

HEMLOCK

A One-Act Tragedy

by Jon Lott

Dramatis Personae:

SOCRATES, famous philosopher

PLATO, Socrates' preeminent pupil

EUTHYPHRO, a student

CRITO, a student

PHAEDO, a student

SIMMIAS, a student

ATHENIAN JUDGE #1 and #2

Scene:

A jail cell in Athens

Time:

399 B.C.E.

Scene 1

Inside an Athenian jail.

There is a simple bedframe with a small blanket folded neatly on top of it. SOCRATES sits solemnly on the bed. A nightstand with a bronze goblet sits nearby. Near the entrance of the jail cell, on stage left, there is a bench, on which PLATO is seated, quickly scribbling down notes on a long, blank scroll. There is a chair, empty, near the entrance, near a single torch burning quietly in the darkness.

ATHENIAN JUDGE #1
(from off-stage)

Socrates, you are found guilty of the following charges: first, of corrupting the youth of the city of Athens. Second, of impiety and blasphemy, in your denial of the gods and goddesses of this city. What is the punishment decided by the jury?

ATHENIAN JUDGE #2
(from off-stage)

Socrates, you are hereby sentenced to death. By hemlock. To be consumed before next dawn.

(The jail cell is lit up, and SOCRATES turns to PLATO.)

PLATO
I didn't think it would end like this.

SOCRATES
(looking up at PLATO incredulously)
HMMMMM. This is how I always suspected it would end.

PLATO
That's not what I meant, Socrates. Crito and Phaedo and Euthyphro and the other students at the academy pooled our money together. We tried to bribe the jury for an acquittal of charges.

SOCRATES
Are you serious, Plato? How much did you offer them? There were five hundred men in that jury.

PLATO

We didn't just offer them money, professor. We paid bribes to over half of them in the last week, and promised coin to others after you were free. Over 3,000 drachma altogether.

SOCRATES

It was a foolish move, Plato. Not only that, I don't approve.

PLATO

If we had flipped thirty more votes, you would be free. Would you approve of that?

SOCRATES

It would be unjust.

PLATO

But you would be happy if you were free, yes? Don't you always claim that a just life is a happy one?

(PLATO begins to write on his scroll.)

SOCRATES

A just life is happy, yes, but not all happy lives are just. To presume that I would be happy upon being acquitted does not make it right. You needn't write that down, my boy, you know it all by heart by now.

PLATO

So is it right that you are sitting here, wrongly sentenced to death for...*impiety* and *corruption*? When we all know the archon Laches is a charlatan and a fraud?

SOCRATES

Why are you asking what you already know?

PLATO

I want to have your answers written down, Socrates. There must be a written record of your wisdom, for future generations.

SOCRATES

I never did like writing much.

PLATO

Why is that?

SOCRATES

My handwriting was imperfect, and I was a slow writer. Now my hands aren't as strong as they were when I was young and in the war, and the...strain on my joints is too painful. I'm not sure I ever expected to achieve this level of reputation considering how often I denied being wise at all.

But regarding your earlier question, the justice system here is imperfect, but it is a contract I entered into. I knew the men of Athens would judge me; I only expected them to make the other decision. As far as I see it, this is more evidence against democracies. They're led by witless men, followed by sycophants with, at best, superficial understanding of governance. Don't write that last part down.

PLATO

Yes, professor.

SOCRATES

I mean it, Plato. I don't mean for my last words to be wasted on the ruling class.

PLATO

I didn't write that part, professor. The part about democracies being led by witless men, followed by sycophants with, at best, a superficial understanding of government.

SOCRATES

(laughs)

Governance. Not government.

PLATO

Apologies. I didn't write it down either way, I swear.

SOCRATES

Another reason not to write things down. Your pupils, years from now, would squabble over the minute differences between governance and government.

PLATO

But without a written record, how would they know what you meant at all? Surely I can't remember everything just as you said it.

SOCRATES

Let them think for themselves and reach their own conclusions. Just because I am seventy years old doesn't mean I have all the answers.

PLATO

Not all of them, anyway. But a great deal.

SOCRATES

I know you'd rather spend my final hours in overly sentimental, tearful moments. But I'd sooner spend them arguing with my students. Aren't they visiting me in my time of death?

PLATO

I believe they're waiting outside with the guard. Shall I go fetch them, professor?

SOCRATES

Yes, please.

(PLATO exits stage left. SOCRATES leans forward and lifts the cup of hemlock. He breathes in deeply and sets it back down.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

I could drink this now and die alone in peace. What is so precious about life that I must cling to every fleeting second of it? What virtue exists for me in my final hours? Would that I had died twenty-five years ago at Amphipolis with my brothers in battle. I could've taken some Spartans with me.

(SOCRATES walks over to PLATO's scroll and examines it.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

Hmmmm, he didn't write that bit after all.

Scene 2

Inside the jail cell.

PLATO

(off-stage)

Professor, I found Euthyphro.

SOCRATES

Bring him in, Plato.

(PLATO enters with EUTHYPHRO, who walks to SOCRATES and embraces him strongly.)

EUTHYPHRO

Professor, I have a problem that needs your counsel.

SOCRATES

Could it be more grave than an imminent death sentence?

EUTHYPHRO

It is, and more impious, too. I am bringing a case to court against my own father.

SOCRATES

What does he stand accused of?

EUTHYPHRO

Murder, professor.

SOCRATES

Whom has he killed? Explain the case.

EUTHYPHRO

On our farm, you know we hire a number of workers, in addition to the slaves we bought a few years back. One of the workers, a free man, killed a slave worker in a drunken fight. No one but the killer witnessed it, and my father, when he found out, he-

SOCRATES

How did he discover this?

EUTHYPHRO

The man confessed when confronted about it. My father tied up the man and threw him in a ditch overnight since we have no holding room at the farm. He didn't care if the man was uncomfortable down there, since he had killed his own slave. But the man died there overnight, and my father has the man's death on his hands now.

SOCRATES

The man violated your father's property and your father violated his life. Do you wonder whether it's right that *you* are the one to prosecute him, or whether what your father did was wrong?

EUTHYPHRO

I wonder whether it is impious to bring a case upon my own father.

SOCRATES

Do you remember how we defined piety and impiety, Euthyphro?

EUTHYPHRO

That which is pious—actions I mean—are in accord with the gods. Actions not in line with the gods are impious.

SOCRATES

Plato, do you agree?

PLATO

I do, professor.

SOCRATES

I've taught you both well. Well, Euthyphro, is it not true that gods have different opinions, just as humans do?

EUTHYPHRO

This is true.

SOCRATES

And then, is it not true that what is in line with one god may be looked down upon by another?

EUTHYPHRO

I suppose so, professor.

PLATO

Indeed, even during the Trojan War, the gods took opposing sides. Aphrodite sided with the Trojans while her own husband Hephaestus backed the Greeks, even forging the armor of Achilles.

SOCRATES

It's no wonder why Ares sided with the Trojans, I think, if that's where Aphrodite stood.

EUTHYPHRO

So what is pious to one is impious to another?

SOCRATES

Just so. And what is impious to one may be pious to another.

EUTHYPHRO

But surely all gods would agree to punish the murder of another?

SOCRATES

Would any god argue that a guilty man should go free?

PLATO

Are we still talking about Euthyphro's father?

SOCRATES

Of course.

EUTHYPHRO

If the act of throwing a chained man in a ditch to die is wrong, shouldn't the murderer be punished?

SOCRATES

Think of Zeus, who overthrew his own father, Cronus. What was just to Zeus was unjust to his father. And if a son of Zeus overthrew him, Zeus would regard that act as unjust, just as the son would believe his own action to be just.

EUTHYPHRO

I don't want moral relativism, professor. I want answers.

SOCRATES

Then you've come to the wrong jail cell, Euthyphro. I don't have the answers, I can only give you a map and let you find them on your own. In truth, I'm not sure I believe in any of the gods. Zeus, Hera, Ares, I certainly don't worship the silly local gods of Athens.

PLATO

Shhhh!

SOCRATES

What are they going to do? Make me drink two cups of hemlock? Facing certain death allows one to be more honest about life. An impious man would not worry about whether his action was permissible. He would not reflect on it, nor make the proper choice in the end.

EUTHYPHRO

Master, I still don't know if I should prosecute my own father.

SOCRATES

I can only give you the map, my pupil. You must determine your own way. I've found mine here.

(SOCRATES gestures to the goblet)

EUTHYPHRO

Goodbye, Socrates. And thank you.

SOCRATES

Farewell, Euthyphro.

(The two hug once more, for a long time. EUTHYPHRO exits)

PLATO

The dawn is nearly here, professor.

SOCRATES

Is Crito near? I know he would want to see me before I go.

PLATO

I heard he was bringing another student or two. I think I hear them now.

Scene 3

Inside the jail cell.

(CRITO, PHAEDO, and SIMMIAS enter, and each one embraces SOCRATES in turn, nodding respectfully at PLATO, writing quickly in his scroll.)

SOCRATES

I'm glad you've come to see me before dawn strikes.

CRITO

We've come to rescue you!

SOCRATES

I don't need rescuing! And I don't want rescuing, either!

CRITO

You don't want to be rescued?

SIMMIAS

We bribed the guards and secured a boat ten miles from here. We'll sail to Corinth!

CRITO

Or Crete!

PHAEDO

Or Egypt!

SIMMIAS

Or anywhere!

SOCRATES

Boys, I'm seventy years old. These bones can't survive another voyage across the sea. I'm too old to become a fugitive. What's more, I'm not afraid of death. And shame on you all for thinking I would go for this half planned scheme. Egypt, Phaedo?

PHAEDO

You want to stay and die here, Socrates?

SOCRATES

I made my peace with fate. If I leave now, my work and philosophy will be one of cowardice and inconsistency. I'll take the hemlock to prove my virtue to all those doubters. Send the boatman away, and any other helpers you've paid off. I'm not going anywhere but the afterlife, if there is one.

PHAEDO

Professor, I cannot stand here and watch you die.

SOCRATES

Then go, Phaedo.

PHAEDO

I will, and I'll take this hemlock with me!

(PHAEDO grabs the goblet of hemlock from the table and starts to stride out. PLATO rises to block the exit.)

PLATO

I will not let you leave with that cup.

SIMMIAS

Reconsider this, Phaedo.

PHAEDO

I'll pour it out. I will!

SOCRATES

Then I'll lick the cup or drink it from the floor. You think, dear Phaedo, that you are doing me some great kindness by this rashly thought out act. Instead, you will deny me the only choice that remains to me in this cell.

I have lived seventy long years on earth, and outlived all my siblings. I survived the great plague of Athens and fought in the great war against Sparta when you weren't yet born, and I survived it all. At Delium, at Amphipolis, at Potidaea, I never retreated from battle then, just as I will never retreat from philosophy now. I have survived the Thirty Tyrants and a marriage, too, something many of you haven't yet found the experience to fully appreciate.

When my mind is set to something, Phaedo, I accomplish it with courage and resolve. I have accepted my fate here, and I will drink the poison gladly. Now set down that cup.

PHAEDO

I'm sorry, professor. I thought that bluff might sway you.

(PHAEDO places the goblet back on the little table.)

SOCRATES

What is death anyway but a separation of soul from body? Why should we philosophers mourn at this exit? Is it not true that what we all do is discuss the virtue of the soul alone?

SIMMIAS

It is, Socrates.

SOCRATES

Then isn't death what we've been chasing all this time? Our glorious and unique chance to exit pain and pleasure? We have been resisting those physical states for too long to fling ourselves to them upon the brink of death. Truth is revealed to us when our mind is at peace, when quiet overtakes us and there are no sensations but our thoughts. Have you ever felt such a state while in pain?

CRITO & SIMMIAS & PHAEDO

No, professor.

SOCRATES

Have you ever felt such an understanding in pleasure? After you've laid with another man or woman?

CRITO & SIMMIAS & PHAEDO

No, professor.

SOCRATES

And have you, any of you, ever felt a transcendent virtue through some bodily sense? Ever seen truth, Simmias?

SIMMIAS

No.

SOCRATES

Ever tasted understanding, Phaedo?

PHAEDO

No.

SOCRATES

Ever smelt knowledge, Crito?

CRITO

Not yet.

SOCRATES

Ever heard truth, Plato?

PLATO

Only from your lips, Socrates.

SOCRATES

You flatter, but I don't have full knowledge of anything. Of all the sophists, I am the least wise, because I am aware of all that I have yet to learn.

CRITO

If you fled with us, professor, you could have time to learn even more.

SOCRATES

I would likely only learn of more things that I didn't know I didn't know, my brave Crito. To leave would mean I love my body more than I love my wisdom. I'm too old to love my body anymore, and I'm just lucky I lasted as long as I have.

SIMMIAS

What will we do when you are gone?

SOCRATES

Plato, what should they do when I am gone?

PLATO

Do you want my own thought or what I think you'd say?

SOCRATES

What do you think?

PLATO

Open your own schools, of wisdom or rhetoric, Simmias. Or seek a new teacher. Greece is a large place. Go to Corinth. Or Crete. Or Egypt, Phaedo, you've paid for the boat already.

(CRITO and SIMMIAS laugh.)

SOCRATES

I cannot lead you after I am dead. You must become your own masters. And if there is an afterlife, I hope to see you all there someday, so you can share with me all that you've learned after I am gone.

CRITO

Socrates, is there anything you would have us do for you? Something to tell your wife and sons, or business you need completed?

SOCRATES

I cannot think of anything specific. My wife knows how my property will be split up, the greatest share to Lamprocles, my eldest son. There is not much to give away, as you all know. My wife will remarry, perhaps to one of you or one of my other unlucky pupils. Echebrates or Apollodorus or some other man who's not present here at this moment.

I would have you all live conscientiousness lives of honest introspection, and shun excessive wealth and the trappings of material life.

(SOCRATES takes a long, deep breath, letting it out slowly.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

Now, don't you youths feel thoroughly corrupted?

CRITO

How do you want us to bury you?

SOCRATES

To be honest, Crito, I haven't given any thought to my remains. You can bury me any way you like. I won't need my body anymore.

PHAEDO

All of Greece will come to mourn you.

(PHAEDO starts sobbing softly.)

SOCRATES

Stop crying, Phaedo. Can't you see I've chosen this? Be happy for me; this is what I want to do.

PHAEDO

Yes, professor.

SOCRATES

I think it's time you've left me to my duty.

(CRITO, PHAEDO, SIMMIAS, and PLATO start to exit.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

Not you, Plato. Stay for a moment.

(CRITO, Pand SIMMIAS exit. PHAEDO looks back once, and exits.)

PLATO

What is it, Socrates?

SOCRATES

I want you to bear witness to my death.

PLATO

As you wish.

SOCRATES

No more writing, though. My final moments and last words you can tell Phaedo to make up, as long as it's in keeping with my reputation. He's always been a good storyteller.

PLATO

Yes, professor.

SOCRATES

You can fabricate the whole story if you want, Plato. You're the one with the scroll, after all. You can even edit yourself out so nobody will suspect you made it all up.

PLATO

Wouldn't that be an impious act?

SOCRATES

(laughs)

Maybe. Maybe not. Zeus made up stories all the time.

(SOCRATES breathes in, and sighs.)

The sun is rising, Plato.

PLATO

To me it feels as though the sun is setting.

(PLATO embraces SOCRATES.)

PLATO (Cont.)

You've been like a father to me.

SOCRATES

And you, a son.

PLATO

You are the wisest and best man I have ever known.

SOCRATES

And you are the greatest pupil I have ever taught.

(The long embrace ends. SOCRATES lifts the cup.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

Shall I make a toast, Plato?

PLATO

Yes, professor.

SOCRATES

To virtue and to truth and to you. Farewell.

(SOCRATES drinks deep from the goblet, and a moment passes in silence. The lights dim, and SOCRATES drops the goblet and falls down upon the bed. PLATO watches in silence next to the door, clutching his rolled-up scroll. Fade to black.)

THE END