


5-1-1991

Envy of an Apology

Jeannette Baillie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces>

 Part of the [Ceramic Arts Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Painting Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baillie, Jeannette (1991) "Envy of an Apology," *Forces*: Vol. 1991 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol1991/iss1/18>

This Short Story is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Collin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Forces by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Collin. For more information, please contact mtomlin@collin.edu.

I am a babe in the woods when it comes to Greek literature. Thus as I read *The Apology of Socrates*, it was with a sense of excitement; I had been aware of the gravity of the work before I had even started the first page. But as I carefully perused each line, chewing each sentence with my brain as a cow chews its cud, I was struck with a jealousy of Socrates. He had been afforded the opportunity to defend himself—but did not play into the hands of his accusers. How wonderful it must have been to have such clear-headedness!

When one is summoned to a court of law in the United States, whether as the accused or the accuser, it is a herald to form a team—to pull the wagons in a circle and establish a formidable prosecution or defense. Most consider it foolish behavior for the accused to attempt to argue his or her own case. Yet I was more than willing to appear foolish during my first official role as the accused.

I was fourteen years old. It was a cool morning, and I was due to appear at District 6 of the Cook County Circuit Court at 9 a.m. The summons had said that I was subject to a truancy hearing, based on a charge filed by the Superintendent of Schools. By Illinois law, the charge was not unfounded. It had been about five weeks since I had last attended any of my classes. I steeled myself as I walked through the

doors of the courthouse, waiting patiently as the guard searched me for weapons. She directed me to the hall of juvenile courts. I had never been in a courtroom before. I was about to learn a lesson, but not the lesson my accusers must have had in mind for me.

As I took a seat inside, I was disappointed with the decor. I was hoping for something a little more authoritarian-looking, but I found the room much too demure. To be certain, there were many cops and court clerks and other official-looking people lurking around with stern looks on their faces, but how did they expect to scare the BeJesus out of a person when the place was so posh-looking? I silently scored one point for myself.

The clerk told us to rise, the Honorable-whoever was coming into the courtroom. I briefly toyed with the idea of not rising, then I stood up. The other people sat down; I sat down. My case was fourth on the docket that morning. I settled back to observe the behavior of those who were the accused (ages twelve to seventeen), and of those who were the accusers (too old to understand). Then came the rude awakening. Those who were the accused could play only one of two roles—either the defiant teenage thug, or the tearful, repentant, mixed-up good kid. I was neither of these. I began to panic.

When the clerk called my name I felt my stomach drop down to my feet. I was hoping that I still had a shot at appearing cool and rational. I advanced to the bench with a gait that I felt was neither too cocky nor too intimidated. An official-looking man began to read aloud the particulars of my case—lots of mumbo-jumbo—lots of numbers and statutes that I didn't care about one way or the other. The judge was nodding his head and writing on a sheet of paper with a gold Cross pen. Then my Meletus came forward—in

Envy of an Apology

by Jeannette Baillie

the form of a social worker whose "McDonald's drive-thru" analysis of my behavior was a cornerstone of the case against me. He proceeded to supply the judge with a slew of adjectives which allegedly described me. I listened with one ear; it was the dialogue of a movie I had seen two hundred times. To amuse myself, I mentally ticked off each epithet—perhaps I would hear a new one this time. No, they were mostly the same as always: "insubordinate," "arrogant" "cocky," "unmotivated," "subversive," "emotionally unstable," "showing insurrectionist tendencies"—(What the hell did that mean? I made a mental note to look it up in the dictionary), "rebellious," oh, and yes—"seemingly intelligent but without direction."

Then my Anytus came forward—I did not recognize this man. Evidently he was some drone from the office of the school superintendent. He addressed the judge—more statutes, more mumbo-jumbo. I found it unusual that someone who apparently was so interested in my behavior did not address me, or even look me in the eye for that matter.

The moment I had been waiting for arrived. The judge looked at me; he addressed me. "Why have you not been going to school?" he said plainly. I carefully meted out my reply, "I haven't felt like it . . . Your

Honor." He grimaced, "Well, start feeling like it!" He then addressed Meletus and Anytus with some legal jargon. He gestured to the clerk and said, "Next case."

This was it? The square-dance of my accusers was finished? Weren't they interested in my defense; I had a good one, and I was ready to argue. Was I just another number in the system, another case on the docket? Evidently I would not be given the chance to offer my analysis of the public school system. My questioning had obviously irritated them thus far, and now they just wanted me out of the way. I was crushed.

Some hours later I walked into the second-hand bookstore on Halstead Street. The clerk, the mother of one of my friends, began her usual berating, "Still not going to school, eh? Well, you just see how far you can get without a diploma. You know if I had your brains I'd throw mine away. When I was your age, you know what I was doing? I was working ten hours a day. And not only that . . ." I tuned out her voice and went to the back stacks. I pulled a hardcover from a shelf at random; at that point I would have read anything to take my mind off my troubles. I opened the book to the first page; I saw it contained a quote. My eyes were tearing, I had to blink several times before I could make out the words. It said, "The Sharp edge

of a razor is difficult to pass over: thus the wise say the path of Salvation is hard." The quote was attributed to someone named Katha-Upanishad. I turned to the title page; the book was called *The Razor's Edge*, by W. Somerset Maugham. I felt a smile creep across my face. I sidled up to the counter and said, smirking, "How much do you want for this old book?" "Don't be so god-damn cocky," she said, "a dollar-fifty." She shook her head in disgust as she took my money. She was my Lycon.

The years of my life both before and since that day have been rife with occasions when I wanted to defend my actions, wanted to defend my thoughts, wanted to defend my opinions. I learned that day that it is sometimes necessary to hold one's tongue, a piece of harsh advice that had been given to me many times. To this day, I still do not adhere to this rule as an absolute; it is unlikely that I will begin doing so at any time soon. But now I can't help thinking that if on just that one day, in that one courtroom, in front of that particular group of accusers, how nice it would have been to be Socrates for a while.