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## SOCRATES AND THE TENSIONS OF DEMOCRACY: BRENTON'S PLAY, *CANCELLING SOCRATES*

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex interplay between personal and political spheres as depicted in Howard Brenton's play *Cancelling Socrates* (2022), alongside historical accounts of Socrates' trial and execution. Brenton's play highlights the tension between individual values and societal demands through the contrasting perspectives of Xanthippe and Aspasia. Xanthippe's dismissal of state concerns in favour of personal, familial realities underscores the clash between individual desires and political responsibilities. Aspasia's emphasis on the state as the embodiment of the common good presents the democratic ideal in opposition to Xanthippe's private sphere. This dynamic reflects the broader historical context of Socrates' trial, where his philosophical inquiries and perceived corruption of Athenian youth provoked a democratic system struggling with internal contradictions. The study examines how Socrates' role as a moral and intellectual provocateur challenged the democratic norms of his time, leading to his eventual prosecution. It also considers Brenton's critique of civilization's reliance on collective beliefs and norms, as articulated through Euthyphro's reflections in the play. This analysis reveals the enduring relevance of Socratic themes in understanding the tensions between personal integrity and political authority.

**Keywords:** Socrates, Democracy, Politics, Howard Brenton, Cancelling Socrates

## SOKRATES VE DEMOKRASİNİN GERİLİMLERİ: BRENTON'UN *CANCELLING SOCRATES* ADLI OYUNU

### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Howard Brenton'un *Sokrates'in İptali* (2022), adlı oyununda tasvir edilen kişisel ve siyasi alanlar arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimi, Sokrates'in yargılanması ve idamıyla ilgili tarihsel anlatımlar bağlamında incelemektedir. Brenton'un oyununda

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Xanthippe ve Aspasia'nın zıt perspektifleri aracılığıyla bireysel değerler ile toplumsal talepler arasındaki gerilim vurgulanmaktadır. Xanthippe'nin kişisel ve ailevi gerçeklikler lehine devlet kaygılarını reddi, bireysel arzular ile siyasi sorumluluklar arasındaki çatışmayı altını çizmektedir. Aspasia'nın devleti ortak çıkarın somutlaşmış hali olarak vurgulaması, demokratik ideali Xanthippe'nin özel alanına karşıt olarak sunmaktadır. Bu dinamik, Sokrates'in yargılanmasının daha geniş tarihsel bağlamını yansıtmaktadır; burada Sokrates'in ahlaki ve entelektüel kısırtıcılığı, iç çelişkilerle boğuşan bir demokrasiyi provoke etmiştir. Çalışma, Sokrates'in bir ahlaki ve entelektüel provokatör olarak nasıl demokratik normları sorguladığını ve nihai olarak yargılanmasına yol açtığını incelemektedir. Ayrıca, Brenton'un oyundaki Euthyphro aracılığıyla ifade edilen medeniyetin kolektif inanç ve normlara bağımlılığı üzerine eleştirisini değerlendirmektedir. Bu analiz, kişisel bütünlük ile siyasi otorite arasındaki gerilimleri anlamak bağlamında Sokratik temaların sürekliliğini ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Socrates, Demokrasi, Politika, Howard Brenton, Sokrates'in İptali

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The intricate relationship between Socrates and Athenian democracy has been a subject of enduring scholarly interest, with the trial and execution of Socrates standing as one of the most poignant episodes in the history of democratic governance. Howard Brenton's play *Cancelling Socrates* revisits this pivotal moment, offering a nuanced exploration of the tensions between individual agency and the collective will that characterized Athenian democracy. This essay delves into the complex interplay between Socratic philosophy and the democratic principles of Athens, examining how Brenton's portrayal sheds light on the inherent contradictions and challenges within the political system.

Democracy, derived from the Greek term "demokratia," signifies a form of government where power rests with the people. In Athens, this took the radical form of direct participation, with citizens actively engaging in the decision-making processes that governed their city-state. However, as Brenton's play illustrates, this system was not without its flaws. The trial of Socrates, ostensibly for impiety and corrupting the youth, reveals the darker side of Athenian democracy—a side where the will of the majority could be wielded to suppress dissent and enforce conformity.

In *Cancelling Socrates*, Brenton vividly captures the precarious nature of Athenian democracy in 399 BC, a time when the city was reeling from the aftermath of war, plague, and political turmoil. Socrates, with his relentless questioning of societal norms and his refusal to acquiesce to the demands of the state, becomes both a symbol of the philosophical pursuit of truth and a victim of democratic excess. Through his portrayal of Socrates' trial, Brenton not only examines the philosophical debates that defined the era but also offers

a critique of the very democratic principles that led to the philosopher's condemnation.

This essay will explore the themes of justice, piety, and democratic governance as presented in Brenton's *Cancelling Socrates*, analyzing how the play reflects the broader historical and philosophical context of Athenian democracy. By doing so, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between Socrates and the society that ultimately sentenced him to death, highlighting the enduring relevance of these themes in contemporary discussions of democracy and individual rights.

### 1.1. What Is Democracy

Democracy, a term originating from the Greek “demokratia,” meaning “rule by the people” (Harrison, 1993, p. 2; Held, 2006, p. 1), signifies a political system radically distinct from monarchies and aristocracies. Unlike these forms of government, which concentrate power in the hands of a few, democracy places authority in the collective body of citizens (Held, 2006, p. 1). This implies a political community characterized by a degree of equality among its members.

At its core, democracy is a procedural framework for group decision-making (Beetham, 2006, p. 2; Harrison, 1993, p. 131; Catt, 1999, pp. 1-10). It ensures that power is distributed equitably, granting all members an equal opportunity to participate in and influence decisions that affect the community. This stands in contrast to individual decision-making, as collective endeavours require shared choices about membership, governance, goals, policies, resource allocation, and workload distribution.

Rooted in the belief that all members are stakeholders in the collective democracy (Catt, 1999, p. 1), it posits that individuals possess the capacity to form informed judgments about the best course of action for both themselves and the community. According to Beetham (2006), it emphasizes the importance of open and inclusive deliberation to arrive at sound decisions. When consensus is unattainable, democratic principles advocate for decision-making through universal suffrage, where each vote carries equal weight, reflecting the fundamental equality of all citizens (p. 3).

The legacy of Athenian democracy, though limited in scope, serves as a foundational model for contemporary democratic systems. The institution of a popular assembly, where citizens directly debated and enacted laws, including matters of war and peace, was a pioneering achievement (Beetham, 2006, pp. 3-4). The practice of randomly assigning citizens to executive and judicial roles (Mitchell, 2015, p. 98) exemplified the democratic ideal of popular self-governance. For Beetham (2006), this system, enduring for a century and a half, demonstrated the compatibility of open public discourse with effective governance and collective action (pp. 3-4). Moreover, it

fostered an environment of intellectual freedom that led to unprecedented advancements in various fields of human endeavour.

Equally significant was Athens' defence of political equality, challenging the notion that social status determined political competence. Athenians asserted that all male citizens, irrespective of wealth, were capable of meaningful participation in public decision-making. As historian Kurt A. Raaflaub (2006) noted, "no polis had ever dared to give all its citizens equal political rights, regardless of their descent, wealth, social standing, education, personal qualities, and any other factors that usually determined status in a community" (p. 388). This principle, championed by figures like Euripides and Pericles, remains a cornerstone of democratic thought (Beetham, 2006, p. 4).

In essence, democracy is a system that empowers the people, providing a framework for collective decision-making, valuing diverse perspectives, and upholding the principle of political equality.

### **1.2. Athenian Democracy: A Radical Experiment**

Athenian democracy, established over 2,500 years ago, stands as a pioneering experiment in self-governance. Unlike the representative democracies prevalent today, Athens embraced a radical form of direct democracy, entrusting political power directly to its "male citizenry" (Raaflaub, 2006, p. 407; Asmonti, 2015, p. 10; Mitchell, 2015, p. 256). This bold experiment, involving a relatively small population of approximately 30,000 to 50,000 citizens, profoundly influenced democratic thought and practice across millennia, including in the United States (Garland, 2018, p. 4).

At the core of Athenian democracy was its Assembly, where citizens convened to debate and vote on crucial matters of state (Hansen, 2008, p. 23). This direct participation in lawmaking and policy decisions was unprecedented in the ancient world. The jury system, introduced by Aristides, further solidified the democratic ethos, guaranteeing defendants the right to a trial by their peers (Bonner, 1933, p. 37). These institutions, while imperfect by modern standards, laid the groundwork for fundamental principles of justice and equality that continue to resonate today (Martin, 2024).

However, for Garland (2018), significant disparities exist between the democratic system of Athens and those prevalent in Western societies today. While Athenian democracy emphasized direct participation by all citizens in the political process, contemporary democracies predominantly rely on representative forms of government. This fundamental difference is further accentuated by the absence of political parties in ancient Athens, a stark contrast to the party-based systems that underpin modern politics. Moreover, the Athenian state lacked the professionalized bureaucracy and formalized accountability mechanisms that are characteristic of contemporary governance structures (pp. 10-11)

Despite its groundbreaking nature, Athenian democracy was far from a perfect system. Freedom of expression, a cornerstone of modern democracies, was notably curtailed in classical Athens. Individuals who dared to question or challenge prevailing religious doctrines faced severe repercussions, as exemplified by the fates of those who ventured into philosophical or theological realms deemed heretical (Finley, 1985, p. 116; Bonner, 1933, p. 67). Moreover, civic participation was not a voluntary act but a compulsory duty, placing a considerable burden on Athenian citizens. This mandatory engagement, while fostering a sense of communal responsibility, also limited individual autonomy (Finley, 1985, p. 24).

It is essential to recognize that the democratic experiment in Athens was far from inclusive. The foundations of Athenian citizenship were restricted, excluding a vast majority of the population. Women were relegated to the domestic sphere, denied any political voice or legal standing. Slaves, constituting a significant portion of the Athenian economy, were entirely outside the democratic process, their lives dictated by the whims of their owners (Mitchell, 2015, p. 74; Asmonti, 2015, p. viii). Furthermore, “foreigners”, or “metics”, who contributed substantially to Athenian economic and cultural life, were permanently barred from citizenship and its associated privileges. While this paragraph primarily focuses on the exclusion of women, slaves, and metics, it's important to note that Athenian citizenship was still restricted even within the category of free men. Citizenship was often limited to men born within Athens to Athenian parents, excluding many free men who were born elsewhere or whose parents were not Athenian citizens. In some cases, property or wealth qualifications were required, effectively excluding poorer free men. Military service was often a requirement for citizenship, which could exclude some free men due to age, physical limitations, or other circumstances. This restricted franchise significantly compromised the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty on the grounds of gender, social status (slave vs. free), and residency status, as well as other factors such as birthplace, wealth, and military service. (Asmonti, 2015, p. viii; Tilly, 2007, p. 9).

Athenian democracy, though imperfect and limited in scope, represents a bold and influential experiment in self-governance. Its legacy continues to shape our understanding of democracy, while its shortcomings serve as a reminder of the challenges and complexities inherent in creating and sustaining democratic societies (Garland, 2018, p. 59).

The restoration of democracy, though achieved without bloodshed, was not without its own forms of persecution in Ancient Greece. A prominent example of this is the case of Socrates, who suffered the consequences of his association with key figures in the oligarchic coups of 411 and 404 BC, such as Critias and Theramenes. In 399 BC, Socrates was prosecuted and convicted on charges of corrupting the youth and impiety. His execution marked a significant moment in the life of the young Plato, prompting him to abandon

his political aspirations in favour of philosophy, with the aim of contributing to the moral renewal of the polis (Asmonti, 2015, p. 196).

Socrates was formally indicted on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth, accusations that stand in stark contrast to his deeply held religious convictions. However, his intellectual independence and critical questioning of societal norms had alienated powerful individuals. While the jury's initial verdict of guilt may have been intended as a form of censure rather than capital punishment, Socrates' subsequent defiant proposal for a lifetime state-sponsored pension enraged his accusers, leading to the imposition of the death penalty. Rather than evade his fate, Socrates chose to accept his punishment as a matter of principle, upholding the sanctity of Athenian law even in the face of its misuse by political adversaries (Brenton, 2022).

By the mid-fifth century BCE, Athens had established a democratic system that, while subject to future modifications, contained its core elements. Athenians had ample opportunities to practice public speaking in various political and social settings, including the Assembly, Council, law courts, and informal gatherings. The art of rhetoric was formally taught by the Sophists, though they often received criticism, particularly from Socrates. Socrates advocated for philosophers to offer their knowledge without charge, an idealistic but impractical notion (Garland, 2018, p. 82).

As Howard Brenton articulated in an interview, Athenian democracy in 399 BC was precarious. The political landscape had been destabilized by a harsh oligarchic coup in 411 BC, which lasted a year before collapsing, followed by another coup in 404 BC when Athens capitulated to Sparta. Although democracy was eventually reinstated, the aftermath left the nation with wounded pride, an imperilled economy, and a populace that was both angry and fatigued. In these dire circumstances, targeting prominent figures became a widespread practice in Athens (Brenton, 2022).

According to Levene (2022) Howard Brenton's play, *Cancelling Socrates*, offers a comprehensive and thoughtful exploration of the life of a figure whose influence is undeniable in fields as diverse as science, literature, and politics. Brenton effectively portrays Socrates as a heroic figure whose legacy continues to shape Western civilization. The play effectively conveys the tensions in Athens at the time, a city in chaos after plague and war, hanging on by a thread to its democracy. Through characters like Aspasia, Xanthippe, and a jailer, Brenton explores the clash between the world and private life, between the state and the values of the family, making it a work that does not drag, patronize, or preach to its audience.

## 2. Insights From Howard Brenton's *Cancelling Socrates*

Howard Brenton's play *Cancelling Socrates* offers a deep exploration of democracy, individual agency, and the conflicts between personal beliefs and societal norms. Through dialogues between Socrates, Euthyphro, and other

characters, Brenton probes the nature of justice, piety, and the role of democracy in regulating thought and behaviour.

Socrates was condemned to death on two primary charges: corrupting the youth and impiety. The latter, a crime against the state's recognized deities, was the more severe accusation leading to the death penalty. While these charges were the official grounds, many scholars argue that Socrates' true crime was challenging the status quo with his unconventional philosophies (Dorion, 2011, p. 12).

The play's portrayal of Socrates emphasizes the tension between his philosophical rigor and his personal life. As Brenton's work suggests, the philosophical debates in which Socrates engaged were not just abstract exercises but had profound implications for the political and social order of Athens. However, Brenton also acknowledges the limitations in fully capturing the complexity of Socrates as a human being. Arifa Akbar, A critique of *Guardian*, notes:

What drama there is alongside the ideas feels arresting, fiercely intelligent, and full of risk but not satisfyingly complete—like scenes from a play rather than a play itself. Although we believe in Socrates as a philosopher, we never quite believe in him as a man choosing death on principle, over family, children, and life. He walks towards his end, blithely philosophizing, right until the cup of hemlock touches his lips and even afterwards as he wavers between life and death. (Akbar, 2022).

This observation highlights the difficulty of reconciling the towering intellectual figure with the emotional and personal dimensions of his choices. To fully understand the context of these accusations, it's essential to recognize the distinct nature of religion in Classical Athens. Unlike modern conceptions, religion was deeply intertwined with civic life. It was not a personal belief system but a cornerstone of the polis. Athenian citizens were expected to participate in state-sanctioned rituals, sacrifices, and festivals, honouring the official pantheon. Religious observance was seen as an indispensable duty for a responsible citizen (Garland, 2018, p. 10; Bonner, 1933, p. 39; Lape, 2010, p. 203).

### **2.1. The Question Of Justice And Divine Will**

The opening dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro examines the nature of justice as it relates to divine will. Euthyphro's story about his father's steward reflects the complexities of moral and legal obligations in a religiously governed society. Socrates' probing question, "Do the gods see slaves as being human?" (Brenton, 2023, p. 3), challenges the moral underpinnings of Euthyphro's actions and, by extension, the justice system that is influenced by religious beliefs. This conversation highlights the tension

between human and divine justice, questioning whether religious dictates are sufficient to govern human affairs.

Euthyphro's assertion that “prosecuting a wrongdoer, that's holy” (Brenton, 2023, p. 4) reveals his deep-rooted belief in the interconnectedness of law and religion. He views moral and legal obligations as intrinsically tied to religious duty. For Euthyphro, the act of bringing a criminal to justice is not merely a legal responsibility but a sacred duty, a way of aligning human actions with divine will. This perspective reveals a deep-seated conviction that the gods themselves dictate what is just and unjust, and that human law must be a direct reflection of these divine decrees. As Euthyphro asserts, “The ways of the gods are beyond our comprehension” (Brenton, 2023, p. 10), reinforcing his belief that divine actions are inherently pious, even if humans cannot fully understand them.

However, Socrates complicates this seemingly straightforward relationship by questioning the consistency of the gods' actions, particularly in the context of the Trojan War, where different gods supported opposing sides. By highlighting this contradiction, Socrates challenges the very foundation of Euthyphro's belief system. He provocatively asks, “So, tell me, my dear religious friend, in the Trojan War, when the goddess Athena said justice was on the side of the Greeks, and the god Apollo said justice was on the side of the Trojans, which of them was right?” (Brenton, 2023, p. 4). This question not only exposes the potential for conflict within the divine realm but also suggests that justice, as dictated by the gods, may be inherently subjective and contingent upon the whims of whichever deity happens to be involved.

Socrates presses further, questioning the idea that divine actions are always holy, regardless of their nature: “So there is no innate holiness in justice itself, it depends on which god supports which cause?” (Brenton, 2023, p. 7). This line of questioning reveals the arbitrary nature of divine justice and, by extension, the fragility of a society that bases its legal system on such capricious foundations. If the gods themselves cannot agree on what is just, how can humans, who rely on these gods for moral guidance, construct a consistent and fair legal system? Socrates' challenge forces Euthyphro, and by extension the audience, to reconsider the reliability of divine authority as the ultimate source of justice.

Socrates further critiques the notion that religious doctrine can provide a stable foundation for justice by pointing out the contradictions inherent in the gods' actions. When Euthyphro claims that “Zeus, father of the gods, was neutral” in the Trojan War, Socrates retorts, “But not acting is, in itself, an action. Are you saying that Zeus was being both holy and unholy at the same time?” (Brenton, 2023, p. 7). This exchange illustrates the potential absurdity of grounding justice in the actions of gods who themselves may embody contradictory principles. It raises the troubling possibility that laws grounded in religious doctrine may be as inconsistent and contradictory as the

gods themselves, thereby undermining the stability and coherence of the society that enforces them.

By questioning the legitimacy of a justice system rooted in the fluctuating and often conflicting wills of the gods, Socrates opens up a broader critique of the relationship between religion and law. He suggests that true justice cannot be based on the unpredictable dictates of divine beings but must instead be grounded in reason and human understanding. This critique not only challenges the religious foundations of Athenian law but also invites a more rational, philosophical approach to questions of justice and morality—one that does not rely on the potentially fallible authority of the gods. Socrates himself highlights this rational approach, stating, “So all we have to do is ask what do we call ‘good’? And is it holy?” (Brenton, 2023, p. 11), urging a move toward a more reasoned and consistent foundation for justice.

In this way, Socrates’ interrogation of Euthyphro’s beliefs becomes a powerful commentary on the dangers of a legal system that conflates religious piety with justice. It highlights the potential for such a system to become arbitrary and unjust, governed more by the caprices of divine favour than by any consistent or universal principles of right and wrong. The dialogue thus serves as a profound exploration of the complexities and potential pitfalls of intertwining law and religion in the pursuit of justice.

## **2.2. The Role Of Democracy In Shaping Thought**

Socrates’ reflections on democracy reveal a nuanced critique of the system. He expresses a paradoxical admiration for the “hard-edged clarity” of democratic rules while simultaneously recognizing the dangers posed by the majority’s power to suppress dissenting voices. This tension is encapsulated in his comment, “I love the rules of our democracy, their hard-edged clarity” (Brenton, 2023, p. 9). However, Socrates is acutely aware that the democratic system can be manipulated by those with influence, leading to unjust outcomes. This is particularly evident when he discusses Meletus, the young man who seeks to “keep the city safe from impious thinking” (Brenton, 2023, p. 10). Socrates describes Meletus as a “passionate young man” who is “protecting the gods” but also acknowledges that this zealotry represents a threat to the freedoms that democracy should protect (Brenton, 2023, p. 10). The threat that Meletus poses to Socrates is emblematic of the broader tension within democracy: the balance between maintaining order and allowing freedom of thought. Socrates’ critique of democracy becomes even more profound when he suggests that the very nature of religious and moral values in society is subject to contradiction, as seen in his questioning of Euthyphro: “So there is no innate holiness in justice itself, it depends on which god supports which cause” (Brenton, 2023, p. 7). This statement not only challenges the religious underpinnings of Athenian democracy but also highlights the potential for democratic principles to be co-opted by those who wield power.

Brenton further explores this tension through the character of Aspasia, who recognizes the political game at play in Socrates' trial. She advises him to be "politic" and make a simple apology to avoid the death sentence, saying, "All your husband has to do is round off his speech by apologising – 'If I've caused offence, blah and blah,' then everyone can have a good gossip and go home" (Brenton, 2023, p. 15). However, Socrates' refusal to conform to this pragmatic approach highlights his commitment to the examined life, even at the cost of his own survival. His statement, "A life unexamined is not worth living" (Brenton, 2023, p. 30), serves as a powerful assertion of individual agency against the backdrop of democratic pressure to conform. Aspasia, understanding the stakes of the trial, tries to persuade Socrates to abandon his principled stance for the sake of survival, lamenting, "I told you, just for once, this time, stick to the text!" (Brenton, 2023, p. 20). Her frustration underscores the tragic irony of Socrates' situation: his unwavering commitment to truth and inquiry, which defines his philosophical practice, also seals his fate. Aspasia's pragmatic advice reflects a broader commentary on the nature of political survival within a democracy, where sometimes "the simple thing" (Brenton, 2023, p. 27) is to conform rather than to challenge the status quo. Yet, Socrates' steadfastness in the face of death embodies the ultimate challenge to democratic norms, questioning whether true justice and democracy can coexist when the majority seeks to silence dissent.

### 2.3. The Personal Versus The Political

The conflict between personal and political life is vividly depicted in the exchanges between Xanthippe and Aspasia, which serve as a microcosm of the larger thematic struggle within the play. Xanthippe's dismissal of the state as "not real" sharply contrasts with the palpable and intimate reality of her family life. She articulates this sentiment when she says, "All that is real to me is a kiss, a smile on their little faces" (Brenton, 2023, p. 17). This statement underscores her belief that the most tangible and significant aspects of life are found within the domestic sphere, where love and human connection hold the utmost importance. Xanthippe's perspective reflects the tension between individual desires and the demands of the state, suggesting that personal relationships and the emotional world of the family are more concrete and valuable than the abstract concepts that govern political life.

Aspasia, on the other hand, presents a contrasting viewpoint, where she sees the state as the embodiment of the "common good" and the democratic will. Her belief in the state's role as a force for collective order and justice is evident when she argues, "The state is the common good. It's the expression of the democratic will" (Brenton, 2023, p. 19). For Aspasia, the state represents an essential structure that transcends individual concerns, aiming to balance and unify the diverse interests of the community. This ideological divide between Xanthippe and Aspasia encapsulates the central conflict of the play: the struggle to reconcile personal values with the broader demands of society. While Xanthippe is deeply rooted in the immediacy of

familial love and the everyday realities of life, Aspasia advocates for a broader perspective that prioritizes the collective over the individual.

Moreover, Xanthippe's lament that "Life and death" are realities only mothers truly understand (Brenton, 2023, p. 18) introduces a profound contrast with the abstract, political concerns of Aspasia and the men of Athens. This statement not only emphasizes the deeply personal and emotional experience of motherhood but also highlights the gendered dimensions of the debate. Xanthippe's focus on the tangible realities of life and death, as experienced through her role as a mother, positions her as a representative of the personal, domestic sphere. In contrast, Aspasia, who engages with the philosophical and political discourse of the time, represents the public, political arena where abstract ideals often take precedence over individual experiences. The dialogue between these two women thus brings to the fore the inherent tension between the personal and the political, as well as the gendered implications of this divide. Through their exchanges, Brenton explores the complexities of balancing individual desires with societal obligations, ultimately questioning whether the personal can ever be fully reconciled with the political.

#### **2.4. The Fragility of Civilisation and The Role of Religion**

Euthyphro's opening statement, "What is civilisation? The art of living in cities. The cultivation of the good between us" (Brenton, 2023, p. 1), immediately sets the tone for the play's exploration of the concept of civilisation and its intricate dependence on shared beliefs, norms, and collective values. This statement encapsulates the idea that civilisation is not merely a physical construct, represented by cities and infrastructure, but a moral and ethical one, built on the cultivation of virtues and the maintenance of harmonious relationships among individuals. Euthyphro's words suggest that the essence of civilisation lies in the cooperative effort to nurture what is good and just within society, highlighting the importance of communal responsibility in sustaining the fabric of social order.

Euthyphro's devotion to religious duty further exemplifies his belief that the stability of civilisation is inherently tied to collective adherence to a higher moral authority or divine will. His assertion, "The one thing we can all agree on, surely, is that religious duty is all" (Brenton, 2023, p. 1), underscores his conviction that religious observance and the collective commitment to divine law are fundamental to the cohesion and continuity of civilisation. By placing religious duty at the centre of his understanding of civilisation, Euthyphro reflects a worldview in which societal order and moral conduct are inextricably linked to the observance of religious practices and the veneration of the gods.

However, through Euthyphro's character, Brenton also critiques the notion that civilisation is inherently stable or self-sustaining. By emphasizing the reliance on "the cultivation of the good between us", (Brenton, 2023, p.

1) the play suggests that civilisation is a fragile construct, dependent on the continuous and active participation of its members in upholding shared values and norms. The idea that “religious duty is all” reveals the precariousness of civilisation, as it hinges on the collective will to maintain not only religious observance but also the broader moral and ethical framework that underpins social harmony. Brenton’s portrayal of Euthyphro highlights the vulnerability of civilisation, implying that without the mutual agreement and concerted efforts of its people, the delicate balance that holds society together can easily unravel.

In this light, Brenton’s exploration of civilisation through Euthyphro’s perspective becomes a commentary on the tenuous nature of societal constructs. Civilisation, as depicted in the play, is not an inherent or unassailable state but rather a dynamic and often unstable arrangement that requires constant vigilance and commitment from its members. The play thus challenges the audience to reflect on the complexities of maintaining civilisation, questioning whether the collective adherence to shared beliefs is sufficient to sustain it or if it is, in fact, always on the brink of collapse due to its reliance on human frailties and uncertainties.

## **2.5. The Historical Context of Socrates’ Influence**

Socrates’ trial and execution, which occurred in 399 BCE, continue to intrigue and perplex historians due to the complexities and ambiguities surrounding the events and the sources that document them. The primary accounts of Socrates’ trial come from his disciples Xenophon and Plato, both of whom were closely associated with him. This connection raises questions about potential biases in their portrayals. Despite this, these sources provide crucial insights into the socio-political dynamics of Athens at the time and the nature of Socrates’ philosophical practice.

One significant aspect of Socrates’ trial is its reflection of the fragile nature of Athenian democracy. Socrates’ method of challenging the status quo and questioning the foundational beliefs of Athenian society tested the limits of the democratic system. His provocative questioning and criticisms were perceived as a threat, which led the democracy to respond with what many historians view as impulsive and reckless action. This response exemplifies a critical flaw within the democratic system: a tendency to react hastily without fully considering the consequences of its decisions. Garland (2018) suggests that this reaction was emblematic of a broader issue within democracy, which ultimately prompted the introduction of measures to safeguard against such rash judgments in the future (p. 116).

Socrates’ approach to education and mentorship was distinctive and directly challenged the prevailing norms of his time. Unlike the Sophists, who claimed to teach political virtue (arete) and charged fees for their instruction, Socrates denied that he possessed any particular knowledge to impart (Mitchell, 2015, p. 198). He rejected the notion of accepting payment for

teaching, as he considered himself not a conventional teacher but a facilitator of moral and intellectual growth. Socrates saw his role as akin to that of a midwife, assisting others in discovering their own understanding of virtue and the good through dialectics and inductive reasoning. This perspective is articulated in Mitchell's analysis, which highlights Socrates' commitment to fostering self-awareness and ethical insight rather than delivering predetermined knowledge.

Socrates' dedication to his philosophical mission was rooted in his belief that he was fulfilling a divine mandate. He famously asserted that "the unexamined life is not worth living," (Brenton, 2023, p. 30) underscoring his view that continuous examination of virtue and self was the highest pursuit in life. For decades, Socrates pursued this mission without significant impediments. However, his eventual appearance in court on capital charges raises questions about what led to such a drastic turn of events. The first charge stemmed from Socrates' early association with the natural sciences, which were often linked to atheism, and his claims of being guided by a divine inner voice, or "daimonion" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 198).

The charge of corrupting the youth was more substantial and was influenced by the political turmoil of the late fifth century. Socrates was perceived as partially responsible for the political instability due to his association with young aristocrats who were involved in radical and destabilizing activities. His relationships with these figures, his provocative style, and his role in challenging traditional beliefs contributed to the perception that he was undermining Athenian values and supporting those who had betrayed democracy. Mitchell (2015) details how Socrates' unconventional methods and his influence on young radicals, who were involved in actions leading to Athens' near-collapse, fuelled these accusations. The public sentiment against him was exacerbated by the belief that his teachings had contributed to the societal upheavals of the period (p. 199).

In summary, Socrates' trial and execution reflect broader themes of democracy, philosophy, and societal change. His engagement with the youth and his critique of traditional values were seen as threats to the stability of Athens, leading to a trial that was both a consequence of and a commentary on the vulnerabilities of the democratic system. The historical context of his trial reveals the complex interplay between philosophical dissent and political power, highlighting the precarious balance between individual freedoms and societal norms in democratic societies.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The relationship between Socrates and Athenian democracy, as well as the thematic exploration of civilization in Howard Brenton's *Cancelling Socrates*, reveals profound insights into the complexities of philosophical inquiry, political life, and personal values.

Socrates' trial and execution highlight the fragile nature of democratic systems when confronted with radical ideas and challenging philosophies. The Athenian democracy, characterized by its responsiveness to public opinion and its vulnerability to impulsive decisions, found itself at odds with Socrates' provocative questioning and his influence on the youth. His philosophical methods, which included relentless questioning and a critique of conventional wisdom, were perceived as subversive and destabilizing. The trial not only underscores the tension between individual intellectual freedom and the collective stability of democratic governance but also reflects the inherent risks of political systems that lack mechanisms for measured and reflective decision-making. Socrates' trial, as analysed by Garland (2018) and Mitchell (2015), serves as a historical case study of how democratic societies may struggle to balance the demands of conformity and innovation.

In Brenton's *Cancelling Socrates*, these themes are vividly explored through the characters of Xanthippe and Aspasia. Their dialogue encapsulates the tension between personal and political spheres. Xanthippe's dismissive view of the state as "not real" compared to the tangible reality of her family life, and Aspasia's emphasis on the state as the embodiment of the "common good," illustrate the conflict between individual desires and the demands of society. This conflict is further highlighted by Xanthippe's belief that only mothers truly understand the profundities of life and death, contrasting with the abstract political concerns of Aspasia and the male figures of Athens. This dichotomy not only emphasizes the personal versus political debate but also underscores the gendered dimensions of this struggle.

The play also engages with the concept of civilization through the character of Euthyphro, whose assertion that civilization is the "art of living in cities" and the "cultivation of the good between us" (Brenton, 2023, p. 1) reflects a view of civilization as dependent on shared beliefs and norms. Euthyphro's devotion to religious duty as a means of maintaining societal order critiques the notion of a stable and self-sustaining civilization. Instead, it suggests that civilization is precarious and reliant on collective adherence to shared values, a critique that resonates with the challenges faced by Athenian democracy in the face of Socratic dissent.

Through these narratives and analyses, both historical and dramatic, we gain a deeper understanding of the challenges inherent in reconciling personal values with broader societal demands. Socrates' influence on his contemporaries and the dramatic exploration of these themes in Brenton's play illuminate the perennial conflict between individual conscience and collective norms, and the ways in which democratic societies must navigate these tensions to sustain both philosophical inquiry and political stability.

Brenton's play is not just a historical exploration; it resonates with contemporary issues, serving as "a tilt at our own culture wars and at a debating arena often shrunk to lobbing insults and manufacturing outrage. But

on a deeper level it is a sharp interrogation of the dangers of easy certainties” (Hemming, 2022). It is also a clever and thought-provoking play that presents its arguments skilfully, though it becomes overly obvious in its conclusion.

In conclusion, Socrates' trial and Brenton's dramatization of his philosophical and political legacy offer profound insights into the enduring challenges of democratic societies. The Athenian experience serves as a stark reminder of the fragility of democracy when confronted with radical ideas and the potential for public opinion to be swayed by fear and prejudice. Brenton's *Cancelling Socrates*, by drawing parallels to contemporary political discourse, compels us to examine how our own democracies grapple with dissent, cultivate critical thinking, and safeguard the space for intellectual freedom. The play's exploration of the interplay between personal values, political imperatives, and the very definition of civilization provides a valuable framework for understanding the ongoing struggle to reconcile individual rights with the collective good. Ultimately, both the historical account of Socrates' trial and its dramatic reimagining in Brenton's work serve as powerful reminders of the importance of fostering open dialogue, encouraging critical thinking, and ensuring that democratic institutions are robust enough to withstand the challenges posed by dissenting voices and evolving societal values.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

#### **ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL / PARTICIPANT CONSENT**

Ethics committee approval is not required for this study. There are no participants in this study.

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