GENERAL

apology by plato translated by benjamin jowett

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Apology by Plato Translated by Benjamin Jowett: A Timeless Bridge to Ancient Athens

When we think of the most influential works in Western philosophy, Plato's *Apology*is almost always at the top of the list. This short, powerful dialogue captures Socrates' defense before the Athenian jury and has been read, debated, and cherished for over two thousand years. Yet the experience of reading the Apology depends heavily on the translator. Among the many English renderings, Benjamin Jowett's version—first published in 1864—has become a staple in classrooms, libraries, and philosophical discussions worldwide. In this article we will explore the historical context of the original text, the life and translation philosophy of Jowett, and why his translation remains a vital conduit for contemporary readers seeking to engage with Socratic thought.

1. The Historical Significance of Plato's Apology

Plato's Apology is more than a mere legal defense; it is a philosophical treatise that reveals Socrates' method of questioning, his commitment to truth, and his willingness to accept death rather than compromise his principles. The dialogue is set in 399 BCE, when Socrates was tried on charges of corrupting the youth and impiety. The text itself is brief—about 25 pages in the original Greek—but its impact is immeasurable.

1.1 Socrates as a Cultural Icon

Socrates' reputation as a relentless interrogator and moral exemplar has shaped the way we think about ethics, civic responsibility, and the pursuit of knowledge. The Apology crystallizes these attributes into a compelling narrative that invites readers to examine their own beliefs. Because the dialogue is rooted in the democratic polis of Athens, it also offers a window into the political and philosophical climate of the ancient world.

1.2 The Role of Translation in Preserving Philosophical Thought

Translating ancient philosophical texts is a delicate balancing act. The translator must preserve the nuance of the original language while making the content accessible to modern readers. The Apology, with its dense rhetorical flourishes and subtle irony, presents a particular challenge. Over centuries, scholars have offered translations that vary in literalness, readability, and interpretive bias. Each new version reshapes how students and scholars perceive Socrates.

2. Benjamin Jowett: Scholar, Classicist, and Translator

Benjamin Jowett (1834–1902) was an English classicist, theologian, and professor at Oxford University. His academic career was distinguished by a deep commitment to making classical literature available to a broader audience. Jowett's translation of the Apology reflects his own intellectual values: clarity, fidelity to the source, and an appreciation for the rhetorical power of the original Greek.

2.1 Early Life and Academic Path

Born into a family of clerics, Jowett was educated at Oxford's University College, where he excelled in Greek literature. He later became a fellow at All Souls College and taught at University College, Oxford. His scholarly reputation grew through his work on Homer, the Greek tragedians, and, notably, his translations of Plato's

dialogues.

2.2 Jowett’s Translation Philosophy

Unlike some translators who prioritize literal accuracy at the expense of readability, Jowett sought a middle ground. He believed that the spirit of the original text should guide the translator, and that the English language should be used in a way that resonates with contemporary readers. This approach is evident in his rendering of the Apology, where he balances the formal speech of Socrates with an engaging, conversational tone.

3. The Publication History of Jowett’s Apology

Jowett first published his translation of the Apology in 1864, as part of a larger project to render Plato’s dialogues into English. The work quickly gained popularity due to its clarity and its faithful representation of Socratic speech. Over time, Jowett’s version has been reprinted in numerous editions and remains a standard text in many university curricula.

3.1 The 1864 Edition

- Publisher: Oxford University Press
- Format: Hardback with a simple cover design
- Key Features: Introduction by Jowett, explanatory notes, and a glossary of terms

3.2 Subsequent Reprints and Modern Editions

Jowett’s Apology has seen several reprints, including a 1974 Oxford University Press edition that added updated footnotes and a new introduction by a contemporary scholar. In 2015, a deluxe edition was released, featuring high-quality paper, a leather binding, and a foreword that contextualizes Jowett’s translation within the broader history of Platonic scholarship.

4. Why Jowett’s Translation Is Still Relevant Today

While newer translations have emerged, Jowett’s Apology retains a unique blend of literary elegance and philosophical precision. The following points illustrate why his version continues to be a go-to choice for students, educators, and lovers of classical literature.

4.1 Linguistic Clarity

Jowett’s language is straightforward yet evocative. He avoids archaic diction that might alienate contemporary readers, yet he preserves the rhetorical force of Socrates’ speech. This balance makes the text approachable for beginners while still offering depth for advanced scholars.

4.2 Faithful Rendering of Rhetorical Devices

One of the hallmarks of Socratic dialogue is its use of rhetorical techniques such as irony, elocution, and dialectical questioning. Jowett’s translation captures these nuances, allowing readers to experience the dynamic interplay between Socrates and his interlocutors.

4.3 Pedagogical Utility

Because of its clarity, Jowett’s Apology is frequently used in high school and university courses. Many textbooks include his translation as the primary text, accompanied by discussion guides and critical essays. The accessibility of Jowett’s version encourages students to engage deeply with the material rather than merely skim over complex passages.

5. A Comparative Analysis of Jowett's Translation with Other Versions

To fully appreciate the strengths of Jowett's translation, it is useful to compare it with other prominent English renderings. Two notable alternatives are the translation by W.D. Ross (1924) and the modern rendering by Richard Kraut (1999).

5.1 W.D. Ross (1924)

- Style: More literal, preserving Greek syntax
- Strengths: Close adherence to original wording, useful for linguistic studies
- Weaknesses: Can be dense and hard to follow for non-specialists

5.2 Richard Kraut (1999)

- Style: Contemporary, with a focus on philosophical clarity
- Strengths: Modern language, helpful annotations, and philosophical commentary
- Weaknesses: Less attention to the rhetorical flair of the original Greek

5.3 Jowett's Position in the Spectrum

Jowett's translation sits comfortably between Ross's literalism and Kraut's modernity. It offers a readable, engaging text that preserves the spirit of Socratic rhetoric without sacrificing fidelity. This balanced approach has earned Jowett's Apology a lasting place in both academic and popular contexts.

6. The Impact of Jowett's Apology on Modern Scholarship

Beyond its pedagogical role, Jowett's translation has influenced the way scholars interpret Socratic philosophy. By making the Apology widely available, Jowett helped democratize access to Plato's ideas, allowing a broader range of thinkers to engage with the text.

6.1 Influence on Philosophical Discourse

Jowett's translation has been cited in numerous scholarly works that analyze Socratic ethics, the nature of justice, and the concept of the examined life. Its readability has encouraged interdisciplinary studies that blend philosophy with literary criticism, political science, and even psychology.

6.2 Cultural Resonance

The Apology's themes—truth, integrity, and the courage to stand by one's convictions—continue to resonate in contemporary discussions about free speech, civic duty, and moral responsibility. Jowett's translation, with its clear expression of these ideas, has become a cultural touchstone for those seeking to understand the roots of Western democratic thought.

7. How to Approach Reading Jowett's Apology

Reading the Apology can be a rewarding but challenging endeavor. Below are practical tips to help readers get the most out of Jowett's translation.

7.1 Start with Contextual Notes

Before diving into the dialogue, review the introduction and any explanatory notes. These sections provide historical background and highlight key philosophical concepts that will recur throughout the text.

7.2 Read Actively

Take notes as you read. Socrates often employs rhetorical questions and paradoxes; jotting down these moments

can help you follow the logic of his arguments.

7.3 Discuss with Others

Engage in study groups or online forums. Discussing Socrates' defense with peers can uncover new insights and clarify ambiguous passages.

7.4 Consult Secondary Literature

Supplement your reading with scholarly essays that analyze the Apology's themes. This will deepen your understanding and expose you to various interpretive lenses.

8. Accessibility and Editions: Where to Find Jowett's Apology Today

Jowett's Apology is widely available in several formats, ensuring that readers can access it in a way that suits their preferences.

8.1 Print Editions

- Oxford University Press (OUP) 2015 Deluxe Edition – High-quality paper, leather binding, and an introduction by a contemporary scholar.
- Penguin Classics – A more affordable paperback version with a short introduction.
- University Press Editions – Often included in academic textbook bundles.

8.2 Digital Versions

- Project Gutenberg – Free ePub and plain text versions.
- Google Books – Preview and full view options, depending on copyright status.
- Amazon Kindle – Kindle edition available for purchase.

8.3 Audio and Video Resources

- LibriVox – Free public domain audiobook recordings.
- Academic Lectures – Many universities host video lectures that incorporate Jowett's translation.

Conclusion

Benjamin Jowett's translation of Plato's Apology remains a cornerstone of classical philosophy education and scholarship. By marrying linguistic clarity with faithful representation of Socratic rhetoric, Jowett has crafted a version that continues to speak to modern readers. Whether you are a student encountering Socrates for the first time

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