A Belle in the Prison of Socrates
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By

Ahmed Etman

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He put a white robe on his shoulder
And said as he overcame his tears:
"Please spare
The explanation and justification
For I hadn't known
That the evil Polyphemus
Is that cruel
In hurting and torturing
Of fathers and sons."
He put his white robe on his shoulder
And was bidden farewell by his dear sons
Without tears.

—A.E.
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This is a drama that plays with the metaphorical stage of current debates as well as with its readers’ and audiences’ interests in the ancient world. Ahmed Etman is a distinguished classical scholar who is also a major voice in comparative literature and in translation, having supervised the new translation of Homer’s *Iliad* into Arabic, published in 2004. As though this were not enough, he is also a creative writer whose plays take leading figures from antiquity and dramatize their relationships with their historical contexts and with the modern imagination in ways that shed light on both.

This play takes the Athenian thinker Socrates, the ‘gad-fly of Athens’, and follows his conversations at home, in the Agora, on the city walls of the defeated *polis* and in his eventual trial, imprisonment and execution at the behest of the restored democracy. The dramatic structure and idiom of the play draws on and reworks major classical sources on Socrates’ life and thought. Etman contextualizes these in the themes of the war between the Athenians and the Spartans and the resulting disruptions of Hellenic social identity and unity amid the shifting alliances with Persia.

The scenes and the dialogue hold in tension the domestic, the civic and the international. Readers of Thucydides and Xenophon, Aristophanes, Andocides and Plato will find much to intrigue and amuse them. Genres are fluid and the witty interweaving of the ancient sources with allusions to contemporary issues such as the environment, drugs and the generation-gap allows historical narrative from the ‘messengers’ to merge with Socratic dialogue and dream sequences and so align ancient and modern. Noteworthy variations on the central theme play with temporalities to introduce Plato’s journey to Egypt as a cultural encounter between Greek philosophy and Egyptian wisdom while Socrates is enabled to probe the relationship between law and popular demonstrations in the operations of Democratia.
Fawzia El-Sadr’s translation of the play into English is timely in several respects. The increase in translations from Arabic into English is making available to anglophones a rich strand of literary culture. In the case of translations of work inspired by ancient Greek texts there is an increase in the potential for dialogues which cross cultural and linguistic boundaries yet are also grounded in ancient sources that are important in both cultures (see for example the four plays in *The Arab Oedipus*, edited by Marvin Carlson, New York, 2005). Furthermore, Etman’s play marks an important addition to the corpus of dramatisations of Greek philosophy and historiography, a companion to John Barton’s *The War That Still Goes On: Adapted from Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian Wars and Plato’s Dialogue with Alcibiades*, London, 2006 (which was also staged in a rehearsed reading in London in February 2006). The ancient texts and contexts are richly resonant for the contemporary world. Etman’s dramatization teases readers and audiences to develop their own responses to both.
PREFACE

FREDDY DECREUS,
PROFESSOR OF CLASSICS,
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‘Democratia herself in my prison’, Socrates exclaims, wondering who that phantom may be that haunts him in the sudden absence of his guards! ‘Socrates…you are a god Socrates’, she replies.

Two these sentences, belonging to the last moments of Socrates in prison, reveal a lot. On the one hand, there is this man, a philosopher, dressed in rags, bare-footed, a louse on his bald-head, meditating in his last moments, not afraid to die. On the other hand, there is this woman called Democratia, symbol and allegory, representative of a culture based upon power, manipulation and deceit. She is trapped in a dilemma, since a revolt in Athens calls, in the days of the coming elections, for the release of Socrates, who recently has been convicted by a jury manipulated by Democratia herself. As a character belonging to the political arena, she represents just one of the many cheap and superficial humans, who do not understand at all what Socrates is dealing with.

A cross-reference to the Magic Flute of Mozart may help to situate this new play by Ahmed Etman as a drama recalling two totally different worlds where two kinds of heroes live: Tamino and Papageno. In terms of this play, the world of the spiritual and intellectual hero is only inhabited by Socrates, the other one by a number of secondary characters who are mainly interested in the lower pleasures of life: money, power, greed, manipulation,…. However, no matter how low and unsophisticated they have grown, they will fascinate the reader, since the animated dialogues between all kinds of characters, young and old, wise and less wise, will fascinate the reader and listener. Ahmed Etman who has studied a long time in Athens has a definite eye and ear for the way people in the street do their daily talk and gossip. The way the common people think and behave is rendered in a masterly way, old and new come together, Athens and Cairo fuse, the back streets of every big city offer a never ending spectacle that every dramatist wants to immortalize. In this new play, not
only Democratia belongs to the second category: there is also Socrates’ wife, called here Xanthula, reviving the old clichés of a nagging old bitch, you have former students who want to please the rulers, the guards in the prison, the maid Hedone,…

However, the many scenes that recall Plautinian boldness and vivacity and represent the outer appetising packing, cannot make forget the underlying seriousness. The professor of Classics and Comparative Literature that Ahmed Etman is, is so well read in the contemporary history of the Greek fifth century that one easily forget that most of the narrative details are based upon Greek texts. The Socrates that he resuscitates today is a brilliant conpeere of the older version! This Socrates redivivus is rendered present in such a detailed way that the author really got in his skin, making forget the years of study it takes to perform such a deeply felt impersonation. Not a burden at all, these historical details provide in the first place good theatre, vivid discussions and quick-witted remarks that make the audience laugh!

From a political and sociological point of view, the times are ready for a drama like this, both in the old days and now. One may not forget that the era in which Socrates lived constituted a real hinge in the formation of Western intellectual and philosophic history. The matters are serious enough to be reconsidered. Socrates, above all, is the man who introduced theoretical discussions and who favoured knowing for the sake of knowing. His ambition was theoria, as later Aristotle would say, a form of pure and speculative knowledge, beyond human practical needs and interests. This ambition would lead him to disavow the survival of his own mortal body, and turned him into one of the first representatives of Humanism: what happened to be known later as ‘theoretical man’ started to question radically and unceasingly the conditions of knowing itself. No divinisation or humanisation of the forces of nature any more, no anthropomorphism to excuse the actions of pagan gods and goddesses. As a gad-fly, Socrates ran after his contemporaries, asking questions all the time, only satisfied when he succeeded in proving their lack of knowledge. Not an easy character after all, and the Athenians were not pleased at all to be confronted with ‘philosophers’: Anaxagoras (432) had to run, Protagoras (415) was accused under the same law indicting blasphemy and atheism. Socrates (399) was condemned, Plato pulled back for some time to Megara and travelled more than once to Syracuse, and even in 323 Aristoteles was accused. Apparently, those in power could hardly stand philosophers, but one cannot forget that out of this interaction a part of Western identity arose, precisely this part that invites people all over the
world to step beyond personal profits and question the trans-personal, the universal.

*A Belle in the Prison of Socrates* is a play that brings back all these challenges, the first ones in the history of the West to question so deeply both our personal and collective identity. Although obviously written as a humorous tale about an extraordinary character called Socrates, a man not able to take care for his own socks and maintenance, this play also has deeper political tones that often enough expose a solid political criticism of superficial democracies. Definitely, a play with many faces, destined to intrigue different audiences!
INTRODUCTION

PROF. FAWZIA EL-SADR
AIN SHAMS UNIVERSITY, EGYPT

Are they really Socrates and his belle? And who is this "belle" is she a notion, or is she democracy aborted, or what? The title initiates the curiosity of the reader, for it sets him to question the concerns that the play presents. He is also skeptic about Socrates' belle, or probably even Socrates himself, who worries the Egyptian playwright at a difficult period when not only Egypt, and probably the Arab world and the whole world is going through, where the map is changing. And on reading the play, the reader realizes the confirmatory of his anticipations. True, the story of the play revolves around Socrates, as the plot springs forward, crystallizing this story in the form of events, within a framework that organizes them so as to allow space for the personae to conflict in such a manner, as to lead to a true expression of what the play proposes, or what is known as the "theme", in a way that reaches the reader, or the spectator, through deduction, rather than outspoken statements or bare ideas. Such a manner allows the "subject" or the message to emerge in a way, nearer to the sore finger, as is the case with many of the Egyptian plays, where you can easily locate the sentences conveying the theme, and which usually are overstated and which point openly at what the writer wishes to convey to the reader or spectator. Ahmed Etman did not overlook the style of the Greek philosopher Socrates that is characterized by dialoguing. His distinctive style of making dialogues depends on a method of deduction through insinuation, whereby he reaches the truth by cornering his interlocutor into reaching precisely what Socrates wants him to say, leading him on to admitting that very truth, spontaneously, naturally.

The play actually expresses the subject in the theatrical language and I do not refer here to the dialogue only, but I mean, the other theatrical techniques, such as story, plot, the events, time and place. However, it transcends Socrates and his society, environment and times, to touch on our contemporary society, through its characters, environment and times, in a manner that the reader or spectator cannot escape, for they focus on the manner that the human mind operates with the association of
meanings. For the similarities between the ancient society of Socrates and the contemporary society, which the play emphasizes- in a successful selection- carries the play further to the level of the locale of our present times. The meeting or intercepting point between Athens and the present times carries the spectators, engaged in the events taking place in Athens to the current reality like a transit traveler then takes him back to Athens. And so on all throughout the play. True that the reader will watch Socrates and Xanthula and Democratia and Lysi and Chaerephon, as he will be convinced with them and their actions, However out of this foreign production, alternative contemporary replacement will unavoidably be stamped on his mind.

The play combines realism and fantasy. For the playwright escorts the reader on a journey between the present with its pains and the past where Socrates suffers from these around him whether it be his wife, or society itself, which makes the play a combination of the classical theatre and the modern experimental theatre, oscillating between past and present scenes in locale and personae: for human nature is pretty much the same in all ages. So that the reader finds himself on a journey, or an open invitation between, the contemporary society with its ailments, and the reality of the past and its ailments. A closer look into the text of the play confirms this double idea in its course, and which makes this "foreign" or Greek play, distant in its time and place, a local or contemporary play, closer to us in time and place. Let us look at some parts of this dialogue to emphasize this point.

"Aristophanes: Today we enter into the depth of cultural hypocrisy and I will show you that men of letters and the intellectuals are inventing new terms, compatible with all ages, and coining titles by which they name every new ruler. This is 'an inspired leader' and another is 'a war and peace hero'. A third maker of 'historical geographical decisions'."

Socrates also accuses Democratia:

"Whereas you and your relatives use the state's money and monopolize some privileges like trading in arms and lands and agricultural crops, and industrial goods local and imported and invest your money at the expense of the people's that you even sometimes import rotten food. "

He tells her "you claim to establish democracy and support its pillars, while you are obstinate in your opinion and forge the elections. You are like the malignant malady that destroys the body before a person can even feel it."
However, although the play apparently involves the ailments in classical Greece, it rises to universality, as it touches with subtlety human nature at all times, whether it be ancient Greece or the contemporary scene. What gives credit to *A Belle In The Prison Of Socrates*, is that it shoots instantaneously in two harmonious levels like a double barrel rifle, carefully reaching its target.
After my two plays "Cleopatra Worships Peace" and "The Blind Guest Restores his Sight" were published, I took to writing this play at hand in the mid eighties of the past century. In 1987, I reread the play, with view of making some alterations, these alterations developed into a new play, without making any essential changes in the play at hand. And so I had two plays with which I am not fully satisfied with. Finding myself in great perplexity I left them in closed drawers.

And in the summer of 2001 the matter recurred to me, so I took to reading this play once more, while bearing in mind an important female Athenian character—of this character I will not reveal now—and whom I had intended to add to the text, with view to intensifying its charm and excitement.

After a careful reading and a tiring revising, I found no place for this charming female character in the play. I felt that this play had fully matured, and standing as it is, does not tolerate the addition, that even the chosen title in the eighties survived of the number of titles that had subsequently occurred and recurred to me, so that after the necessary alterations this play "A Belle in the prison of Socrates" came to life to finally relieve its writer from prolonged labor pains.

To God we turn for success
A BELLE IN THE PRISON OF SOCRATES
PERSONAE

Xanthula: The nickname of Xanthlippe rather plump, tall, pretty wife of Socrates.

Socrates: The famous philosopher, in his late sixties or early seventies.

Chaerephon: A friend of Socrates, almost his age.

Democratia: She represents the city of Athens and its political system; she is a middle-aged woman of moderate beauty and intelligence.

Maker of gods' statues: He is stout and clever in his craft, owns a shop in the public market. He wears a wreath over his head and rings in his fingers.

Ion: An epic Reciter, who sings heritage and forges it to the benefit of the ruler.

Aristophanes: The well-known comic poet in his forties; he collaborates in the play within the play.

The Peasant

Right

Wrong

Plato: Socrates' student during the early twenties.

Andocides: Solicitor and orator.

Lysias: Orator

Chief of guards: Tall, broad-shouldered, with a big mustache, tough and sullen.

Silent characters and various voices of Socrates' students, and public of men and women.
ACT ONE

Scene I

Socrates' Shoes are not for Sale

(Socrates' house. In the depth of the stage there are two walls: one on the right, with a door and a window overlooking the street, the other on the left, with a window leading to the inside. In the midst of the theatre is a primitive bed, on its side wooden stools. Socrates sits on a piece of stone beside the window of the right wall, in a state of contemplation. His wife Xanthula is sitting on the edge of the bed beside him, with a mirror in her hand, dressed in rich clothes and golden sandals, in contrast to Socrates, who is in tattered clothes and bare-footed).

Xanthula: The maid Hedone is out with the children for a walk, I asked her to do that. It's a chance for us to sit together...huh.

Socrates: ....

Xanthula: (Sweetly) Darling Socrates... Socrataki.

Socrates: ....

Xanthula: (Raising her voice a bit) Socrates... Socrataki.

Socrates: ....

Xanthula: (Fretting, tapping the floor with her feet) Socrates... Socrates.

Socrates: (Facing her silently).....

Xanthula: (Starring in the mirror as she cuddled her hair) Didn't you hear me, sweetie... I said... we are alone, we can talk and...

Socrates: (Interrupting) Do you really want a dialogue... splendid! (Getting up and approaching her)

Xanthula: (Cheerful) Yes, I would like to have a dialogue alone with you...sometimes I even find my children a barrier between us... But today we are alone...so let's... (Approaching him, trying to touch him or hug him, he withdraws)
Socrates: If you want a fruitful dialogue, there must be an esthetic distance between us.

Xanthula: A distance! An esthetic distance between a married couple? O, catastrophe!

Socrates: Yes… so that none of us would affect the other…

Xanthula: And what fruitful dialogue could take place between a man and a woman with a distance between them? (She approaches him as he ducks away) All distances should disappear between husband and wife… they merge…an explosion takes place... a melting.

Socrates: Then this is not a dialogue.

Xanthula: But this is the most beautiful dialogue …come on. (She is after him, he ducks away)

Socrates: Anyway we should start a dialogue, whether it is a nearness you seek, or more differences and aloofness, as usual.

Xanthula: (Sits on the bed, as Socrates stands in a distance) Alright dear, it is time for you to prepare for the festivities.

Socrates: What festivities?

Xanthula: (Surprised and astonished) The great festivities of Dionysus. (Adding) They say that the competitions in theatre this year will be the strongest… for poets of tragedies, Sophocles and Euripides are taking part. (Adding) Anyway, I don't like tragedy… my eyes hurt out of crying when I watch them… I want to laugh, I like comedy… I am a pleasure-seeker. (She gets up, approaches Socrates) This year a young poet called Aristophanes will join the competition. They say that he wrote a wonderful play of funny situations… (She places her hand on Socrates' shoulder sweetly, saying) Everybody is getting ready for these festivities Socrates, and we have done nothing yet… (Looking in Socrates' face to find that he is still absent-minded, she shakes him several times) Did you listen to what I was saying… huh…

Socrates: (Confused) You were talking about… about…

Xanthula: (Sarcastically) About the sun, the moon, the clouds, the space… darling…huh
Socrates: I mean were you really talking about these matters? Then this is an interesting conversation! So, how do you see this superb universe and its enchanting system?

Xanthula: (Impatiently) My bitterness! No… I won't talk to you again. (She walks away)

Socrates: I told you over and over again that the conversation about these cosmological issues needs a long time and a lot of patience, so it would be more appropriate to deal with it out-doors in the fresh air… (Getting up)… come on… come on… let's go out to the mountain… climb to its peak…get closer to the clouds and discuss the system of the universe and its captivating beauty… Come on, I'm fed up with these closed places… they suffocate my breath and my thoughts… I feel as if I were in a prison…

Xanthula: Prison!! You say your life with me is a prison!! O catastrophe! Say you hate me too… you can't stand talking with me …and you need to get out to dialogue with your young wanderers students in the alleys… where you lecture them …I know you well… These lectures satisfy your vanity, because they make you appear as a dignified professor …but here with me you don't want to hear one word…you are unfair, just my bad luck. (She is crying)

Socrates: Anyway I'm going out.

Xanthula: (Pulling herself together) Over my dead body…you will never go out of here before you listen to me… (Hedone, the maid enters carrying an infant and two boys…sons of Socrates) or else I'll leave the house, the children… I'll go to my folks' place.

Socrates: (Giving in) My dear… no… don't do it… and don't be angry with me… here I'm listening to you, say what you want.

Xanthula: Wasn't I talking to you about the Dionysus festivities, they will be taking place soon and you aren't even prepared for them.

Socrates: Are they that soon?

Xanthula: They start in three days.

Socrates: And what am I to do?

Xanthula: Nothing… only remember that people receive these feasts and festivities in new clothes, change their old shoes with new ones and I'll buy you all that.
Socrates: But I didn't ask for anything.

Xanthula: (In repressed boredom) So will you be going to the festivities looking like that? In ragged clothes...bare-footed...aren't you ashamed of yourself? You brought me shame throughout Athens! Man, the whole down-town is but shoe-shops everywhere, and people say we can't afford to buy a pair.

Socrates: (Sarcastic) That is true, even book-stores have turned into shoe-shops, which means that people's minds are in shoes. (In a serious tone) It's the ugly deed that disgraces its doer and his folk... as for these simple clothes, they don't disgrace me... Besides, I like to free my feet, not to enchain them in soles ...that I may walk freely everywhere... (Joking) and don't forget that the prices of shoes have risen to an unbearable point, so I'm sparing you all this... (After a while) Ah if only people would all walk bare-footed...nude... then they would know the truth

Xanthula: You're violating the nature of things and following what people aren't used to... these are festivities and celebrations, full of joy and glee...and...

Socrates: And what have new clothes and soles got to do with celebrations and glee?

Xanthula: These festivities are held for the gods who are-as you know-of beautiful countenance, loving for all that is beauty...so we have to meet them in new clothes and...

Socrates: (Interrupting) Rather say in new thought... (Adding) besides, the gods who can not accept me as I am... I will not accept them nor do I care for their festivities.

Xanthula: (Raises her eyes and hands to the sky) O! God Zeus, God of Gods forgive him... for he is a reckless philosopher! (Adding) Nothing spoils the mind like philosophy. (Addressing Socrates) You are insulting the Gods... you must ask for their forgiveness right now, otherwise they'll disgrace you. Children... (Realizing the presence of the children and the maid... addresses Hedone) why are you standing like that?... The children were not supposed to hear that talk... nor see their parents in this state (A moment of pause) take them to the bathroom...and I'll join you. (Hedone and the children leave, as Xanthula approaches Socrates) Huh, sweetie, ask for the Gods' pardon and all the problems of the universe will be solved.
Socrates: But I did nothing wrong… I ask you a definite question which is definitely unmistakably clear: do the gods wear soles?

Xanthula: It is a simple, clear and unmistakable question. Socrates, I don't know... to think of these matters is atheism. All I care for is to dress well.

Socrates: So at least it is possible that gods don't wear soles in their feet?

Xanthula: You're right...I think they wander in space and encircle around the skies bare-footed and nude…

Socrates: So I object… I refuse to go to meet the gods in the festivities in new clothes, and old or new soles…as long as they don't do that.

Xanthula: But these are Gods and we've got to accept them and meet them in any image. I believe in their presence, and I meet them whether with or without soles...this is the true belief… as for you, you've lost your mind... your rash will ruin us.

Socrates: Don't be nervous, calm down, so as not to spoil the dialogue.

Xanthula: But why don't you like meeting the gorgeous Gods in bright new clothes? Even Hera herself, queen of the sky, beautifies herself, wears the most beautiful ornaments when she is about to meet her beloved husband Zeus.

Socrates: She does that for other reasons that you know well. And I have a little question.

Xanthula: All your questions are terrifying... but I'll hear you anyway...this is my fate.

Socrates: I am what I am… am I not handsome?

Xanthula: You are handsome, Socrates? (Laughs) You are handsome, Socrates! (Laughs) Oh, how terrible! What has happened to your mind? Haven't you seen your face in the mirror?

Socrates: I only look in the reflection of myself from the inside…I don't care much for the outer appearance. I see my image in the reactions of others generally towards my behaviour and through my meditation of my true self.

Xanthula: And do you find yourself handsome?

Socrates: I'm trying to reach the highest degree of beauty.

Xanthula: And what cosmetics do you use?
Socrates: The soul does not use cosmetics and perfumes. I don't care for appearance; what concerns me is the essence. I think that those who beautify themselves with colors and perfumes are those who feel utter ugliness within... so they make up for it with false decoration on the outside.

Xanthula: (Sharply) Socrates... Socrates! What is it that you want to say exactly?

Socrates: Nothing ...nothing.

Xanthula: Do you mean to tell me I'm ugly! Just say it out loud and don't be afraid, coward.

Socrates: You're right...you are the only person that makes me feel a coward, for you are stronger than me in tongue and hands...and feet. (He moves away) I'm scared of your kicking. (Moves further)

Xanthula: I am wrong. I, daughter of the elite, marrying you a scoundrel, when I had in front of me the most beautiful young men of the lineage in Athens...but for love...I was young, blinded by love and I couldn't see your ugliness...

Socrates: Any discussion with you is not safe... I am going out, I am leaving this house to you. (About to leave when Xanthula stands in his way)

Xanthula: No, you are not running away from me, this discussion must come to an end.

Socrates: (Trying to go out) Alright. Let me go out for a breath of fresh air and I'll be back.

Xanthula: Oh, no, never, you won't go out till we reach a solution...

Socrates: About what?

Xanthula: About our marital life...divorce me... (She cries)

Socrates: And why?

Xanthula: You said that whoever wears cosmetics and uses perfumes to beautify himself is ugly...and you know that I use them all the time...and all for you (She cries).

Socrates: If you're doing it all day long and doing nothing else, then you're very ugly indeed.