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The Hemlock Cup

Bettany Hughes

BETTANY HUGHES

THE HEMLOCK CUP

SOCRATES, ATHENS AND THE SEARCH FOR THE GOOD LIFE

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LONDON

Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781446419168

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Jonathan Cape 2010

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Jonathan Cape

Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

www.rbooks.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:
www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780224071789

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For

KE-SE-NE-WI-JA

xenwia and xenia

and therefore for my
friends, at home and abroad.

ALSO BY BETTANY HUGHES

Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore

Praise for *Helen of Troy*

‘I didn’t think it would be possible to write a life of Helen. Bettany Hughes has done so with a brilliance and erudition that leaves me gasping.’

Sunday Times, Books of the Year

‘Hughes skilfully brings this period back to life. A fascinating window on to the power politics of an age.’

Richard Miles, *Sunday Telegraph*

‘Fantastic … I have never, ever, read anybody write so well about travels in Greece and going to explore archaeological sites.’

Professor Edith Hall, ‘Woman’s Hour’

‘When Helen launched her “thousand ships” was she a “shameless hussy”? … Or, like her mother, was she a rape victim? … The answers have always depended on who you speak to and when, Hughes has them all.’

Peter Stothard, *The Times*

‘Bettany is the first person to push Helen as a major Bronze Age figure, rather than as a shadowy myth, and to a large extent she’s succeeded. Why should we think all the people Homer mentions are fictitious? I see every reason to believe that the Helen of legend, like Agamemnon or Menelaus, may have been a real character with a real background whose actions have been modified, embellished and distorted over the centuries.’

Dr Kenneth Wardle, *Independent on Sunday*

‘The book triumphantly reclaims Helen from her traducers. Hughes’ portrait is as close to a real, living Helen as we are likely to get. In an increasingly sexualised culture, the questions Helen raises are more alive than ever.’

Financial Times

‘Her multi-faceted, multi-hued, and multi-period portrait of la Belle Helene will capture the imagination of professional scholars and general readers alike. I cannot recommend it too strongly.’

Professor Paul Cartledge,
A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture, Cambridge University

‘Intense debate surrounds Helen whose elopement with Paris sparked the Trojan war. “Did she jump or was she pushed?” has been a key question from the sixth century BC to our own. In *Helen of Troy* Bettany Hughes has gathered together a startling array of answers, both ancient and modern … an investigative achievement.’

Mary Beard, *Guardian*

‘A fantastic, compelling argument … A gripping read.’

Dr Jenny Wallace, Peterhouse, Cambridge University

‘Hughes brings a passion for ancient history and archaeology crossed with a strain of feminism to the figure of Helen.’

Marina Warner, *Washington Post*

‘A meticulously-researched book about Helen, whose text and notes demonstrate her intimate knowledge of her subject.’

Joan Smith, *Independent*

‘This book puts Helen of Troy at the centre of a world in which, as Bettany Hughes convincingly explains, the primordial power was female.’

Geraldine Bedell, *Observer*

‘So has Bettany succeeded in her quest and self-appointed task [to track down Helen of Troy]? In my view – yes. Magnificently … Bettany controls this complex material beautifully and brings it together into a very satisfying whole. Moreover the book is a “good read”.’

Lesley Fitton, Chief Bronze Age Curator, Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, British Museum

‘Bettany Hughes’ *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* might have been a tepid, encyclopaedic listing of all the mentions of beautiful Helen in Western myth, literature and art. But the most exciting thing about this book, besides its subtitle, is its hot fascination with the past, its almost ecstatic pursuit of sensuous history … The greatest pleasures of this biography, this history, this survey, lie in the author’s capacity to awaken the senses, to carry us with her as she hears, smells, feels, tastes, sees the past. Hughes’ attention to detail calls up a sympathetic experience not only of pleasure but also of pain. The writing reveals a passionate awareness of corporeal experience, and the capacity to inhabit imaginatively the bodies of historically distant peoples.’

Professor Page du Bois

Many wonders, many terrors, but none more wonderful or more terrible than a human being.

Sophocles, *Antigone*, 332

And what kind of person is more loved by the gods than the one who is most happy?

Xenophon describing Socrates in his *Memorabilia*, 4.8.3

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have referenced the works, both ancient and modern, upon which I have relied heavily or which might be of further interest to the reader. Although I would have loved Socrates to be Sokrates – and hence more Hellenic, I have in general chosen the more familiar, Latinised versions of the names of literary and historical figures and places.

The translations are my own or a collaborative effort between myself and my colleagues unless otherwise stated.

For help, humour, hospitality and the gift of *nous* my heartfelt thanks go to;

Julian Alexander, Anna Antoniou, Professor Mary Beard, Professor Lisa Bendall, Richard Bradley, Professor Sue Blundell, Professor John Camp, Professor Paul Cartledge, Sophia and Alex Constantidis, Professor Michael Cosmopoulos, Professor James Davidson, Dr Angelos Delivorrias, Professor Matthew Dickie, Dr Matt Edge, Kathy Elgin, Lucy Felmingham, Wing Commander John Foden (who, age 83 led me through the mountains of the Peloponnese), Spiro and Millie Flamburiari (thank you for introducing me to the delights of Corcyra), Dr Annelise Freisenbruch, Professor Betsy Gebhard, Dr Dimitris Grigoropoulos, Dr Angie Hobbs, Dr Dan Hogg, Ben Jackson, John, Jenny, Jane and Julia (for the houses), Professor Robin Lane-Fox, Bill Locke, Jack Maclnnes, John Morcom, Dr

Alfonso Moreno, Peter Millett, Professor Dirk Obbink, Justin Pollard, Jennifer Redfearn, Professor P. J. Rhodes, Laura Rizzotto, Sophia Roberts, Professor Charlotte Roueché, Dr Deborah Ruscillo, John Savage, Dr Michael Scott, Philip Sellars, Dr Victoria Solomonidis, Julietta Steinhauer, Dr Claire Stocks, Professor Barry Strauss, Professor Oliver Taplin, Lieutenant-Commander Alec Tilley, Dr Nicola Wardle, Olivia Williams. The staff of the Ashmolean and British Museums, the German Archaeological Institute, the Naples Museum and the Samos Epigraphical Museum, thank you for your patience. St. Hilda's College – my alma mater – always there for me. Professor Dirk Obbink – the treasures from the sands of Egypt have been patiently and generously revealed. Robin – you fired me to do all of this, when we meet or talk or I read a word of your work I remember why every single one of your tutorials was wildly inspirational. Never a dull moment. Matti and Nicholas Egon have been, as ever, wonderful. The world owes you much. Professor John Camp, your guided tours were exceptionally helpful, and illuminating for both me and my girls. Peter and Anna, you've let me impose on your hospitality so many times now, and Athens will not be the same without you. Pete, our road trips have been amongst the happiest days of my life. Sorrel and May Evans – thank you very much for reading out those Plato quotes at times of need. Adrian, thank you for living with a backview at a computer for the last five years. Ma and pa you made it possible.

Without the undinting support of all of the above this book simply would not have made it into print.

Ellah Allfrey and Dan Franklin sympathetically honed the text and saved me from both extreme colloquialism and self-indulgence, Tom Avery – the man with the most beautiful writing in the world, was charm personified despite my increasingly wild demands, Neil – thank you for

the extension, Will for your good judgement, and Clara for your vivacity and vision. Julian Alexander my Literary Agent has been my rock and has become one of my dear friends, you have made my life better – and whenever I think of you I smile. Dr Alfonso Moreno, Dr Angie Hobbs, Professor Oliver Taplin, Professor Michael Cosmopoulos, Professor James Davidson, Professor Elizabeth Gebhard, Professor Matthew Dickie, Peter Millett, Dr Matt Edge have all been kind enough to read all or part of this text and save me from error and mania. Paul Cartledge has proved himself, once again, to be both the superior friend and scholar. He has met last minute requests to look over this text – I blush to think how many times – with grace and generosity. He is one of the reasons I love antiquity with such a passion.

PREFACE

Those who are already wise no longer love wisdom – whether they are gods or men. Similarly, those whose own ignorance has made them bad, rotten, evil, do not strive for wisdom either. For no evil or ignorant person ever strives for wisdom. What remains are those who suffer from ignorance, but still retain some sense and understanding. They are conscious of knowing what they don't know.

Socrates in Plato's *Lysis*, 218b, fourth century BC

PUT TWO AUTHORS TOGETHER IN A room and someone is bound to leave mildly depressed. The only exception seems to be when one of the pair is Peter Cook. Meeting a fellow writer in a bar, so the anecdote goes, he was asked whether he was penning a book. 'Yes, I'm not either …' came the soothing reply.

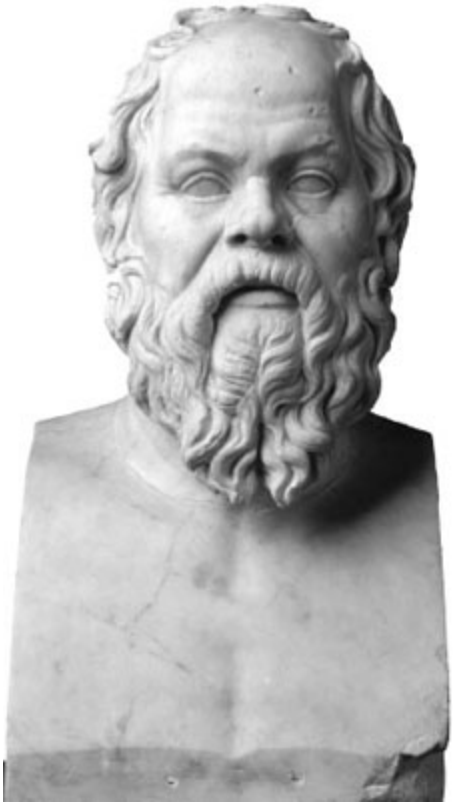
No such comfort for me. Sharing breakfast in an Edinburgh hotel with an award-winning novelist, just as I embarked on this book, the friendly chat came round to our next projects.

'Socrates! What a doughnut subject!' he exclaimed. 'Gloriously rich, with a whacking hole in the middle where the central character should be …' My smile fixed. Of course he is right: because as far as we know, Socrates wrote down not one word of philosophy. The idea of

Socrates is immensely influential, and yet everything we know of him is hearsay. He is, historically, conspicuous by his absence. And thus for the past five years, as I've typed, I have had a spectral doughnut hovering over my shoulder.

But painters will tell you that the truest way to represent a shape is to deal with the space around it. The primary-source, autobiographical, historical Socrates is a lacuna; my hope is that by looking at the shape around the Socrates-sized hole, at the city in which he lived – Athens in the fifth century BC – I can begin to write not quite a life of Socrates, but a vivid sketch of Socrates in his landscape; a topography of the man in his times.

I have a warehouse full of unusual allies in this task – the earth-shifters, bulldozers, spades and trowels that have been picking over the Greek landscape in the last few years. The millennial year of 2000, the promise of a Greek Olympics in 2004, the new Acropolis Museum, a change in planning law – all these things have yielded huge amounts of material evidence from the fifth century BC. Socrates is an *eidolon* – the Greek word gives us idol, a ghost – who haunts a very real landscape. By exploring this physical landscape my hope is to flesh out this idol, and to imagine the life of one of the most provocative and provoking thinkers of all time. [1]



INTRODUCTION

The unexamined life is not a life worth living for a human being.

Socrates, in Plato's *Apology*, 38a [1]

WE THINK THE WAY WE DO because Socrates thought the way he did. Socrates' belief that, as individuals, we need to question the world around us stands at the heart of what it means to live in 'modern times'. In the Socratic Dialogues, generated twenty-four centuries ago, we find the birth of *ethos* – ethics [2] – and the identification of the *psyche*. [3] 'The First Martyr' – the Greek *martys* means 'witness' – a witness to 'truth, virtue, justice' and 'freedom of speech', is commemorated as a bedrock of our civilisation.

Socrates stands at the beginning of our world – when democracy and liberty are first conceived as fundamental values of society. We need to understand him because he did not just pursue the meaning of life, but the meaning of *our own* lives. [4]

Socrates sees us coming. He worries that the pursuit of plenty will bring mindless materialism, that 'democracy' will become just a banner under which to fight. What is the point, he says, of warships and city walls and glittering statues if we are not happy? If we have lost sight of what is good? His is a question that is more pertinent now than ever. He asks: 'What is the right way to live?'

I am a stinging fly, sent to goad the city as though it were a huge, thoroughbred horse, which because of its size is rather sluggish and needs to be stirred. [5]

When Socrates comes into focus, in Greece in the fifth century BC, he is no didact: he wanders through the streets of Athens, *debating* the essence of what it means to be human. For the young men (and women) of the city he is irresistible: his relentless questioning appears to tap man's potential for self-knowledge. His 'ethics' programme centres on the search for the 'good life'. His, it was whispered – then and through the next 2,400 years – is a voice of incomparable *sophia*: of knowledge, skill, wisdom and truth. The greater part of Socrates' life was spent out in public, in Athens, philosophising unrestricted. But when the philosopher was seventy, Athens turned against him. In March 399 BC the ageing citizen was tried in a religious court and found guilty of both primary and secondary charges: *'not duly acknowledging the city's gods and inventing new ones*' and *'corrupting the youth*'. The death sentence was passed: four weeks or so later Socrates killed himself by drinking the hemlock poison left for him by his jailer in his Athenian cell.

Socrates' arguments were perhaps just too incendiary, too dangerously charismatic. He believed that man had the potential to enjoy perfect happiness. A clue to the contemporary impact of his ideas is given by his pupil Plato. In the *Allegory of the Cave*, [6] with cool detail, Plato has Socrates describe a race of men who have been born in chains, and who, staring for ever at a cave wall, see only the shadows of creatures above them and believe these shadows to be reality. He then reveals the dismay and joy

these captives feel when they are brought, blinking, into the light of the real world. The chained men represent those of humanity who have yet to hear or understand what Socrates has to say.

However, when it comes to wholeheartedly embracing the new, mankind displays a poor record. In a superstitious city, Socrates' spiritual and moral make-up was unconventional, troubling. He seems to have suffered from some form of epilepsy or 'petit mal' (hence his curious cataleptic seizures, when he stared into the distance for hours on end), which in a pious age was interpreted as a malign 'inner voice'.[7] His contemporary, the playwright Aristophanes, talks of the passionate men who go to hear him preach and turn their minds to fundamental issues rather than frivolities as having been 'Socratified'. And in his comedy, *Clouds*,[8] Aristophanes jeers at Socrates' high-minded eccentricities, has him clamber into a raised bath and scramble around in the clouds to *'peer at the arse of the moon*'. Democracies need pragmatists, yet Socrates refuses to contain himself, to temper the power of principle. So *pheme* – rumour, gossip – starts to fly through Athena's city. As the robust philosopher is only too aware, a whispering campaign is the most pernicious and insidious of enemies.[9]

These people who have thrown scandal at me are genuinely dangerous. They've used envy and slander and they're difficult to deal with. I cannot possibly bring them into court to cross-question them or refute their charges. I have to defend myself as if I were boxing with shadows.[10]

Socratic thought and the living Socrates

In all cities, it is easier to hurt a man than to help him.

Plato, *Meno*, 94e

In the Metropolitan Museum in New York hangs a painting of Socrates, dying, by the great neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David. Socrates – speaking slowly but determinedly as the hemlock runs through his veins, a martyr to virtue and high principle – is surrounded by agitated disciples. [11] Crouched around his bed are those men such as Plato who will carry his words into literature and thus on into the very DNA of world civilisation. [12]

Now it is time for us to go away, for me to die and for you to live; but which of us is going to a better condition is not known to anyone except god. [13]

This is not, in principle, a book of philosophic theory. I am a historian, not a philosopher, and cannot possibly better the work of those who have gone before me, who have squeezed ever-evolving interpretations out of Socrates' philosophical ideas; Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes the Cynic, Al-Kindi, Yehuda ha-Levi, Thomas Hobbes et al., all these men have tussled with what Socrates' philosophy means. That is a bulging canon and one I would not presume to augment. But I can turn my eyes to the stones under my feet. I can

see how Socrates' philosophy evolved in his time and his place.

For the purposes of this book, the joy of Socratic thought is that Socrates did not believe in or deal with abstracts. For him, morality stemmed from and emerged to deal with real problems in a real world. The characters he employs as porters for his ideas are often cobblers, bakers, priestesses, whores. Socrates continually emphasises that he is flesh and blood, and that it is as a flesh-and-blood man that he lived and understood life. It is one of the reasons his philosophy is so accessible to all of us. So bringing the humble, the archaeological and the physical back into the Socratic experience is appropriate. The totemic ideas that Socrates delivered were, put simply, as much to do with the religious ritual he had just witnessed down at his local harbour, with the pleasure of walking barefoot through Athens, with the death of a loved one, or the horror of living through a wasting-war, as they were with any kind of purely intellectual concept. Socrates' prime concern was with the world as lived. As this book weaves together the mongrel evidence for his life, where material remains are as valued as literary and documentary sources, a picture emerges of a world that is, for the first time, self-consciously trying to build a 'civilisation' that is based on a 'democracy'. [14]

Yet Socrates is not concerned just with our surroundings, but what is *within* us. '*He who orders us to know ourselves is bidding us to become acquainted with our soul*.' [15] Socrates is soulful. The philosopher believes open conversation an essential balm for the *psyche*. His method gets inner thoughts out into the public sphere, not as a monologue, but as a dialogue. For him this was cathartic – Plato uses the Greek word, *katharsis* [16] – releasing 'bad things' from the spirit. Socrates is the first man for whom we have an extant record who explores how

we should all live in the world, as the world was working out how to live with itself.

Truth is in fact a purification [katharsis] … and self-restraint and justice and courage and wisdom itself are a kind of purification.[17]

Socrates' philosophy is relevant to all of us, not least because it has been so tenacious. From Elizabeth I to Martin Luther King, from the Third Reich to twenty-first-century America, Socrates' example has been used to try to understand what society is, and what it should be. Socratic words filled the halls of Italian Renaissance humanists. The Jewish philosopher Yehuda ha-Levi in the eleventh century AD cites Socrates in a dialogue with King Khazar concerning the nature of Judaism. John Locke and Thomas Hobbes scatter their treatises of political theory with Socratic quotations.

Socrates was also a central influence in early Islam. Al-Kindi, the 'first' self-professed Arab philosopher, certainly the first Muslim philosopher, wrote extensive (long-lost) treatises on Socrates in the ninth century AD.[18] Socratic wisdoms were quoted in coloured stone, mortared into the very fabric of public buildings in Samarkand. The philosopher was nominated one of the Seven Pillars of Wisdom, his nickname 'The Source'. Socrates' inner voice was thought by medieval Muslims a sign that he was an angel in poor man's clothing. Throughout the Arab world from the eleventh century AD up until the present day he was said to refresh and nourish, '*like … the purest water in the midday heat*'.[19]

And yet why should we still care for him? Why commemorate this long-ago life? One good reason is because Socrates does that shocking thing – that thing we still crave – he implies there might be a way to be fulfilled on this earth. Socrates was magnetic because he counselled care of the soul. He believed that men can

achieve true happiness only when they are at peace with themselves.[20] He suggested it is ‘us,’ not ‘them’, who can make things better.

Socrates, as I have said, is tantalisingly elusive. But what we do have in our favour is the physical setting of his ‘not thereness’. If the play of fifth-century BC Athenian life was lovingly crafted by Plato, and Socrates was his inspiration, then the stage-set, Athens, is still available to all of us. All agree, when it comes to Socrates, that he was down-to-earth. His was a great mind supported by feet of clay. And it is those muddy footsteps that I will follow. So this is not a philosophical, but a topographical map of the man.

There are many reasons why Socrates’ story demands to be told. It is, at its most basic, an electric courtroom drama. The men of Athens vote to exterminate Socrates. They think he is a threat. He thinks he can save the soul of the city. Is this mob-rule, a political conspiracy, or the perfect example of the rule of the majority? Is Socrates’ story a tragedy or a useful staging post in the development of civilisation? Who is in the right?[21] The story of Socrates also incarnates the tension between the freedom of the individual and the regulation of the community. His refusal to compromise ends in his death. It is for this reason that he is hailed as humanity’s first-recorded ideological martyr.

Socrates’ life was spent in search of treasure, of an intimate understanding of humanity. And the combusting energy of that search drove him around the city of Athens. This book pursues the path he burned. His quest was to identify what place ‘the good’ might have in human society. We might not find that ultimate prize; Socrates himself was never sure that he had done so, and the only thing he seems to have been certain of was the futility of trying to find ‘real’ scientific explanations for everything in life. He

thought it fruitless to stare at the skies and travel to the ends of the earth in order to catalogue the world, without learning to love it. Yet by inhabiting the Athens that raised him, we might just get a glimpse of the treasure-seeker: hot and cross sometimes, bad-tempered, self-absorbed, brilliant, dangerous, droll. Socrates never lost sight of his own temporality. The day he is condemned to death he declares: *'I am, as Homer puts it, "not born of an oak or a rock", but of human parents*.' [22] And so this books aims, physically, to inhabit Socrates' Athens – not just as recorded and as promoted, but as lived and experienced.

The city of Athens *is* Socrates. Nothing means more to Socrates than Athens, and, more importantly, than the Athenians within it. He tells one of his colleagues Phaedrus that his home, his world, is the city – a city full of people. For Socrates, people are his magnetic North: he *loved* them. Xenophon reports that his conversations '*were always about human concerns. He dealt with questions such as how people please and displease the gods, what is the essence/purpose of beauty and ugliness, justice and injustice, prudence and moderation, courage and cowardice*.' [23] All his philosophy is drawn to understanding the being of men and women around him. This understanding, this consciousness of one's own consciousness, is what Socrates calls the '*psyche*'– the life-breath or soul. And it is in the city of Athens, between the years 469 and 399 BC, that Socrates' soul flits.

My ambition is very simple: to re-enter the streets of Athens in real time. Not to revisit a Golden Age city, but to look at a real city-state that was forging a great political experiment and riveting a culture; a city that suffered war and plague as well as enjoying great triumphs. To inhabit a place that is at once absolutely recognisable and utterly strange. To breathe the air Socrates breathed. To meet

democrats who pre-date democracy and philosophers who operate before the science of philosophy is born.

This history is pathos. Socrates' life and trial and death by hemlock are stories that Athens did not want fully told, but which we need to hear.

THE DRAMATIC STORY OF SOCRATES – SOURCES AND APPROACH

The words of Socrates survive and always will, although he wrote
nothing and left no work or testament.

Dio Chrysostom, *On Socrates*, 54, first century AD

TRADITIONALLY WE MEET Socrates when a few of the key authors from antiquity, in particular Plato and Xenophon (both pro-Socrates) and Aristophanes (mixed), decide to open the door to him: but in that doorway there is always the screen of the author's opinions, their take on what they choose us to see. So, when we read the 'words' of Socrates, it is hard to tell whether these are his or another's attitude, another's philosophical enterprise. [1]

There is a second challenge. Plato, Aristophanes and Xenophon – Socrates' immediate or close contemporaries, men who are the fathers of Western philosophy, drama and chronicle – each deal with Socrates in a notably theatrical way.

Plato writes as a dramatist, a frustrated playwright. In his work the 'character' of Socrates is – as all great theatrical characters are – essentially charismatic, articulate and, to some extent, fabricated. The dramatic persona is both amplified and collapsed, it is extra-