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Film: The Trial of Socrates Study Guide, 2012

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FILM: THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES

STUDY GUIDE, 2012

Steven Alan Samson

Background to the Film

"The Apology has a greater historical interest than any other of the dialogues. For one thing, it is a central document in any reconstruction of the life and character of the 'real' as opposed to the 'Platonized' Socrates. For another, it may very well be a nearly original Socratic document. The majority of the commentators believe it to represent Socrates' actual defense of himself, polished no more than are the speeches of Demosthenes, say. Since the dialogue must have circulated at a time when many of those present at the trial still lived, the view is a thoroughly probable one.

Assuming that this is the defense Socrates made against his accusers, a number of very interesting questions are raised. The speech itself amounts to a defiance of the court and seems to indicate a desire for martyrdom on Socrates' part. The roles and motives of the two principal prosecutors are also rather puzzling. Meletus seems to have been just the sort of religious fanatic who would bring charges of irreligion and impiety. Anytus, however, defended a certain Andocides against the same charge brought by a Meletus who (from the rarity of the name) must almost certainly have been the same man. It seems likely, therefore, that Anytus wished to dispose of Socrates because of his former associations with Alcibiades, Charmides, Critias, and other aristocratic opponents of the democratic regime. If these were the 'youths' Socrates was supposed to have 'corrupted,' 'corruption' to Anytus must have meant indoctrination with anti-democratic views. Alcibiades and others of his group had also been involved in the religious scandal of the year 415, involving 'profanation of the mysteries.'"

"If this, as Burnet and Taylor argue, is the real background of the trial, much that is otherwise mysterious in the Apology can be explained. For an 'Act of Oblivion' consigning to legal oblivion all actions of Athenian citizens previous to the archonship of Euclides had been passed with Anytus himself as one of its prime movers. Thus there would have been grimly humorous drama in Meletus' inability to specifying what specific ways Socrates had been guilty either of impiety or of corrupting the youth of the city. In scornfully dismissing the charges as 'factitious,' Socrates would have been pointing really to the fundamental illegality of the whole proceedings." -- William Callaghan, An Outline of Plato's Republic and Dialogues. Boston: Student Outlines Company, 1938, pp. 81-82.

[NOTE: When Alcibiades, who was leading the Sicilian expedition, was recalled to Athens to stand trial, he fled to Sparta, where he betrayed the Athenian war plans and later, while King Agis II was away at war, it was rumored that he had impregnated the queen. The Sicilian Expedition turned into a disaster for Athens and Alcibiades provided much assistance to Sparta for about two years before he fell out of favor, whereupon he went over to the Persians, advising them to play off both sides against each other while he sought an opportunity to return to favor in Athens. Alcibiades, who figures prominently in Plato's *Symposium*, was as depraved as he was brilliant].

Notes to the Film

The film starts with a scene, as in the *Phaedo*, of Socrates's friends reflecting on Socrates just after his death. They recall that Crito asked Socrates: "How shall we bury you?" With Socrates' amused reply: that they were acting as if he had already been taken from them: "Be of good cheer, Crito, and say you are burying my body." The narrator says afterward: "Such was the end of our friend, who was the best, the wisest, and most just of men."

The film poses a question: Why was Socrates put to death? He was convicted of three charges: 1) He refused to recognize the gods of the state; 2) He introduced new divinities; and 3) He corrupted the youth

of Athens. The narrator then asks: Are these the real reasons why Socrates was tried? He then asks viewers (c. 1970) to seek parallels with political and social confrontations today.

NOTE: What follows is a reconstruction of what Socrates' accusers might have said. It is a narrative device for providing background to the trial. As for Socrates' defense itself, it is a digest of what may be found in Plato's *Apology*. Another source to examine is Xenophon's *Apology*, which is briefer.

Meletus:

Meletus laments the sorry times Athenians had recently lived through. He describes an Athens that had once had wealth, power, and empire, and that had been magnificent. When he asks who was to blame for Athens' reversal of fortunes, the jurors cry out: **Alcibiades**. And who was his teacher? Socrates. Meletus curses Lysander, the Spartan general, and the Council of Thirty (The Thirty Tyrants) that had been imposed on Athens by the victorious Spartans. During their reign of terror led by Critias, 1000 were put to death and 5000 exiled. Charmides, Plato's uncle, who is mentioned by Meletus, was apparently not one of their number. Afterwards, democracy was restored and the amnesty of Eucleides (the Act of Oblivion, like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission), which was supported by Anytus, was instituted to end reprisals. Meletus here complains that Socrates had gone unpunished for his political crimes, but it was now illegal to prosecute him for them.

Lycon:

Greek laws are closely associated with religion. But disrespect for the gods has grown. Lycon compares the piety of the playwright, **Aeschylus**, with what he regards as the impiety of **Euripides** ("gods are like fleeting dreams"), whom he calls a follower of Socrates (although Euripides was a decade Socrates' senior). This appears to be a fanciful idea derived from Aristophanes' *The Clouds*. Both men were accused of impiety. Anaxagoras and the Sophist Protagoras ("man is the measure of all things") are described as Socrates' teachers. Lycon describes Sophists as usually foreigners who make young people clever but not wise. He also recalls the character of Socrates depicted by Aristophanes in *The Clouds* as the proprietor of a Thinkery

Anytus (a general and a leader of the restored democracy):

Anytus claims that Socrates will ruin your sons by his words and encourage rebellion, as he did with his own son: "From that moment, my son was not mine but his." He adds that Socrates is not interested in leading the youth to wisdom, but only in demonstrating that nobody but himself is wise. My son now criticizes everyone, even our great men. Socrates teaches this disrespect, but refuses to take part in public affairs. [NOTE: During the period of the democracy in 406 BC, Socrates refused as president-for-the-day to permit a vote on an illegal proposal to try the Athenian admirals *en masse* rather than individually. Later, during the rule of the Tyrants, he refused a summons to turn over a would-be victim and risked his life doing so]. Anytus declares: No Spartan spy is as dangerous as Socrates. He destroyed the morality of our forefathers. Athens has the right and duty to destroy him, adding that if the court fails to convict this evil old man, the "vengeance of the gods will be on your head."

Socrates:

He begins humorously by saying that he didn't know how the men of Athens were affected by his accusers, but "they almost made me forget who I am." As for the warning that "you should be on guard against my eloquence: If by eloquence you mean truth, then I am eloquent." The rest of his speech continues to paraphrase Plato's original.

Review

Meletus
Alcibiades

Lycon
Aeschylus

Anytus
Euripides