here.

Just as, if I were literally a stranger,
You'd understand if I spoke in that manner
And dialect I learned while growing up,
I ask that you ignore my mode of speech,
And this seems just. For better or for worse,
Please concentrate on what you hear me say,
Determining if it is just or not.
This is where excellence in judging lies,
Just as, with speech, we praise it if it's true.

Now gentlemen, at first I must defend
Myself against the early accusations,
The lies told by the first set of accusers.
In course I will address the later lies,
The accusations of the second set.
For years you've heard complaints about me; men
Have said these things, and none of them are true.
I fear these more than I fear Anytus
And friends, although they too are powerful.
The early lies exert the greater force,
Because they were instilled when you were young,
Persuading you of baseless accusations:
To wit, there is a man called Socrates;
He's wise; he studies all things in the sky
And under Earth; and through his arguments
He makes the weak position seem the stronger.
The ones who spread that rumor, gentlemen,
Are my most feared accusers; for the ones
Who hear them are inclined to think the ones
Who study things like this reject the gods.
Also, the ones who make these claims are many.
They've pressed their case for many years from when
You, being young, were ready to believe.
You heard them speak as children, and as teens;
And in the hearing there was no defense;
And so they won their case as by default.

I find what's most absurd in all of this
Is that one cannot know or mention names,
Except for one: he authors comedies.¹
The ones who spread this malice and this slander —
Persuading you, themselves, persuading others —
Are just the ones most difficult to know.
One cannot summon them to court, refute
Their lying in the open; therefore one
Must fight with shadows, making one's defense
Where cross examination lacks an answer.
Know too that my accusers have two kinds:
The recent ones, and older ones I mentioned.
I'll first defend against the older ones:
You heard them first, and for a longer time.
All right, then; let's begin. I must defend
Myself, must try to pull out of your minds
In little time the slander that took root

¹ This is a reference to Aristophanes, whose comedy *The Clouds* ridiculed a fictionalized version of the school of Socrates.

And grew in them so long. It is my wish
That I successfully perform this task,
This being to advantage not for me
Alone, but for you too, as I believe.
I think this task will be most difficult.
I fully see the challenge that I face.
And yet, let us proceed. I must obey
The law, and I must proffer my defense.
The outcome will be as the god may wish.

It's best for us to start from the beginning.
What accusation first provoked the slander
That Meletus believed in writing out
The charge he brought against me? What said they
Who first uttered the slander? As if they
Were here and brought this case, I must read out
The affidavit that they would have sworn.
Its contents would be similar to this:
He's guilty, Socrates, of doing wrong.
He occupies himself by studying
Phenomena in sky and under Earth;
He makes the worse the stronger argument;
He teaches all these practices to others.
In Aristophanes you've seen the same:
A Socrates who struts and proudly says
He walks on air, and so much other nonsense
Concerning things I do not know at all.
I do not mean to criticize such knowledge;
Perhaps there is someone who knows these things.
(Please note what I say here, lest Meletus
Decide to open up another case.)
However, gentlemen, I do not know
These things; and on this point I call on you
As witness. Those of you who've heard me speak,
And many of you have, should now come forth
And say if they have heard my speech engage
With subjects of this kind in any way.
From those you'll learn what most already know:
Those present here would not repeat the slander.
They would not say it, for it is not true.
And if you've heard that I have charged a fee
To students that I've taught, that's not true either.
Of course I've no objection to such teaching:
It's fine that Gorgias of Leontini,
Or Procidus of Ceos, Hippios
Of Elis do it. Any one of these
Can go to any city that he likes,
And get young men to follow him who could
For free engage with fellow citizens,
To leave those citizens and join with him
And pay a fee, and gratitude besides.
Indeed, another wise man visits us
From Paros. I know this because I met
A man who, in his spending on the Sophists,
Exceeds the total that all others pay.

His name is Callias, Hipponicus
His father's name. I asked (he has two sons),
"Say, Callias, if they were colts or calves,
Your sons, you could engage a trainer, who
Would shape their properties, make them excel;
A horse breeder or farmer would be right.
But they are men. Whom do you have in mind
To train them? Who is expert in this kind
Of excellence, the human, social kind?
You must have thought of this, since you have sons.
Does such a man exist, or does he not?"
He answered, "Certainly, I know he does."
I asked, "Who is he? What's his origin?
His name? What is he charging for his fee?"
"His name is Evenus, he comes from Paros.
Five minas² is the fee that he would charge."
This made me think that Evenus must be happy,
To have this art, and teach it for a fee
So modest. Certainly if I possessed
Such knowledge, I would advertise with pride;
But I do not possess it, gentlemen.

Perhaps you'll interrupt me now and say,
"But Socrates, what is your occupation?
What is the origin of all these slanders?
We think you must do something that is strange;
For otherwise this talk would not arise.
Your actions must not be like others' are.
Instruct us what you do, so that we speak
Correctly on the subject of your life."
Of course the one who says these things is right.
And so I'll try to show you what has caused
This slander, and has stained my reputation.
Now listen: Some of you will think I jest,
Perhaps; and yet I say just what is true.
What caused the reputation that I have?
It's this: None other than a kind of wisdom.
What kind? The kind that men possess, perhaps.
It may be that I have this kind of wisdom,
While those I interact with, more than that,
Possess another, super-human kind.
I can't explain that other kind. I don't
Possess it, certainly. Whoever says
I do is lying, and he slanders me.
Do not create disturbance, gentlemen.
You may believe I'm boasting, but the tale
I tell does not originate with me.
Its truth is backed by a trustworthy source.
I call upon none other than the god³
At Delphi as a witness, to attest
About the kind, existence, and extent
Of wisdom I may have. I think you know
Of Chairephon. He was my friend from youth,

² A mina was equal to 100 drachmas. A drachma was the daily wage of a laborer.

³ Apollo, whose oracle was at Delphi.

And friend to most of you; with him you shared
Your exile and return. Surely you know
The kind of man he was. He was impulsive
In choosing what to do. There was a time
He went to Delphi, asked the oracle
(Please, gentleman, do not create disturbance)
If any man be wiser than I am.
The Pythian replied: No one is wiser.
The witness, Chairephon, no longer lives;
His brother, though, will say these facts are true.

Consider why I'm telling you this story:
I must explain the slander from the start.
I heard of this reply and asked myself,
"What can this mean? The god must speak in riddles.
I'm conscious that I am not wise at all.
What can he mean by saying I am wisest?
I know he cannot lie; for if he did,
The action would be contrary to nature."
I pondered long in baffled ignorance.
What did it mean? And then, reluctantly,
I started in on this investigation.
I sought a man that most considered wise.
Through him, I thought, I'd show the oracle
Was wrong. I'd say, "He's wiser than I am;
To say I'm wisest, therefore, isn't right."
I started a discussion with this man.
(There is no need to name him; he was one
Of many who conduct the public life.)
What happened then may be recounted thus:
Although this man had wisdom in the eyes
Of many people, most of all his own,
To me it seemed he wasn't wise at all.
Intense dislike arose, both on his part
And on the part of others who were there.
I left and thought, "I'm wiser than this man.
Although it's likely neither he nor I
Knows anything of substance, he's convinced
He knows what he does not; whereas I see
I'm lacking knowledge, and don't think I know.
Perhaps, therefore, to just this small extent
My wisdom is the greater: I don't think
I know what I don't know, whereas he does."
I next approached an even wiser man,
According to the popular opinion.
The same thing happened; and, as a result,
I made new enemies of him and others.

Continuing this process, I became,
I realized now in sorrow and alarm,
Unpopular. And yet I could not stop:
To understand the oracle I must
Consult all those whose reputations said
They were possessed of knowledge. By the dog,
O jury gentlemen (I must tell truth)
In my investigation for the god

I found that those of highest reputation
Were most deficient in the cause of knowledge;
While those who were perceived as knowing less
In fact knew more. I started now a quest
To prove the oracle, in fact, correct.
I left the politicians and I went
To poets: writers of the tragedies
And dithyrambs and others, thinking that
In ignorance I'd be ahead of them.
I took the poems that with greatest care
They had constructed, asking what they meant,
And hoping to learn something of the art.
In shame I tell the truth of it; I must.
The poets were not competent to say
What any of it meant; a bystander
Could discourse on their meaning with more insight.
I realized that constructing poetry
Does not require knowledge; rather talent
And inspiration let the poets write
Like seers and like prophets who expound
Fine words and understand not what they say.
It seemed to me the poets were the same.
I also saw, because of poetry,
These poets thought themselves possessed of wisdom
In other subjects that they did not have.
Again I left them, thinking that I had,
As with the public men, the same advantage.

At last I saw the craftsmen; for I thought
My knowledge next to nothing, and I knew
That theirs encompassed much. I was not wrong:
They knew of things I didn't, and in this
Their wisdom was superior to mine.
But, jury gentlemen, at the same time,
These craftsmen seemed to me to have the faults
The poets did: while each pursued his craft
With skill and with accomplishment, he thought
Because of this he knew of other things
Which plainly he did not; and in this way
Such wisdom as he had was overshadowed.
I asked myself, and asked the oracle,
Should I prefer to be as I am now,
Who lack their wisdom and their ignorance,
Or would I be improved if I had both?
Both for myself and for the oracle
I answered: I am better as I am.

You see how I became unpopular,
O jury gentlemen. In every case
Ill feeling followed me that's hard to take.
I bore a heavy burden; there arose
Both slander and a claim that I was wise;
For those that heard discussions that I held
Attributed to me the kind of wisdom
That I had merely proved that no one had.
It's probable, O gentlemen, the god

Is wise and, speaking through his oracle,
He meant that human wisdom is worth little
Or nothing; and he used me, Socrates,
As an example. He meant any man
Is wisest if, like Socrates, he knows
What wisdom he obtains has little worth.
Since then I've kept up the investigation;
I view it as my duty to the god.
I seek all those, each citizen or stranger,
Who outwardly seems wise. If I don't think
He is, I do as bidden by the god
And show him why. Because this is my charge,
I don't have time to work in public life,
Or even to look after my affairs;
I live in poverty and serve the god.

There are young men who follow me around.
They do this of their own free will. They can;
Their families are rich, and they have leisure.
They take delight in hearing questioning.
They imitate me, and they question others.
Like me, they find there are a lot of men
Who pride themselves in knowledge, but know little.
It comes of this that all these men are angry:
Not with themselves; the anger flows to me.
They bitterly complain of "Socrates,
That pestilence, that fellow who corrupts
The youth, and turns their minds to foolish thoughts."
One asks them what he does, and what he teaches,
What is the nature of corrupted youth.
At first they're silent, for they do not know;
But then, so that they don't look ignorant,
They say the things that everybody says
Against philosophers: things in the sky,
And things below the Earth; rejecting gods;
Advancing weaker arguments as strong.
They cannot tell the truth: that they've been proved
To lack the knowledge that they claim to have.
These people are ambitious. They are violent.
They're large in number; constantly they talk
Of me, and fill your ears with vicious lies.
It is on their behalf that I'm attacked
By Meletus and Anytus and Lycon.
The poets come at me through Meletus.
The craftsmen press their claims through Anytus,
As do the politicians. As for Lycon,
He represents the orators; so that,
As I said at the outset, it seems hard
To counteract the quantity of slander
Within the time I'm given for defense.
This, jury gentlemen, is just the truth.
I've hidden nothing; nothing is obscured.
I know why I'm unpopular; the proof
Of what I say is in the very slander
That my behavior has brought down on me.

Don't take me at my word; investigate.
 You'll find that everything I say is true.
 Let this suffice against the first accusers.
 I'll turn now to the claims of Meletus,
 That good and patriotic man (he says),
 And to the second group attacking me.
 As these accusers are a different set,
 Let us recount the things they would have sworn.
 The claims go just like this: One Socrates
 Corrupts the city's youth, does not believe
 In gods the way the city does; instead
 He teaches novel spiritual beliefs.
 This is the charge; let's take it point by point.
 As to corrupting youth, it's Meletus
 Who's guilty, for his claims are frivolous.
 To bring a charge in court is serious;
 And yet he does this lacking valid cause.
 The things he claims he cares about are not
 The things about which he has ever cared.
 I'll now attempt to prove that this is so.
 Come, tell me, Meletus; I'd like to know:
 You must agree with me that it's important
 That young men be as good as possible?

Meletus.

Indeed I do.

Socrates.

All right then, tell the jury:
 Who is it that improves them? You must know,
 Because you're so concerned. You say you have
 Discovered who corrupts them, namely me.
 You bring me here and make these accusations
 Before the jury. But then, who improves them?
 Your silence says you don't know what to say.
 Do you not feel ashamed? Is this not proof
 Of what I say, that your concern is false?
 Please tell me, Meletus, who can improve
 The young men of our city?

Meletus.

It's the laws.

Socrates.

That's not what you were asked, but very well.
 What person has the knowledge of the laws?

Meletus.

These jurymen have knowledge, Socrates.

Socrates.

What does that mean? Can these men educate
 The young men of the city?

Meletus.

Yes, they can.

Socrates.

They all can? Or some can, but not the others?

Meletus.

They all can do it.

Socrates.

Very good, by Hera.
 It seems that there are many hands to help.
 But what about the audience? Can they do it?
 Do they improve the city's youth or not?

Meletus.

They do it too.

Socrates. And what about the council?

Meletus. They also can improve the city's youth.

Socrates. And what of the assembly, Meletus?
How do its members influence the young?
Do they improve them, or do they corrupt them?

Meletus. Improve them.

Socrates. All Athenians, it seems,
Ensure the young grow up to be good men,
Except for me; and I alone corrupt them.
Is this what you intended to convey?

Meletus. That's it. That is exactly what I mean.

Socrates. It seems that I have caused a great misfortune.
Does this apply to horses, do you think?
Do all the men improve the horses' lot,
Except for one, who makes them all corrupt?
Or is the truth exactly opposite:
That just one man improves them, or a few,
The expert breeders; whereas other men,
The ones who own the horses and who use them,
Deserve the blame when horses are corrupt?
Is this not how you see it, Meletus,
With horses and with other animals?
Of course it is, say you or Anytus
That you agree with it, or that you don't.
If only one corrupted all our youth
While all the others benefited them,
The city would be happy.

Meletus,
It's clear that you have never had concern
For youth. You clearly show that you don't care.
You've never given thought to what you claim
Are reasons that you bring me here to trial.
By Zeus, inform us also, Meletus:
Suppose a man must choose where he's to live,
Among a group of wicked citizens,
Or good ones. Which is better for that man?
The question put is hardly difficult.
Do not the wicked harm the ones they meet,
While good men freely give a benefit?

Meletus. Of course.

Socrates. And do you think a man exists
Who wants the harm that's caused by wicked men?
Please answer, sir. The law commands you do.
Does any man seek out that kind of harm?

Meletus. Of course he doesn't.

Socrates. Good. And do you claim
That I corrupt the young and make them worse
Unwillingly, or with a bad intent?

Meletus. With bad intent.

Socrates.

Why would I, Meletus?

Are you much wiser at the age you've reached
Than I am at my age, to understand
That wicked people are the ones who harm
Their neighbors, while good people do them good;
While I in ignorance don't realize that,
And so am unaware that when a friend
Is turned to wickedness I risk the harm
From him, and thus corrupt him with intent,
As you claim, Meletus? I don't believe
That this is true, or that another would
Accept it could be so. Thus I do not
Corrupt the city's young; or, if I do,
I am unwilling; and, in either case,
You lie. If I corrupt unwillingly,
The law does not require you to bring
These people into court to prosecute;
Instead, you should convene a group in private
Whose purpose is to guide and to instruct.
For if I'm taught to remedy my ways,
Then I will cease what is unwilling wrong.
However, you avoid my company.
You don't instruct; instead you bring me here,
The place where what occurs is punishment,
And not instruction.

Therefore, gentlemen,

What I have said is an established fact:
This Meletus has never been concerned
With any matters that he raises here.
Yet tell us, Meletus, how do you say
That I corrupt the young? Perhaps it's clear
From testimony you have given that
It is by teaching them to shun the gods
In whom the city trusts, replacing them
With different, novel, spiritual things?
Is this the way you say I teach the youth,
And so corrupt them?

Meletus.

Yes, that's what I say.

Socrates.

Then, by the very gods of whom we speak,
Please clarify for me and for the jury.
I can't be sure exactly what you mean.
Do you say that I teach there are some gods,
That I therefore myself believe in gods,
And so am not a total atheist,
And therefore am not guilty of that crime;
And yet the gods in whom I place my faith
Are others than the city says are true,
And so this is the charge I must refute?
Or do you mean I don't believe in gods,
And that I teach this godlessness to others?

Meletus.

I mean you don't believe in gods at all.

Socrates.

You, Meletus, are really very strange.
Why would you say this? Do I not believe,

As others do, the sun and moon are gods?

Meletus. He lies, by Zeus, O jurymen. He says
The sun is made of stone, the moon of earth.

Socrates. Dear Meletus, remember who I am.
You've mixed me up with Anaxagoras.
Do you believe the jury ignorant,
And do you hold these men in such contempt,
To think they do not know that in the books
Of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae
These theories can be found, and further that
Young men can visit shops and buy these books
(At most they cost a drachma) and that they
Would laugh at me if once they heard me claim
These theories were my own? And more than that,
The theories are absurd. Is that, by Zeus,
What you think I believe? There are no gods?

Meletus. Yes, that is what I say. You don't believe
In any gods at all.

Socrates. One can't accept
What you are saying, Meletus. I think
That you yourself do not. It seems to me,
O jury gentlemen, that Meletus
Is disrespectful and is uncontrolled.
His deposition flows from disrespect,
From violence and from youthful energy.
He is like one who, making up a riddle,
Now tries it out and asks, "Will Socrates
Perceive I jest and contradict myself?
Perhaps I will deceive him and the others."
His affidavit contradicts itself,
As if it said, "This Socrates denies
The gods exist, but he believes in them."
A jester is the one who says such stuff.
Examine with me, gentlemen, the way
In which he seems to contradict himself.
And answer us, please, Meletus. Remember,
O gentlemen, I asked you not to make
Disturbance if my questioning proceeds
As typical for me.
Does any man,
Believe in human actions, Meletus,
And not believe in humans? Make him answer,
And force him to refrain from his disturbance.
Does any man who says there are no horses
Believe there are horsemen's activities?
And what if flutes are played? Could this occur
Without a player? How could any man
Believe this could be so? If you won't answer,
I'll tell you and the jury. Now please answer.
Does any man believe in spiritual
Activities, who says there are no spirits?

Meletus. No one.

Socrates. Thanks for that answer, even though
The jury forced what came reluctantly.
You say that I believe in spiritual things,
And teach about them, whether new or old.
This testimony's in your deposition.
But if I hold that spiritual things
Exist, it follows I believe in spirits.
Is that not so? It must be so, indeed.
You do not answer, so you must agree.
Now, don't we think that spirits must be gods
Or children of the gods? Say yes or no.

Meletus. Of course.

Socrates. Then since I do believe in spirits,
As you yourself admit, if these are gods,
This is just what I mean when I proclaim
You speak in riddles, or you speak in jest.
You say that I do not believe in gods;
And then you say I do, because you say
That I believe in spirits. If the spirits
Are children of the gods — say bastard children
By nymphs or other mothers, as is said —
What man would say these children could exist
Without the gods themselves? That's as absurd
As saying that the offspring of a horse
And ass (that is, a mule) exists, but then
Denying there are horses and are asses.
You made this deposition, Meletus,
To test us, or because there was no claim
You had against me that you could assert.
It simply isn't possible to get
A man of even small intelligence
To say of any man, "Yes, he believes
In spiritual things; but he denies
That spirits, gods, or heroes can exist."
I do not think, O jury gentlemen,
A long defense is necessary here
Against the claims that Meletus has brought.
I think that what I've told you should suffice.
And yet, as I explained to you before,
I've stirred the hatred of so many people,
That this will be the way I meet my end,
If I'm undone, and not what Meletus
Or Anytus can do. Instead of that,
It will be through the slander and the envy
Of many men. Such envy has destroyed
Good men before and will, I think, again.
Despite all that, it will not stop me now.
Someone might ask me, "Are you not ashamed?
The choices that you've made have brought you here,
Where you are now on trial for your life."
If so, I should be right to tell him this:
"You're wrong, sir, if you think that any man

Who's good at all should take into account
The risk of life or death in what he does.
His only measure must be right and wrong.
In judging his own actions he should ask,
Do they befit a good man or a bad one?
According to your view, at Troy the heroes
Who perished were deficient, for they died;
Not least of them the son of Thetis was,
For choosing death instead of safe disgrace.
His mother, seeing how he hated Hector,
Pronounced a warning similar to this:
'Dear child, you may avenge your friend Patroclus
By killing him, but then you'll die yourself:
When Hector dies, it's fated you will die.'
On hearing this he did not fear his fate.
Indeed, he was afraid that he might live,
A coward who could not avenge his friend.
'Then let me die at once,' Achilles said,
'When I have meted out the just deserts,
Instead of staying here, a laughing stock,
A burden to the earth among these ships.'
What did he care for danger or for death?"

We see the truth, O jury gentlemen,
In such a case: one who takes a position,
Or who is placed there by a just command,
Must hold it, must remain and face the danger,
Without a thought of death or anything
That might incur disgrace. It would have been
A dreadful act, O jury gentlemen,
If at Potidaea, Amphipolis,
And Delium I had, at risk of death,
Like all the others stayed there at my post
Where those you had elected to command
Had stationed me; and then, hearing the god,
Who ordered me, as I believed, to live
The philosophic life, in questioning
Of self and others, had forsaken it
For fear of death or any other reason.

That would have been a dreadful act; and then
I truly might have justly been brought here,
For saying that there really are no gods,
Ignoring what the oracle commanded,
And fearing death, and thinking I was wise
Despite the lack of wisdom that I had.
A man afraid of death, O gentlemen,
Claims wisdom of a kind he can't attain,
And knowledge that no man can ever have.
For who can say that death is not the best,
The greatest blessing given to a man?
Yet most men fear it, just as if they knew
That death is worse than any other evil.
And surely ignorance attains its height
When one believes he knows what he does not.
On this point, gentlemen, perhaps I differ

From other men; and if I were to claim
That I am wise more so than anyone,
In anything, it would be in this way:
That as I have no knowledge of the things
That may exist down in the underworld,
I do not think I have. I know, however,
That it's a wicked and a shameful deed
To fail to carry out a just command
From one's superior, a god or man.
I shall not fear the things I do not know,
Believing that these things may not be good,
Avoiding them in favor of the things
I know are bad. Were you to tell me now,
"You are acquitted," and if you forswore
The claims of Anytus, who told you that
Once brought here I had best be put to death,
For if I were released then all your sons
Would hear my teachings and would take them up
And be corrupted; if you said to me,
"We do not, Socrates, believe him now,
This Anytus. Instead we will acquit you;
But only on condition that you stop
Your questioning, give up philosophy,
And do so for all time on pain of death";
If you acquitted me on just those terms,
Then I'd respond, "O jury gentlemen,
I am your grateful friend; and yet I must
Obey the god in preference to you."
So long as I draw breath and I am able,
I cannot cease to do philosophy,
To discourse in my customary way,
Reminding anyone that I may meet,
"Good sir, you are a citizen of Athens,
The greatest city, one whose reputation
For wisdom and for might surpasses that
Of any other city on the Earth.
How can it be that you are not ashamed
That you're so eager to acquire wealth
And fortune, reputation and good name,
And yet you hardly care or have a thought
For wisdom or for truth or for the state
In which you find your soul?" Then if someone
Disputes my claim and says, "Of course I care!"
I shall not let him go without a test.
Through questioning I will examine him;
And if I find that he has not attained
The goodness that he says he wants to have,
I shall reproach him: "What is most important
Is just what you ignore; while all the things
You pay attention to are of no moment."
In this way I'll engage with anyone
I meet by chance, regardless of his age,
A citizen of Athens or a stranger.
(More so I minister to citizens

Because you are my kindred.) This the god
Commands me that I do, you may be sure;
And for the city there's no greater blessing
Than when I do it faithfully and well.
For all I do is talk, discuss, persuade
Both young and old among you not to care
For body or for wealth so much that you
Spend insufficient effort on your soul.
For wealth alone does not bring excellence.
Instead it's excellence that makes the wealth
And everything besides a good for men.
It's true for groups of men as much as for
The individual.

Now if you claim
That I corrupt the young, then this advice
Must be a cause of harm; unless you say
That this is not, in fact, advice I give,
In which case you speak nonsense. On this point
I say to you, O jury gentlemen:
You may believe him, Anytus, or not;
You may convict me, or you may acquit;
But make your choice aware that I am firm
In course of action, though I may be charged
With death, and though I face it many times.
Do not create disturbance, gentlemen.
Please honor my request and hear me out.
I think that listening will do you good;
And I have more to say that, when you hear it,
May cause you to cry out. Please don't do that.
Be sure of this: if I'm the man I say
I am, then killing me will not harm me
As much as it will you. For Meletus
Like Anytus, can't do me any harm.
I simply do not think it possible
The better man can suffer any harm
From actions of the worse. I can be killed,
Or banished from the city, disenfranchised;
And he and others think this does me harm;
But I do not agree. What Meletus
Attempts, to put a blameless man to death,
Is cause for greater harm to Meletus
Than any harm that he can do to me.
Indeed, O jury gentlemen, I now
Set forth a defense not on my behalf,
As might be thought; instead it's on your part
That I defend, so that you don't do wrong,
Abusing what the god has given you
By sending me to death. For if I die,
You'll find that I'm not easily replaced.
The god installed me here so that I could
(Although it seems ridiculous to say)
Act like a fly upon a horse's nose,
To motivate the horse, which, great and noble,
Has gotten somewhat sluggish due to size.

The god has placed me here to do this task.
This I believe; and so I never cease
To stimulate your minds, each one of them,
Persuading and reproaching all day long
And everywhere I see that others are.

It seems you won't soon find another man
To do these things; and if you think that's true,
Then you will spare my life. Yes, be annoyed
With me as people are when from a doze
They are aroused; and yes, strike out at me
If Anytus convinces you it's good
To do this, so you may sleep undisturbed
Forever, or until the god decides
To send you someone else. That I'm a gift
The god has sent the city you can see:
For how is it that, given human nature,
I pay no mind to personal affairs,
Neglecting them for years out of concern
For you, approaching each just in the way
A father or an elder brother would,
Solicitous that you attend to virtue?
If you could claim I profited from this
By charging for my work, it would make sense.
But you can see yourself that I have not.
For all their baseless claims, not one accuser
Has found a witness who in court of law
Will say that I received or even asked
A fee for what I've done at any time.
Against this lack of evidence I set
A most convincing witness: it's myself.
My poverty proclaims I speak the truth.

It may seem strange, the way I go around
And give advice in private, interfere
In purely private matters, yet do not
Enter the assembly or advise the city.
I've said the reasons why at many points.
As Meletus has, in his deposition,
Called out and made the stuff of ridicule,
I've had a spiritual or divine
Companion with me since I was a child.
It is a voice; it speaks to me and turns
My will from things that otherwise I'd do.
At no point does it tell me to do something.
It's this that keeps me out of public life;
And in this keeping I think it is right.
You may be sure, O jury gentlemen,
If ever long ago I had attempted
To enter politics, I should have died;
This would have had no benefit for you,
Nor certainly for me. Now don't be cross
At me for speaking truth; for any man
Who faces you or faces any crowd,
To stop injustice and to fight against
Illegal acts, cannot remain alive.

A man who fights for justice, to survive,
Must lead a private, not a public life.
If not, his life is destined to be short.

In proof of what I say I'll cite not words
But deeds, which you esteem. Hear what's occurred,
So you'll believe that I will never yield
To any man if what he wants is wrong,
For fear of death, although I'm sure to die
Except by yielding. What I tell is plain
And legalistic, but it's also true.
Although I've held no other city office,
I did serve as a member of the Council,
When Antiochis was the Council's head.
You claimed ten generals had done a wrong
By failing to go back and rescue those
Who, following a battle,⁴ had survived.
You said, "Let's try these generals as a body."
This was illegal, as you later said.
Of all the members in committee there,
Alone I voted to oppose that course;
The rest supported the illegal act.
The orators were ready to press claims,
And cart me off in chains. I heard your shouts
Supporting what they did; and yet I thought
That I should run the risk of punishment
To side myself with justice and with law,
Instead of joining with you in the wrong
For fear of prison or for fear of death.

The city, then, still had democracy.
When, after that, the oligarchy ruled,⁵
The Thirty summoned me into the Hall,
Accompanied by four, and ordered us
To bring them Leon, who was in Salamis,
For execution. They gave such commands
To many people, thus to implicate
As many as they could in doing wrong.
I showed again, through actions, not through words,
That I (though it be vulgar to proclaim)
Am not concerned with any thoughts of death;
Instead I simply want to do what's right,
Avoiding what's impious or unjust.
The oligarchs, as mighty as they were,
Did not intimidate me; they could not
Coerce me into actions that were wrong.
We left the hall, and then the other four
Went to Salamis and delivered Leon;
But I went home. This action risked my death,
Except the government thereafter fell.
The witnesses of these events are many.

How could I have survived so many years
If I'd engaged in government affairs

⁴ The battle of Arginusae in 406 B.C.

⁵ An oligarchy ruled Athens for nine months in 404–403 B.C. until democracy was restored.

And, acting in the way a good man must,
Advanced the cause of justice and professed
This action as the most important thing?
I never could, O jury gentlemen.
I couldn't; nor could any other man.
In all public activities I've done
Throughout my life I've acted just the same
As in my private life. I've never once
Agreed that I'll perform an unjust act
With anyone, including all the ones
The slander calls my students. But in fact
No one has ever had me as his teacher.
If anyone, no matter young or old,
Would like to pay attention when I speak,
In dealing with my own concerns, then fine.
I've not stopped anyone from doing that.
However, I have never charged a fee,
Conversing only with the ones who pay.
I question rich and poor, whoever says
He's willing to submit to questioning
And listen when I speak. I cannot be
Responsible for what these people do,
For good or ill. I never promised them
I'd teach them anything; I have not taught.
If someone claims that he was taught by me,
Or that he paid a fee so he could hear
Me say in private what others could not,
Then be assured he doesn't tell the truth.

Why, then, is it the case that some enjoy
The time they spend while in my company?
You have heard why, O jury gentlemen.
I've told you the whole truth. They like to hear
The questioning of those who see themselves
As wise, but lack the wisdom that they claim.
And yes, this questioning is not unpleasant.
To do it, as I say, is the command
The god has given me through oracles,
Through dreams, and through the several other ways
Divine manifestation has appeared
And ordered men to listen and obey.
The truth of this is easily established.

If it is true that I've corrupted men
As youths, then surely some of them have grown
Much older and have realized what I've done.
I gave them bad advice when they were young,
So now they should come here and state their claims,
Accusing me in vengeance for the wrong.
Perhaps they are unwilling; in that case,
Some kindred, fathers, brothers, or relations,
Could testify their family had been harmed
By me. I see that there are many here:
First Crito's here; he is my fellow demesman⁶
And is my age; I see his son is here.

His name's Critoboulos. And here's the next,
 Lysanias of Sphettus with his son
 Aeschines. Also Antiphon is here,
 The Cephisian, father of Epigenes.
 I see some more whose brothers spent their time
 With me: here's Nicostratus; he's the son
 Of Theozotides, who is the brother
 Of Theodotus, who is dead, and so
 Cannot exert an influence on him.
 I see Paralios, who is the son
 Of Demodocus; that man had a brother
 Named Theages. And here is Adeimantus,
 Whose father was Ariston; he's the brother
 Of Plato here. I see Acontidorus,
 The brother of Apollodorus here.
 These are not all; I could cite many more.
 It seems that some of these should have been here
 As witnesses in Meletus's speech.
 If Meletus forgot to summon them,
 Then let him do it now; I'll yield the time
 If he has anything he'd like to say.
 I think you'll find he doesn't, gentlemen.
 These men are on the side of the corrupter,
 Who, Meletus and Anytus have said,
 Has harmed their kindred. Those who are corrupted
 Might side with me, if I have bent their minds;
 But uncorrupted kindred, older men
 Do not have reason to assist my cause
 Except the right and proper one: that they
 Know Meletus is lying, and they know
 I speak the truth.

All right now, gentlemen.
 These things, and things like this, are what I say
 In my defense. Perhaps you may be angry
 Remembering that you stood trial here,
 The charge less serious than what I face,
 And begged the jury, showed them many tears,
 And brought your children, many of your friends,
 And family into court, so to provoke
 Such pity as you could; but in my case
 I'm doing none of that, despite the fact
 The penalty I face is ultimate.
 The thought of this may stir up a resentment,
 An anger which could influence your vote.
 If anyone among you feels this way —
 I do not say he does, but if he does —
 I think it would be right to tell him this:
 "Good sir, I have a household just like you.
 I come from men and not, in Homer's phrase,
 'From oak and rock'; I also have a family."
 Indeed I have three sons, O gentlemen.
 Of them one is an adolescent; two

⁶ That is, he and Socrates were from the same deme. The deme was a political division in Athens.

Are children. Nonetheless I will not beg
That you acquit me, nor will bring them here.
What makes me say that I won't do these things?
It is not arrogance, O gentlemen;
Nor is it that I lack respect for you.
The issue isn't whether I am brave
In facing death. Instead, it's reputation:
Both mine and yours, and that of the whole city.
Especially considering my age
And reputation, it does not seem right
That I should supplicate. For it's believed
In general, whether it be true or false,
That Socrates is greater than most men.
If you've been marked out as superior,
In wisdom, courage, or in other virtue,
And you are seen behaving in this way,
It's a disgrace. Yet I have often seen
Men do just this when they are standing trial:
Men who, we thought, had virtue and had worth
Complaining at the thought that they might die,
As if, unless you executed them,
They'd be immortal. I think that these men
Bring shame upon the city in this way:
A stranger would assume that those of us
Superior in virtue, whom we pick
To hold our offices and to receive
The honors that we give are just like women.
You should not act like that, O gentlemen,
If you are one with any reputation.
And if the man on trial acts like that,
You should discourage it, should make it clear
That you'll more readily convict a man
Who comes to court embarrassing himself
With histrionics, and who turns the city
Into a laughing stock than you'll convict
A man who's calm.

But separate from this,
The reputation question, gentlemen,
I think it isn't right to go to you
And ask for pity, and receive acquittal.
Instead, defendants should instruct the jury,
And should persuade them. Jurymen should not
Give justice as a favor to the ones
That strike their fancy; rather they should judge
According to the law, as they have sworn.
Defendants should not tempt the jurymen
To perjury, nor should the jurymen
Commit it; this is bad for both of us.
Do not accept as right, O jurymen,
That I should act towards you except as I
Deem good and just and pious; for, by Zeus,
The charge the prosecution, Meletus,
Has brought against me is impiety.
If I convinced you by the pleas I made

To violate your oaths as jurymen,
 Then I'd be teaching you there are no gods,
 And my defense would be my own conviction.
 This is not how things are, O gentlemen:
 I do believe in gods, indeed more so
 Than my accusers do. I leave to you
 And to the god to judge me in the way
 That's best for me and also best for you.

The jury votes and gives its verdict of guilty. Meletus asks for the death penalty.

Socrates. I can't be angry, jury gentlemen,
 That you've convicted me, for what occurred
 Is just what I expected. I'm surprised,
 However, that so many votes were cast
 In opposition. Hardly did I think
 The outcome would depend on so few votes,
 But rather many more. As it turned out,
 With only thirty votes cast differently,
 I would have been acquitted. I myself
 Think I've been cleared of Meletus's claims.
 Not only this, but it is clear to all
 That if his claims had not received support
 From Anytus and Lycon, he'd have lacked
 A fifth of all the vote and would have paid
 The fine for lacking votes, a thousand drachmas.

He says the proper penalty is death.
 So be it. Well, what counter-punishment
 Should I propose to you, O gentlemen?
 Whatever I propose should be a fate
 That I deserve; and what do I deserve
 To suffer or to pay for what I've done?
 I never chose to lead a quiet life.
 I have neglected what most people want:
 Accumulated wealth, household affairs;
 The military rank of general;
 Another office, orator perhaps;
 Or membership in any club or faction
 Existing in our city. I believed
 Myself too honest to take up these things
 And yet survive. I did not take the path
 That would have made me useless both to you
 And to myself, but went to each of you
 In private and conferred upon each one
 What I say has the greatest benefit,
 By trying to persuade you not to care
 For any of your worldly goods before
 You cared that you yourself should be as good
 And wise as possible, and not to care
 For what the city owns more than you care
 For what it is, and to bestow your care
 On other things exactly in this way.
 What is my lot for being such a man?
 Some good, O jury gentlemen, if I
 Must answer truly as to my deserts,
 And something suitable. What is it that

Befits a benefactor who is poor
 And who requires leisure to perform
 His duties? Nothing less, O gentlemen,
 Than that he go to the Prytaneum,⁷
 There to be fed. It's much more suitable
 For him to go there than for one of you
 Who's won a contest at Olympia
 With pair or team of horses. Such a victor
 Inspires happiness, and so do I.
 And yet Olympic victors don't need food
 As I do. So, if I am to assess
 In justice what a man like me deserves,
 This is my answer: grant me these free meals
 In the Prytaneum.

When I say this,
 You may think, as before when I discoursed
 About entreaties and appeals to pity,
 That I am arrogant. That's not the case,
 O jury gentlemen; instead, know this:
 I know I never willingly cause harm
 To anyone; yet I can't make you see
 The truth in the short time we have to talk.
 If here the law were, as it is elsewhere,
 That in a case of life and death the trial
 Should last for many days, you'd be convinced.
 But as things stand I'm given little time
 To counteract great slander, and it's hard.
 As I'm unwilling to cause any harm,
 It isn't likely I'll inflict it thus,
 By saying that it's evil I deserve,
 Or passing harsh assessment on myself.
 What should I fear if it is carried out,
 The penalty that Meletus proposed
 I suffer, when I say I do not know
 If it is good or bad? Am I to choose
 In preference to this what I do know
 Is evil, and propose it as my doom?
 Imprisonment? Why should I live in jail,
 Subjected to the ruling magistrates,
 The Eleven? Were I made to pay a fine,
 And locked away until I've paid it all,
 There'd be no difference, for I have no money.
 My exile? That I think you would accept.
 But I would have to love my life indeed,
 O gentlemen, if I were to suppose,
 Unreasonably, that some foreigners
 Would tolerate my company and speech,
 When you, my fellow citizens, have not
 Been able to endure them, and have said
 They are a burden, and resented them,
 So that you seek to rid yourselves of me.
 I think not, gentlemen. What kind of life

⁷ The town hall of Athens, where Olympic victors were feted.

Could I have at my age, when driven out
 Of city after city? For I know
 No matter where I go young men will hear
 My speech and listen, just as they do here.
 Perhaps I could force them to go away;
 But then they'd get their elders to insist
 I leave; and if I don't drive them away,
 Their fathers and relations will take up
 The cause of excommunicating me.

Perhaps someone will ask me, "Socrates,
 Can you not leave us and live quietly,
 And stop the talking?" It seems difficult
 To make you understand me on this point.
 If I say no, this is impossible,
 A quiet life would disobey the god,
 You won't believe the claim; instead you'll think
 I speak in irony. At the same time,
 If I say that it is the greatest good
 For man to spend his days discussing virtue,
 And all the things about which I converse
 And test and question and examine others,
 Because the unexamined life is not
 A life worth living, you'll believe me less.

These things I say are true, O gentlemen;
 And yet you are not easy to convince.
 At all events I don't think I deserve
 A penalty. If I had any money,
 The penalty could be just the amount
 That I could pay, thus causing me no harm.
 But I have none; so all that I can pay
 Is one mina of silver. If you'll set
 The penalty at that, then I can pay it.
 That's my assessment, jury gentlemen.

Socrates confers with members of the audience.

Socrates. I've talked with Plato and Critoboulus,
 With Crito and Apollodorus. They
 Suggest a penalty of thirty minae,
 And they'll stand surety for that amount.
 So that is my assessment, and these men
 Will guarantee that you receive the sum.

The jury votes again, and Socrates is sentenced to death.

Socrates. It's but a short time, jury gentlemen,
 That you have purchased at the cost of guilt
 And tarnished reputation in the eyes
 Of those who shame the city. They will say
 That you have killed the wise man, Socrates;
 For those who wish to heap their scorn on you
 Will say that I am wise, though I am not.
 By waiting just a little bit, you could
 Have had the outcome that you sought for free.
 You see my age, you see that I'm advanced
 In years sufficiently that death is near.
 It is not all of you that I address,

Just those of you who voted I should die.
To those I say: Perhaps you're thinking that
I stand condemned because I failed to say
The words I could have spoken, had I tried
My utmost to avoid decree of death.
This isn't true. The reason I'm condemned
Is not a lack of words, but lack of boldness
And shamelessness, and willingness to say
The things I knew that you'd be glad to hear:
The crying, wailing, and the other things
Unworthy of me, but that you expect
To hear from others. I have never thought
The danger that I faced should make me do
What's shameful; therefore I do not regret
The way I made defense before this court.
Much rather would I, having made it, suffer
My death than make the other kind and live.
Nor I nor any man who is on trial
Or who fights in a war should seek to flee
From death at any cost. Indeed, in battle
It's often clear the best escape from death
Is to throw down one's weapons and to turn
And ask forgiveness from those who pursue;
And every kind of danger has its ways
That death can be avoided, if the one
Who faces it is not ashamed to do
Or say what must be done or must be said.
Avoiding death is easy, gentlemen;
Much harder is avoiding wickedness:
It runs at speeds that death can't hope to match.
I'm elderly and slow; I have been caught
By death, the slow pursuer. My accusers,
Are young, astute, and clever men, and they
Are victims of the quicker wickedness.
I leave you now, a man condemned to death;
Compare those men, unjust, who are condemned
To wickedness. Therefore I still assert
The assessment that I gave, as they do theirs.
Perhaps this had to happen, and it should.
I'll prophesy to those who passed this sentence,
For I am near to death, the point where men
Most often prophesy. O gentlemen,
To those who voted to pronounce my death,
I say that sudden vengeance will appear
As soon as I am dead, and it's a vengeance
Much harder to endure than what you've done
In killing me. You did this in belief
That you'd avoid accounting for your life;
I think you'll see that quite the opposite
Will happen. Greater numbers will come forth
To test you, who, while I was still alive,
Held back, and whom therefore you did not notice.
They'll prove more difficult for you than I:
They will be younger; you'll resent them more.

You're wrong if you believe that killing men
Allows you to avoid a just reproach
For failure in the way you live your life.
Escape from tests like this is neither good
Nor possible; instead it's easiest
And best not to discredit other men,
But to ensure you live your life as well
As possible. Thus having prophesied,
I leave you.

I am happy to discuss
Today's events with those who said, "acquit."
I'll do this while the officers are busy,
Until I'm called to go be put to death.
So, gentlemen, please stay here for a while;
For nothing says that we cannot converse
While it's allowed. With you, who are my friends,
I want to talk about what happened here.
I am surprised by something that's occurred,
O judges — for I rightly call you judges.
At all times previously in my life,
My spiritual guide, familiar power,
Opposed me, even if the stakes were small,
Were I about to venture down a path
In error. But you can see for yourselves
That in the face of what a man might think,
And most do think, must be the worst of evils,
At no time did my spirit sign oppose
My actions: when I left my home at dawn,
Or when I came to court, or any time
I went to make a point throughout my speech.
In other talks it's often held me back
From saying things I otherwise would say;
This time it didn't stop one word or deed
Of mine. What do I think must be the reason?
I'll tell you. What has happened must be good
For me; and those who claim instead that death
Must be an evil must be in the wrong.
The proof of what I say consists in this:
I would have been opposed by my familiar
If anything I did here was not right.
Let us reflect as well upon the hope
That death may be a blessing. It is one
Of two things: either once we're dead we're nothing,
And we have no perception anymore;
Or else, as many say, it is a change
In which a relocation of the soul
Occurs from here unto another place.
If there is no perception, as in sleep
Devoid of dreams, then death is an advantage.
For think about a night where you have slept
So soundly that you didn't dream; compare
That night with other days and nights of life.
Which passed more pleasantly? Not only he
Who lives a private life, indeed a king

Would pick the dreamless night as easiest.
There seems to be advantage in this death,
Which makes eternity a single night.
If, on the other hand, a relocation
Occurs on death from here to somewhere else,
If what we're told is true, and all the dead
Are there, what greater blessing could there be,
O jury gentlemen? If visitors
To Hades have escaped the judges here,
The ones called judges, and exchanged for them
The ones we're told preside in judgment there,
Aeacus, say, and Minos, Radamanthus,
And Triptolemos, and the demigods
Who've lived upstanding lives, would that be bad?
Should we prefer our judges to that kind?
What would you give to be with Orpheus,
And Hesiod and Homer and Musaeus?
For that I would agree to many deaths.
How wonderful if I could spend my time
With Ajax, son of Telamon, and with
Palamedes and any other men
Of old who suffered an unjust conviction.
To speak with them, compare experience
Would be most pleasant. Most importantly,
By going there I could test and examine
The people there as is my habit here,
To see who's wise among them, and who thinks
He is, but lacks the wisdom that he claims.
What is there you would not give, gentlemen,
To hold discussions with the man who led
The expedition that invaded Troy,
Or Sisyphus, Odysseus, or others,
Innumerable men or women one
Could mention? It would be a happiness
Beyond compare to hold discourse with them,
Keep company with and examine them.
I'm sure that I would not be put to death
For doing so. There they are happier
Than we are here in several respects;
And for all time they live, if what we hear
Is accurate.

You must be of good hope
Regarding death, O jury gentlemen,
And keep this truth in mind: that no good man
Can suffer harm in either life or death,
And that the gods will not neglect his business.
What's happened here is not a random act;
For me I think it is a benefit
To pass away and thus be free from trouble.
That's why the sign I have, which is divine,
Did not at any point tell me to stop.
Therefore I can't be angry at the men
Who voted to convict, or my accusers.
Of course in their accusing and conviction,

To render aid was not their goal; instead
They sought to do me injury. For this
They rightly should be blamed. This much I ask
From them: "Please, when my sons have come of age,
Avenge yourselves by causing them the grief
That I caused you, if you think they might care
For money or for any other thing
More than they care for virtue, or they think
They are somebody when, in fact, they're not.
Reproach them in the way I've bothered you,
If they neglect to care for what is right,
And think that they are worthy when in fact
Their worth does not amount to anything.
By doing this you will have treated me
With justice, and done justice to my sons."
The time for us to part has now arrived.
I go to die; you go to live; and which
Of us is going to the better lot
Cannot be known by any but the god.

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