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Socrates' Last Bath

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Socrates' Last Bath DOUGLAS J. STEWART THE PURPOSE OF THIS NOTE is to celebrate the discovery—if that is not too strong a term—of one of those delightful if minor aspects of Plato's art that proves all over again that genius is known as much by small pains as by magnificent architectonics. Why does Socrates take a bath in the Phaedo (116a)? Not, why does he say he is going to take one—to save the women trouble after he is dead—but why does Plato bother to mention this seemingly trivial incident? The Phaedo is not history; no dialogue is. But the Phaedo contains an extra prohibition against our reading it as the mere report of historical fact: Plato himself was not there, and possibly was ill (59a). Here again, the question is not, Is this true? but, Why does Plato mention it? Why does he insist that the reader not imagine him as among those present? Clearly so that we could not take what follows as history or journalism, but as drama, an ideal creation of the imagination evoked by, but not limited to, the actual occurrences on the last day of Socrates' life. I will argue here that Socrates' bath, indeed the whole mise-en-scène of the Phaedo, is the simulation of a telet~, a ritual of initiation and purification practiced by the people history has come to call Orphics. Since

the dramatic point of the dialogue is that this may not be the last day of Socrates' life at all, but the beginning of his immortality, Plato was obviously inspired to weave the arguments about immortality around a system of Orphic commonplaces about the wheel of birth, the need for a ritual cleansing from sin in order to escape a foul Homeric Hades, and the body-prison analogy. 1 No doubt he got his original inspiration from the fact that Socrates died in a prison, and thus his death was a form of escape from both the prison of the body and the prison of the state. 2 But, I would x Passages of "Orphic" origin and/or inspiration are given in the index of the Burnet edition (Oxford, 1911), p. 152. See also Guthrie (note 3), pp. 242-244, and note 7 below. 2 The importance of capture-prosecute-prison motifs in the Phaedo has not in my opinion been given its due in scholarship. At 115c Crito asks Socrates how he wishes to be buried and Socrates replies, "However you wish, if you catch me and I do not elude you." The latter verb is ekphugo; the common meaning is to escape or elude, but one specialized meaning is to win acquittal in a criminal case. This then reminds us of an earlier passage, where Socrates gives Cebes the reasons he has taken up writing poetry, as a message for the poet-sophist, Evenus (61b-c). The next sentence, as commonly translated, goes "and tell him, if he has any sense, to follow me as quickly as he can. I shall be taking my departure today, it seems . . ." (Bluck). The discussion immediately turns to suicide because Simmias and the others assume that the verb "to follow," di6kein, means to follow Socrates to death. But this verb too contains (an intentional?) ambiguity. Again in the technical language of the courts, it means to prosecute. I think Plato means Socrates to intend the latter meaning--Evenus, Socrates [253] 254 HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY add, it is not just the arguments of the dialogue which are given an "orphic" flavor; the dramatic "staging," the comings and goings of the various "actors" in the piece are given the tone of orphic ritual, as well. But since the mere mention of the word "Orphic" seems to threaten scholarly controversy I must at the outset make it clear that I am not here trying to say anything new or contentious about the many areas of dispute connected with the Orphic Question per se. 3 It has been doubted that the word "Orphic" as used by ancient writers really refers to a specific, organized body of worshippers with codified systems of ritual and commonly-agreed-upon doctrines, analogous...

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I will argue here that Socrates' bath, indeed the whole *mise-en-scène* of the *Phaedo*, is the simulation of a *teletē*, a ritual of initiation and purification practiced by the people history has come to call Orphics. Since the dramatic point of the dialogue is that this may not be the last day of Socrates' life at all, but the beginning of his immortality, Plato was obviously inspired to weave the arguments about immortality around a system of Orphic cosmologies about the wheel of birth, the need for a ritual cleansing from sin in order to escape a foul Homeric Hades, and the body-prison analogy.¹ No doubt he got his original inspiration from the fact that Socrates died in a prison, and thus his death was a form of escape from both the prison of the body and the prison of the state.² But, I would

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