
Heirman, J.G.M.

Published in:
Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Reviewed by Jo Heirman, University of Amsterdam (J.G.M.Heirman@uva.nl)

"A Belle in the Prison of Socrates" is a play written by Ahmed Etman, Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature at the University of Cairo. Besides his scholarly activities he has translated Greek texts into Arabic (for instance, the *Iliad* in 2004) and writes plays in which figures from antiquity are dramatized. The play is a tragicomic depiction of Socrates' life with his wife Xanthula and his students till his execution. It is preceded by prefaces from several professors.

In the first preface Lorna Hardwick (Professor of Classics at the Open University, UK) stresses two points in the play. First of all, she points out the play's intertextuality. Indeed, there are many allusions to Plato's dialogues (*Phaedrus, Phaedo, Crito, Apology*), and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, and a scene from Aristophanes' *Clouds* is inserted in the play. Although these intertextual elements offer intellectual pleasure to the reader, the knowledge of these ancient Greek texts is not necessary for a full understanding of the play. The situation is thus comparable with Umberto Eco's "Name of the Rose". Secondly, Hardwick stresses the play's allusions to contemporary issues such as environmental pollution, drugs, etc.

In the second preface the renowned Belgian scholar Freddy Decreus (Professor of Classics and Theatre, Ghent University) discusses not only the intertextuality, but also the play's deep engagement with political issues. Etman criticizes what he sees as the fragility and superficiality of democracy that has become demagoguery, mere indoctrinating propaganda. This criticism, however, is not so overt or one-sided as Plato's critique of democracy. Etman invites the reader to be critical of every political regime that deceives people.

The hermeneutic task of the reader/spectator to grasp those hidden thoughts is emphasized in the third preface, written by Fawzia El-Sadr (Professor at the Ain-Shams University, Egypt), who translated Etman's play from Arabic into English. Like Hardwick, El-Sadr points out the contemporary issues the play deals with. The play functions as a mirror for our own society, so that we are constantly going back and forth from fifth-century Athenian society to our present society. In this way Etman manages to bring ancient culture close to our own time. It has to be noted, however, that El-Sadr inaccurately labels story, plot, events, time and place as "theatrical techniques" (xiv), whereas these are narrative techniques, not theatrical ones.

After a brief foreword by Etman himself, a list of the play's personae is offered. One character, however, is forgotten in the list: Hedone, the maid of Socrates and his wife "Xanthula", is not mentioned. Besides this major failure, it has to be noted that this work is absolutely brimming with typographical errors, which disturb the reading of the play.
The play is divided into two acts, respectively consisting of three and four scenes. Etman replaced Greek choral interludes with several poetic songs (for example, the songs of the rhapsodic poet Ion). The play is very suitable for performance, and the author's attention to performance is stressed by numerous notes on details of staging. Indeed, the present reviewer was fortunate to attend a performance by an Egyptian theater group during the Ancient Greek Drama Festival last summer at Paphos (Cyprus).

The first scene of the play depicts the contrast between the contemplating Socrates and the down-to-earth Xanthula in a discussion of whether or not Socrates needs new shoes or not for the Dionysia. Thereafter, Socrates' friend Chaerephon enters and tells the well-known story from Plato's *Apology*, that according to the Pythia no man is wiser than Socrates. As in the *Apology*, Socrates wants to challenge the oracle's pronouncement by going out to look for someone wiser than himself, and questioning artisans, poets and statesmen.

In the second scene Socrates first interrogates a "maker of gods' statues". Socrates' criticism of the artisan's work is in line with Xenophanes' rejection of the idea that the gods resemble humans in form. Socrates believes that gods cannot be represented by statues, since gods are everywhere and they have to be worshipped in our hearts. The artisan's angry reaction at Socrates' opinions reveals him as no wiser than Socrates.

After the artisan, Socrates questions a poet. The poet here is the rhapsodic singer Ion of Plato's own dialogue. Etman brilliantly interweaves the two Platonic dialogues and exploits the discussion between Socrates and the rhapsode to stress the main point of *Ion*: Ion has no expertise at all: he sings under the effect of some divine inspiration, but with no understanding of the content of his songs. Finally, Socrates interrogates Democratia herself and criticizes the fact that democracy deceives people. Hence, the reader/spectator can conclude that Socrates possesses the most wisdom.

The third scene focuses on Socrates' wife. In a comic dialogue between Xanthula and Hedone, the latter expresses the desire to ask the oracle if Xanthula is the most beautiful woman on earth. This scene can not only be read as a comical reversal of Chaerephon's philosophical question to the Delphic oracle, but also as an allusion to the fairy-tale of Snow White ("mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"). It has to be noted, however, that there is a problem in the dialogue between the two women. Socrates did not tell Xanthula that he was going out in search of a wiser man, yet Xanthula reveals to her maid how much she is worried that Socrates has not yet returned home from his quest. The question is how Xanthula knows what her husband is doing. This is only one of many indications that this play is a highly garbled piece, in which the playwright forgets which characters have been doing what and so makes nonsense of their actions.

While chatting about the fancy clothes Xanthula bought for the Dionysia, the women notice Socrates and his students entering the house. The end of the scene has the women make funny comments on the men's meditations, while Socrates is being dressed up for the upcoming Dionysia.

The core of the first act's last scene is a play within the play. Socrates and Xanthula watch Aristophanes' *Clouds* at the Dionysia. This is surely one of the (comic) highlights of Etman's play. In the 'play within the play' Aristophanes plays the role of 'Socrates' talking to a peasant. In the dialogue between the two, 'Socrates' tries to teach philosophy to the farmer, but, of course, the peasant does not understand what Socrates is talking about. We see here theoretical knowledge opposed to practical skills. A second part of the play within the play -- loosely connected with the first part -- deals with the opposition between Right and Wrong. This reminds us of Aristophanes' critique of the sophists (of whom Socrates was one according to *Clouds*) for turning right into wrong or wrong into right.

The first scene of the second act begins with a dialogue between Xanthula and Hedone. We are suddenly in the middle of the war between Athens and Sparta. The opening has a more
tragic tone, since the women are talking about the grief the war causes. The dialogue ends with the return of the Athenian soldiers defeated by the Spartans. Socrates is with them after, apparently, leaving his front position during the battle. Xanthula blames Socrates for the shame his desertion has caused to her family. While Socrates is defending his 'action', the orator Andocides enters on stage and reports that Socrates has to stand trial for atheism, corrupting youth and resisting the democratic system. It is important to note that the third reason does not occur in Plato's *Apology*. This addition emphasizes Etman's critique of democracy as a fragile and superficial form of government, and easily turned into demagoguery. After his entrance on stage, Andocides proposes to write a speech in defence of Socrates, but the latter refuses his support. The scene ends with Xanthula whispering in the orator's ear to write a defence speech. The rational reaction of Xanthula seems rather strange, considering the emotional attitude she adopts throughout the whole play.

The second scene is about Socrates' trial. Andocides has switched sides: despite taking Xanthula's money, he now speaks on behalf of the prosecutors. It is Lysias, whose speech on love is discussed in Plato's *Phaedrus*, who proposes to defend Socrates, but the latter refuses, again. Xanthula asks her money back from Lysias, but it is not clear why, since she only gave money to Andocides.

Andocides gives two reasons for Socrates' accusation: his corruption of young men and his atheism (the most important reason, i.e. Socrates' anti-democratic stance, becomes clear at the end of the scene). To these two main reasons Andocides later adds some comical ones, that Socrates would have instigated youngsters to use drugs and to keep rats. After Andocides' speech it is time for Socrates' defence. The reader/spectator who is familiar with the *Apology* of Plato (and of Xenophon) will be surprised at Socrates' words. Here, Socrates is not the triumphing philosopher, but a very weak person, who even wants to weep at the end of the scene. We might see this as an evocation of the frailty and impotence of the individual in the face of the state system. The scene ends with the verdict: the votes for acquittal are equal to the ones for the death sentence, but the judge (Democratia herself) has the last word. She condemns the philosopher to death. The conclusion has a clear political message: in the end it is democracy itself that condemns an individual to death.

While the last scene of the first act is a comic highlight, the last scene of the second act is a tragic highlight. We are now in Socrates' prison. The situation recalls Plato's *Phaedo*, but what happens is totally different. A demonstration has taken place in Athens calling for Socrates' release. Socrates disapproves of the chaotic and violent situation in the city, and we might see here Socrates depicted as an ancient Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Because of the anarchy that rules the city as a result of the people's call for Socrates' release, Democratia comes to visit Socrates in prison. Playing the role of Plato's Crito, she offers Socrates to flee into exile. As in Plato's dialogue, Socrates rejects the offer. He does not want to violate the law, for he wishes to be a model for society.

A comic interlude is provided by the entrance of Xanthula and her maid. Now his wife truly is "A Belle in the Prison of Socrates". This meeting is comic, for, when Hedone sees Socrates together with Democratia, she thinks the two are having an affair. Like Democratia, Xanthula tries to persuade Socrates to escape, but again he does not agree.

Next, Socrates has another guest: Plato himself. Like the encounter between Socrates and Aristophanes, this is a highly pleasant meeting for classical philologists. An intertextual joke is made at the beginning of the dialogue between the two philosophers: Socrates' question if his pupil is still ill reminds of the opening of Plato's *Apology*, in which is said that Plato could not be present at Socrates' trial, since he was ill. Afterwards, Plato says he is planning to travel to Egypt to gain wisdom. This is an allusion to the legend that Plato went away from Athens for a while after Socrates' death.

After Plato has left, together with Socrates' wife, maid and children, Socrates' guard (well-
known for the warm relationship he has with Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*) reveals that he has instigated a revolution and thrown off Democratia. Now that he is in power, he wants to set Socrates free. Socrates does not agree, for he considers the usurpation illegitimate. In accordance with *Crito*, Socrates wants to carry out what the law has condemned him to do, and so he drinks the cup of poison and falls dead.

Hence, the comedy has become a true tragedy, showing what democracy can do to people who oppose to the system. An evolution is certainly evident, throughout the play, in Socrates' attitude to democracy. While Socrates' criticism of democracy is light at the beginning of the play, the piece progressively acquires a more bitter tone. The play ends with Socrates' determined opposition to the democratic system. The play thus develops from what first seems a mere comedy towards a tragedy, in which the dangerous sides of democracy are emphasized.

Comment on this review in the BMCR blog

| Read Latest | Index for 2009 | Change Greek Display | Archives | Books Available for Review | BMCR Home |