

Plato's Apology of Socrates purports to be the speech Socrates gave at his trial in response to the? accusations made against him (Greek apologia means "defense"). Its powerful advocacy of the examined life and its condemnation of Athenian democracy have made it one of the central documents of Western thought and culture. Philosophical and literary sources While Socrates was alive, he was, as noted, the object of comic ridicule, but most of the plays that make reference to him are entirely lost or exist only in fragmentary form--Clouds being the chief exception. Although Socrates is the central figure of this play, it was not Aristophanes' purpose to give a balanced and accurate portrait of him (comedy never aspires to this) but rather to use him to represent certain intellectual trends in contemporary Athens--the study of language and nature and, as Aristophanes implies, the amorality and atheism that accompany these pursuits. The value of the play as a reliable source of knowledge about Socrates is thrown further into doubt by the fact that, in Plato's Apology, Socrates himself rejects it as a fabrication. This aspect of the trial will be discussed more fully below. Soon after Socrates' death, several members of his circle preserved and praised his memory by writing works that represent him in his most characteristic activity--conversation. His interlocutors in these (typically adversarial) exchanges included people he happened to meet, devoted followers, prominent political figures, and leading thinkers of the day. Many of these "Socratic discourses," as Aristotle calls them in his Poetics, are no longer extant; there are only brief remnants of the conversations written by Antisthenes, Aeschines, .Phaedo, and Eucleides