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## Poetic Justice: Apology Overdue

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## Poetic Justice: Apology Overdue

Stephen Faison

Jurors of our republic, I do not know whether you were persuaded by the case made against me, but I certainly hope that you were not. Some of what the prosecutor told you is accurate, though much of it is untrue. To put it another way, some of his facts are correct, yet the conclusions he presented were usually misleading distortions and in some cases simply incorrect. If the indictment is clarified to its essentials, I am accused of corrupting the young and not believing in the gods in whom the city believes. I intend to show that these charges are false and my enemies are motivated by prejudice they have spread with much success like a disease throughout our city. I am aware that this is a serious accusation. However, I will attempt to prove my case as though my life depends on persuading you, as it well may.

My task is difficult, I know, because the plaintiffs are the leaders, and in a way, the founders of our republic. They have the advantage because they got hold of most of you from childhood. They persuaded you and accused me falsely, saying that there is a poet, a self-proclaimed wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who peddles ignorance and vice. Those who spread that rumor, jurors, are my most dangerous accusers, for the persuaded believe that those who study these things do not even believe in the gods. These accusers are numerous and have been at it a long time. They spoke to you at an age when you would most readily believe them, some of you being children and adolescents, and they won their case by default as there was no defense. At the end of my testimony you may better understand why the poets were permitted no defense. One thing I do ask and beg of you: if during my apology you hear me using stories as I am accustomed to use in the marketplace, as some of you may have heard me, do not be surprised or create a disturbance on that account.

I begin by anticipating a reasonable question. If I am not guilty, why am I charged with these crimes? Well, I am a storyteller dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom, a certain kind of wisdom. Because our founders and leaders deny that the poet is wise, or can be wise, one of my listeners, whom you know, went to Delphi and asked an oracle whether any man was wiser than I am, and the oracle replied that no man was wiser. I must admit that I was very surprised by the answer. I shall not condescend to false modesty,

for I am not the dissembling type who professes ignorance while privately judging that he is superior in wisdom to all others. Though I have indeed devoted my adult life to inquiring about what might broadly be called *practical wisdom*, I found it difficult to believe that no man was wiser than I. However, because I was told that this answer was given by an oracle, I made it my duty to discover its meaning by interviewing a variety of citizens.

As you know, our republic is segregated into three classes, with each citizen assigned to the class most compatible with that citizen's soul, as that soul is evaluated by our rulers. Even though only the guardians are thought to possess wisdom, I decided to talk with members of each class during my investigation, to avoid the possibility of overlooking some exception. I generally encounter a variety of citizens in the marketplace, one of the few areas where the classes occasionally mingle, but due to the urgency of my mission I ventured out to their respective locations.

I wandered first to the nearby commercial area of our republic occupied by our artisan class. I peered into the window of a tavern where I observed many workers, and went inside. I had no sooner entered than I was heartily summoned over by a group of artisans whom I could not recall having met before that day. They shared light-hearted stories about their work, each taking a turn as the others listened. The speakers seemed exceptionally knowledgeable in matters pertaining to their occupations. I tried several times deftly to raise the issue of wisdom, hoping to receive their thoughts while maintaining the amiable mood they had established. They politely listened to my inquiries but did not offer any reply. As I tried to explain to myself their reluctance, I considered the following. Our founders were convinced that the state would produce the most excellent artisans by having them specialize from an early age; perhaps because their upbringing was restricted to matters of their class, they had not developed other interests. After a few hours they allowed me to leave their company, and as I made my way to my next destination, I was not completely satisfied with my conclusion and had not yet formed an opinion about the oracle's statement.

I next traveled to the location of our soldiers. In the near distance I spotted a group running together towards a substantial building, and I followed. Inside in one corner of a large room pairs of soldiers engaged in unarmed sparring. In another corner a row of soldiers participated in target practice. In the farthest corner from where I stood, one soldier was leading the group I followed in fitness exercises. I joined the latter group, but found myself winded long before they finished. I was not a soldier, they appreciated, but my effort amused them. They agreed to converse with me, but insisted

that first I watch them demonstrate their fighting prowess. I admired their athleticism and skill, but I was most impressed during their examination of various military strategies and tactics and discussion of the strengths and weakness of our enemies and allies. Once they turned to address me, I raised, as I had with the artisans, the topic of wisdom. The soldiers, too, were not responsive, and I wondered why. Again I recalled that our founders were persuaded that the best soldiers would be those identified early in life as spirited, and trained from that age to be soldiers and nothing else. I reflected as I had earlier that this specialization might be responsible for their reluctance to engage. But I was no more convinced that this explanation was sufficient to explain the oracle's meaning than I had been with the artisans.

My investigation took me next to the realm of the guardians, which is located at the farthest end of our city, quite isolated, almost hidden, from the other classes. I found a few of the several guardians assembled near the steps of their academy, gathered around one speaker. I could distinguish, even from a distance, that they were having an *intellectual* discussion. The speaker was evidently their director, as he spoke with great authority and certainty. He put a series of questions to his listeners each beginning with "Is it true that," or "Is it not the case that," and before I had time to adequately reflect, the listeners quickly replied, "It is true," "Absolutely," "Necessarily." The group turned to another topic and then another and a few hours passed before I was able to get their attention. Where the artisans and soldiers had greeted me warmly, these guardians were aloof. At long last the director turned towards me as he spoke to the rest, "This man is a poet and writer," and the others nodded in assent. The director curtly asked me my business, and I replied that I was there to talk about wisdom. "Let us see if the poet is sincere," he said. "What is courage?" he asked me. I related the legend of Achilles, who defeated Hector, the greatest warrior of Troy; and Ajax, who held off the Trojan armies almost single-handedly; and Antigone, who defied Creon in defense of divine law at the cost of her life. The director turned away from me and said to his associates, "The poet is concerned with *acts* he calls courageous. The philosopher, the true seeker of knowledge and wisdom, is concerned with courage *itself*." The guardians abruptly excused themselves and took their leave. I pondered whether it was true that even these guardians were no wiser than I. I had not gathered any evidence in that brief encounter because it was clear that these guardians did not really care to discuss wisdom with me, but presumed the rightness of their position and were not even curious to hear anything more that I had to say about courage.

As I look back, I suspect that it was during the next few months that the trouble that led to these charges began. Though poets are forbidden to tell stories within the city except by special permission, I had long done so without being bothered by authorities. Citizens were instructed from an early age that poets have no wisdom and are a destabilizing element, so I did not draw crowds like our approved bards. My tales did not flagrantly violate the rules imposed on poets, but each narrative contained some minor insubordinations discernable only to the keen ear, such as an ambivalent character or ambiguous scene complicating the story's resolution and raising some unsettling but stimulating question. After the storytelling listeners usually rewarded me with their reviews and we often had extended conversations over refreshments. My modest stall was located away from heavy traffic, and my audience, though consistent and dedicated, was small. So even though the free-thinking poet is officially regarded as a danger to the city, my relative insignificance probably led the rulers to consider me not worth the trouble to arrest. At worst I seemed a minor irritant, and to seize me would draw unwanted attention and arouse curiosity. Better to just ignore me. But once word of the oracle's judgment circulated, my audience grew, as did the attention of the guardians.

Conditions that had been simmering after the oracle's declaration rose to a boil when some guardians organized a storytelling competition, with the winner to receive a prize from the hand of our foremost ruler. Our two leading poets both teach in the schools and are so admired by our leaders that no others accepted the challenge. A few of my listeners urged me to participate because the marketplace was abuzz about the oracle's claim that no man is wiser than I. I reluctantly agreed and entered the contest at the last moment of registration. The order of presentations was selected, and as fortune would have it, my turn was last. You will please pardon me if I do not recite the stories of the other poets as I am confident these oft-told tales are known to you, but I will recount the plot of my narrative because its content is relevant to my defense.

My drama features Anatolios, a very successful merchant, husband, and father more than sixty years of age, long married to Hypatia, a woman from a prominent family. His mistress, Euthalia, is an emotionally unstable younger woman who insists that Anatolios leave his wife for her. Euthalia sometimes becomes hysterical and has lately threatened to visit his home and confront Hypatia, and also expose Anatolios' past financial indiscretions that he shared with her in confidence. When he cannot reason with Euthalia, Anatolios confides in his brother, Alexis, who offers a solution. Alexis has agents who for a fee will kill Euthasia in what will appear to have been a robbery.

Alexis will take care of everything; Anatolios need only give the order to proceed and pay for the service. After much hand-wringing, Anatolios agrees. For a while after Euthalia is killed, Anatolios is worried and depressed and considers confessing. Alexis warns Anatolios that the agents would kill him to protect themselves, and a confession would also incriminate the brother who came to his aid. Several months pass, and the murder is attributed to unknown transient burglars. Though free from arrest, Anatolios feels shame and fear, and wonders whether he will be forever tormented, and whether there is an ultimate divine justice that will punish him for his crime. In the penultimate scene, Anatolios has a dream of a family dinner-table argument between the ghosts of his long deceased father, uncle, and aunt. His father asserts that the eyes of god are on us always, and god ensures that the unjust are always punished. His aunt calls this superstition and insists that morality is applicable only to those who accept morality. Anatolios the adult interrupts to ask the group what happens if a man kills. His father replies that one way or another that man will be punished. "If he's caught," his uncle coolly interjects. His father continues that even if the perpetrator is not caught in this life, his foul deed will bear rotten fruit. Anatolios' aunt counters that if he can get away with it and chooses not to be bothered by ethics, he's free. The final scene of my drama takes place one year later at a banquet. Anatolios, to one of his guests, tells the *fictional* story of a man who committed a murder but was never found out. The man was for some time beset with guilt and wondered whether god would punish him. Over the next several months his conscience bothered him less and less. And then one morning he awoke to find the sun shining, his loving family around him, and the crisis lifted.

I took my bow, but kept my eyes lifted to watch the spectators from the platform as I also listened. The mood of the audience was one of guarded excitement and anticipation. The winner was selected using the usual procedure: each member of the jury of ten chosen by lot inscribed the name of their choice as best. Five tablets were randomly selected, and I was declared the victor. I heard a smattering of applause, although they hushed when our ruler appeared to present the prize. I turned to see that the man beside me was the director I had encountered on my visit to the guardians! I had not seen our ruler in so many years that I had not recognized him at the academy. He handed me the prize in a most perfunctory manner, and his displeasure was evident.

I am charged with these crimes, I submit, because I have embarrassed our leaders. I am confident that the storytelling competition was intended to glorify the approved poets of the state, and when I finally joined the contest, demonstrate their superiority. The rulers could have disqualified me after hearing my story, claiming that it violated

the rule that prohibits the poet from saying or writing that unjust people are happy and that injustice is profitable if it escapes detection. Of course I do not actually proclaim either, though the story's conclusion leaves the matter in doubt and encourages the audience to consider these practical matters themselves. I suppose, however, that they did not disqualify me because they were confident that I would lose and my defeat would prove that the oracle had made no such claim about me. If my conjecture is correct, then the plan backfired when the randomly chosen judges selected my drama and some members of the crowd registered their approval.

My victory and the reaction of some citizens confirmed our rulers' conviction that storytellers are a subversive element because they possess the ability through their cunning to confuse distinctions between truth and falsehood, good and evil, virtue and vice, as the rulers interpret these as abstract contraries. If allowed to practice their art without strict regulation, storytellers would undermine the education upon which our republic stands. Our rulers sought to guard against this danger by allowing poets to tell only state approved tales. But I won the contest, and a growing number of citizens are aware of the oracle's answer. If I were to remain free, I would surely interpret my victory as a sign of approval, and I would feel encouraged to create and relate other unorthodox stories. More citizens might be eager to hear my tales and give them a fair hearing. So I am perceived by our leaders as a threat to their authority and their assertion that only the rulers have wisdom.

Distinguished jurors, I expect that my narration meets the challenge that I set in my opening statement, to explain why I am being prosecuted though I am innocent. I am grateful for your patience, and the time has come for me to address the specific indictment against me, the accusation that I do not believe in the gods of the city and that I corrupt the young.

The charge that I do not believe in the gods in whom the city believes is based on my usage of traditional descriptions of the gods favored by past poets, and according to our rulers these descriptions are false. But why should believing in other gods be a matter before this assembly? Why is merely believing or not believing in something a crime? The rulers are convinced that their teachings about gods are true and all others false. The crime, it seems, is that the poet uses his skill to persuasively teach the alleged falsehoods he believes about the gods. By teaching falsehoods about the gods, the poet distorts what is true and false and undermines education that promotes virtue. So the crime seems to be less about what poets believe, and more about what they teach.

The fact is that I have never claimed that my stories about the gods are true or false, nor that I believe them. My stories contain legends about the gods and are presented as such. Furthermore, in our present society, poets and writers such as I am do not teach. It is true that before our new republic was founded the stories of the great poets were used to educate, but that is no longer the case. The city controls the education of our citizens, and the poets either conform to these regulations or they are not permitted to teach. What's more, in the dialectic that established rules for teaching, our founders declared that even if the legendary tales were true, such tales must not be taught because they do not encourage virtue. So it appears that truth is not the highest priority. Nevertheless, the truth is that I have complied with the law and have not attempted to teach anyone. I decline to conform to the regulations for teaching, and I have deliberately stayed away from the schools. I tell my stories at the edge of the marketplace and citizens are free to come and go, listen or not, as they please.

The charge that I corrupt the young is related to the charge that I teach falsehoods about the gods. But as I have already testified, I do not teach anyone. I keep a regular schedule and location, so I am easy to find and easy to avoid. Those who patronize my stall do so of their own volition, including the young ones. Our founder claims that the young are malleable, so we must take care what they hear. Yet those who listen to my stories have spent several years in the schools and have been warned against uncertified poets. The young are raised by and live among a nation of virtuous citizens, including those assembled here today. If the young are so easily corrupted by listening to my stories, we must wonder about the efficacy of their state education. If I am guilty of this charge, then the prosecutor implies that a substantial number of the young are corrupt. Are they? Are they wicked? If so, is there evidence that my stories are to blame? Even my most faithful young listeners spend only a small fraction of their time with me compared to the time they spend with teachers and other fine citizens. I wonder whether the problem is that some young people are less than completely convinced of what they are taught in school, and their dissatisfaction and curiosity leads them to me because of my reputation for nonconformity. Some hear my stories and may question what they have been taught, and their receptiveness to alternatives is interpreted by our rulers as corruption. If the young are not permitted to suspend judgment until their intellects are satisfied, it seems that the purpose of state education is not to encourage students to reason and judge for themselves, but to indoctrinate them.



I made the bold statement in my introduction that the prosecution knows that the charges against me are false. I say that because the leaders support this prosecution that I teach falsehoods about the gods, but they are the ones that teach the falsehood. So that our citizens would accept the radical scheme to segregate the population into classes based on their theory of the nature of the soul, our founders concocted the *fiction* that the god mixed gold into the souls of those equipped to rule, silver into the souls of auxiliaries, and iron and bronze into the souls of artisans. The founders agreed that this story was a noble falsehood. No doubt it was an expedient falsehood, for it helped instill the belief that the rulers are chosen by god, implying that to oppose them is to oppose god. That explains why it has been such a serious crime to refuse to believe in the gods in whom the city believes. If any stories about the gods are allowed to compete with theirs, the citizens might question or dispute this myth of the metals, and once they do so, the foundation for this division of classes that places the rulers in their glorified position is imperiled.

Despite my defense and my counter-charge, it has never been my intent to attack our republic or humiliate our founders. I was content to leave our rulers alone and tell my stories from my stall, but I am on trial for my life and must use all true evidence to defend myself. I learned what I know about our founders and leaders through the transmission of old stories, a practice that never died, despite the measures enacted by the rulers to destroy it. I can accept that our founders may have acted with good intentions, and may have sincerely believed that a great city must be a moral city and a moral city must be comprised of citizens educated to be virtuous, though we must acknowledge that higher education is given only to the guardians. The founders evidently realized the power of stories and supported a myth that reinforces their agenda. It is ironic that poetry is condemned as a source of vice by our leaders because it, as a work of imagination, is thrice removed from the truth, but when the need arose to establish support for their scheme, our founders chose not to present our citizens with truth supported by their beloved arguments, but instead offered a work of imagination. Perhaps they genuinely believed their lie was noble. But as wise men, did they not foresee the practical consequence? Successive generations would not have their perspective and would judge the story on its merits. Their experiment, whether well intentioned or not, was bound to fail because it is not, as they assert, built upon truth about the gods.

The law states that the god must always be described as he is: good. Therefore, stories in which the gods perform morally questionable acts are forbidden. The

declaration that a god is good, however, is avowed without objection. Of course, if we stipulate that a god is good, then a god is good by definition. But that does not prove a god is good; it merely presents a tautology with the expectation that no one will have the courage to dispute this first principle.

What is the truth about the gods? As a poet, my interest is in the *legends* of the gods, and my purpose is not argumentative, but illustrative. The mythical gods are larger than life figures, and as such, are useful for conveying complex ideas through imaginative and engaging narratives. By employing the gods in this way, I have committed no crime, unless we are willing to say that our founders were equally guilty in their dialectic.

When our founders stalled in their attempt to define justice in the individual, they envisioned a just city that would presumably be comprised of just citizens so they could work with a larger image. Some poets are primarily concerned with practical human difficulties, and if I may speak for some, the gods represent our own human characteristics magnified to supernatural proportions: a larger image. The legendary gods resemble us but are different enough to permit critical distance. Just as a human being is not *either* good *or* bad, but *both* good *and* bad, sometimes good and sometimes bad, so is a god.

The traditional gods in this interpretation are the deification of our common self-conception, just as our founder's god is the deification of his version of the philosopher who is by definition good. The legendary conception of the gods was effective because it served a practical function by being accessible to ordinary citizens. The rulers' conception leads to a labyrinth of esoteric obfuscation that even the founder acknowledged is understood only by the philosopher, who also manages to be its creator.

We excluded poets do not object that our rulers are convinced that their conception of a god is correct; we object to the law that makes any unconvinced citizen guilty of a crime. To be guilty of not believing in the god in whom the city believes is to be guilty of not believing in the god in whom the rulers believe. If a citizen can be punished, perhaps executed, for this supposed crime, then the rulers have the power to tell the citizen not only what he must do, but what he must believe.

The audacity of this law becomes even more apparent when we recall that restrictions placed on storytellers are not limited to portrayals of the gods, but apply also to depictions of human beings. My friends and I concede that our descriptions of the gods cannot be confirmed, and we rejoin that the rulers' conception cannot be

authenticated. We should, however, have no such quarrel concerning stories about people, because people are available for our common observation and evaluation. Yet the rulers forbid poets and writers to tell any tale that states or implies that the good suffer or the evil prosper, and they must not even suggest that injustice is profitable if one gets away with it. We are not only prohibited to say that the gods fight and plot against each other, we must say that no citizens have ever behaved this way. We have, again, a practical problem. Of course the young ones soon learn what the old ones have long known, that these approved stories do not reflect reality, and so their teachers are either delusional or liars. It is one thing to present such approved tales as guides to what should be, it is quite another to teach them as the way things are in reality. If the citizen is required by law to believe the state's claims about people, then the law demands that the citizen deny the legitimacy of her experience, the evidence of her own eyes, or face severe punishment.

In conclusion, I maintain that the storytelling competition is at the heart of these charges against me. The oracle's statement indicates that no man is wiser and my victory in the competition confirms my ability as a poet. One might reasonably draw the conclusion from these events that the poet can be wise. Nevertheless, our rulers consider the free-thinking poet dangerous to the city and must therefore deny that he is wise. Our founders anticipated the continuous threat posed by the poets given their history as our civilization's earlier teachers.

Rather than take the gruesome steps to banish us altogether from society, the founders redefined wisdom in an idiosyncratic way so that the term *wise* would apply only to those trained in their methods and officially recognized as philosophers. As the founders stated in their dialectic, it is difficult to remove what is taught, especially if absorbed at an early age, so they made sure that the young were fed their special diet and were conditioned to accept only one definition of philosophy; one that de-emphasizes the practical, or makes the practical dependent upon the aptitude and willingness to engage intellectual puzzles. The critique of the poets as transmitters of falsehood and vice was declared and sustained without rebuttal, and their path to wisdom officially eliminated. In the founding dialectic, the poets' side of the argument is not even presented and given a fair hearing, lest it be found reasonable or persuasive to the unprejudiced.

As you decide my case, please do not be concerned that a guilty verdict means that I will be executed. Even if I were allowed to live with the promise that I would stop writing and telling stories, I would not stop. I do not claim to serve god by my actions,

and I do not hear a voice that stops me from doing wrong. I perceive the poet to be a servant and conscience of the people, to implore people to examine their lives and make them worth living, to seek and find some truth, because doing so will bring practical improvement to their lives. If I am killed, my death will stimulate others to replace me because the people will always want truth-tellers, and there will always be those willing to tell the truth.

By truth I refer to truth available to all who observe life and reflect upon it, the accumulated wisdom of humanity passed down through the generations. I do not mean some mysterious truth that is allegedly available only to the few with access to that which is accessible only to them. What is courage? I cannot adequately define it as the certified philosopher requires, but I can help you perform a practical search. Place yourself in the many recognized and long-honored situations that require courage and you will have the occasion to discover some meaning for yourself. What a quirk of fate that a guilty verdict should provide this opportunity for me!

Our rulers would, of course, define courage differently. They would tell you that courage is understood through contemplation of its form. Listen to the argument, ask your questions. Are you convinced? If so, I am pleased for you. If not, then I implore you to continue my struggle, your struggle, to pursue truth in your own way. Our founders have transformed the desire for a practical understanding of such matters into a systematic search for universals and absolutes attained only through argumentation, refutation, and manipulation of abstractions. Their objective has been to discredit every other means of exploration, to strangle the alternative represented by the storyteller.

We poets do not agree with the purported philosophical approach, the term as redefined by them, but we would never deny their right to conduct their investigation in their own way. We the disenfranchised insist upon the same right for ourselves. The rulers believe that wisdom is gained through contemplation of abstractions. Perhaps the rulers' approach is satisfactory for a minority class that is isolated from the population and has removed itself from the trials and tribulations of the sensible world. But the overwhelming majority of the population lives in the sensible world, and some need and want an approach to wisdom that offers practical equipment for living. We are there to provide for those seeking an alternative. The rulers should not fear us and try to eliminate us, but should support any search for enlightenment, however different from theirs. If the philosophers are right and we are wrong, we unorthodox poets will eventually wither away due to lack of interest.

But I predict that storytellers will endure and the rulers' approach to philosophy will slowly fade into obscurity. To say that no man is wiser than I is not to say that I am wiser than all others. I believe the artisans and soldiers were not responsive to my questions because they have been taught that whatever acumen, judgment, and insight they have gained from experience in the world does not qualify as wisdom or philosophy. I believe the oracle gave that answer as a clarion call for citizens to recognize and acknowledge an alternative to the rulers' definition of wisdom, and perhaps that call was answered through the storytelling competition.

I prepare for my grave with confidence that we storytellers will survive, as we have in this republic despite the efforts to crush us, because our stories respond to the collective desire to understand ourselves and our world, and we do so in a way that is practical, accessible, and inviting. The rulers' method, it seems to us, takes the opposite position, reducing the path to wisdom to one, and restricting seekers to the few. They disparage the poet for appealing to emotions and dealing with images, but our attitude respects practical wisdom, lived experience, and the evidence of our senses. Their version of philosophy withdraws from our world to conduct their private disputes over difficulties that seem artificial and remote from life. Given their love of argument, they will no doubt devise a rationalization for their diminishing impact as they fade into insignificance. The society of certified philosophers needs to decide whether seeking wisdom is the obligation and pleasure of every person, or the plaything of an elite class. I fear that if they choose the latter, they will find their influence confined to their academy.

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