

# Up in the Air: Aristophanes, Socrates, and THE CLOUDS

## Tully P. Daniel

*The Graces, seeking a precinct imperishable,  
Found it in the spirit of Aristophanes. Plato<sup>1</sup>*

Aristophanes is undoubtedly the first creative genius of Western comedy and by common consent one of the supreme masters of his craft. That judgment is necessarily based on only a quarter of his output—of the forty or so plays Aristophanes evidently wrote, eleven have come down to us bearing his name. Yet even here Aristophanes has been more fortunate than almost any other Greek poet. Out of the work of some fifty Athenian comic dramatists whose careers overlapped Aristophanes, not a single play has survived. Thus, almost all of our ideas concerning Greek Old Comedy are derived from a study of his plays.

The results of this intensive scrutiny have produced mixed results at best. Critics, both ancient and modern, have found themselves faced with an abundance of problems: What to make of the peculiar mix of haunting lyric poetry and obscene bawdry? Can surreal fantasy and lampoon denote a higher moral concern? Are Aristophanes' own frequent claims about the "serious" purpose of his plays to be taken seriously?

Perhaps no other play so well exemplifies the critical dilemma as does **The Clouds** and its wonderful, ragging satire of the sophists. But is the portrait of Socrates a willful act of malicious slander by Aristophanes? Why did this young and intelligent playwright present the wisest and most virtuous man of his time as a ridiculous and improbable buffoon?

An attempt to answer these questions might well begin with a look at the culture of fifth century Greece that provides both the background and material for **The Clouds**. As a result of the intellectual curiosity that distinguished the Greeks, two new developments were beginning to conflict with the traditional beliefs and practices of Greek society. One was scientific speculation on the structure of the universe, leaving little room for the traditional gods. The second development relevant to **The Clouds** is the growth of interest in the techniques of persuasion in lawcourts and political assemblies.<sup>2</sup>

Since the aims of the sophists were largely those of political education, the art and study of speech dominated their educational work. The Athenian public, in spite of a general interest in rhetoric, had only vague and often wrong ideas about the sophists and their theories. The people considered them idlers and liked to include, under the name of sophists, not only teachers and thinkers, but also soothsayers, physicians, and astronomers as well: parasites who got all they could from the State.<sup>3</sup> They were "sophists," since they lived by their brains and charged very high fees.

Thus, Aristophanes' genius for comic distortion and absurdity found a ready-made target in what the audience perceived as the sophist "corruption" of traditional education and values. Here was yet another chance to exploit what translator William Arrowsmith has termed the "...enormous cultural polarities. . . which Aristophanes loved to elaborate and which he presented in play after play as locked in a life-and-death struggle for the soul of Athens."<sup>4</sup>

**The Clouds** is one of the best known plays of Aristophanes and, without doubt, the one that contains the most puzzling riddle in his entire work: Why did Aristophanes select Socrates as his spokesman for the sophists, deliberately exploiting him in a grotesque, and hilarious caricature? It might be useful to note here that the Socrates of **The Clouds** is one of the few portraits of a "young" forty-seven-year-old philosopher, not the older Socrates that Plato created nearly thirty or forty years later when the early dialogues were published.

Also, Aristophanes was not the only comic dramatist to make fun of Socrates—his appearance and eccentricities evidently made him a peculiarly good subject. He is at least mentioned by four other writers of Old Comedy. While not all the remarks are uncomplimentary, he is represented as "...squalid (literally 'unwashed'), thievish, and an endless talker indulging in time-wasting dialectical subtleties."<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the main source of the comic Socrates is **The Clouds**; hence, the nagging question—why was Socrates of all men chosen to represent the sophists, whereas he is depicted by Plato as the most formidable enemy of that movement? One authority has suggested at least a partial answer: Socrates may have been chosen because he was a "free-lance" philosopher who never had a school of his own; thus Aristophanes could avoid libeling any of the particular sophistic academies and their wealthy patrons.<sup>6</sup> Whether Aristophanes privately believed that Socrates was a sophist or presented him that way for preposterous effect, we cannot really know. It is feasible that the poet saw similarities in some of the methods and ideas of both Socrates and the sophists: dialectics, aversion to the old religion, and attacks on traditional views, especially of man's knowledge and justice.<sup>7</sup>

It was also traditional in Old Comedy to present familiar faces. Professor Cornford, in **The Origin of Attic Comedy**, argues that the actors wore one or another of set of stock masks representing a few set types: the Boastful Soldier, the Parasite, the Learned Doctor—which in a particular play were attached to the name of a well-known

contemporary figure. (Chapter 8) With his bald head and snub nose, his belly, his bare feet, and shabby clothes, Socrates offered a comic writer of Aristophanes' gifts a temptation he obviously could not resist.

Another consideration having to do with tradition involves the evolution of Old Comedy from the earlier **komos**. The **komos** was a convention whose essential elements were invective and abuse. Thus the Athenian comic poet was not just given free reign to be abusive, but that abuse was expected by the audience.<sup>8</sup> There would not have been any question of representing Socrates seriously and accurately. Otherwise, why would Aristophanes gather together the Weaker Discourse of Protagoras, some of the rhetoric of Gorgias, the air physics of Diogenes, the linguistics of Prodicus, and the ethic of Antiphon into one caricature called Socrates?<sup>9</sup>

This outrageous send-up of a familiar figure is not unusually cruel in Socrates' case; in fact, it is rather typical for Aristophanes. Consider his unrelenting distortion of Euripides in several works such as **The Archanians**: Euripides' words are taken out of context, his plays parodied by willful misunderstanding, and even his mother made fun of because she sold vegetables! Some have noted that the Platonic defenders, angered by Aristophanes' mockery of Socrates, have never come to the defense of Euripides.<sup>10</sup>

Actually, the "harsh treatment" of Socrates in **The Clouds** is surprisingly mild and impersonal. The savage attack on Cleon in **The Knights** is an interesting comparison. Except for a couple of digs at Socrates' funny walk and his general untidiness, Aristophanes completely avoids the personal. We get nothing about the legendary shrewish wife Xanthippe, nothing about the fashionable homosexuality of the Socratic circle, nothing about Socrates' midwife mother—a virtual gold mine for satiric lampooning that Aristophanes studiously avoids mining. Instead, the charges leveled at Socrates are entirely professional: he is a trickster and a charlatan.

Such observations appear to coincide with the critical opinion that views Socrates not as the improbable victim of **The Clouds**, but as the poet's comic representative of the sophistic "corruption" that is the play's real subject. Whether or not the loose assemblage of intellectuals, frauds, and 'educators' referred to as 'sophists' could be called a movement was of little concern to Aristophanes. He saw them as a conspiracy of humbugs and used Socrates as their emblem, exploiting the average citizen's warped stereotype of philosophy and science.

Many pages have been written to substantiate the claim that the attack on sophistry in **The Clouds** is a clear indication of Aristophanes' extremely conservative viewpoint—that he considers the prevailing educational system to be the cause of the overall decline of Athens. Critics have eagerly pointed to the few known facts concerning his birth and middle-class upbringing during the glory of Periclean Athens as evidence of his conservatism.

But what of the fact that the Old Tradition is lampooned just as relentlessly in the character of Strepsiades, the Athenian citizen and would-be pupil of Socrates? Strepsiades—his name translates almost literally as "Debt-dodger" and is played upon throughout the play<sup>11</sup> is a typical comic hero, who acts as a buffoon to mock the pretensions of his opponent. Aristophanes shows that Strepsiades can be duped only because he had been corrupted prior to his enrollment in the Thinkery. Confronted with new ideas, Strepsiades alternates between extravagant praise and earthy comments which disgust his guides. Thus, Aristophanes manages to parody both learning and ignorance. But these are only two of the polar opposites Aristophanes sets up and elaborates on throughout the play: wise and foolish, young and old, city and country, rich and poor—culminating in the central argument of the Two Logics.

The contemporary classical scholar and translator William Arrowsmith has greatly clarified the central issue of **The Clouds** by rendering the so-called Just Reason and Unjust Reason as Philosophy and Sophistry respectively. (He also justifies his rendition in a lengthy note appended to his cited translation of the play, p.117+.) Here the comic genius of Aristophanes to play off opposites is clearly in evidence. The contest between Philosophy and Sophistry is really no contest. Philosophy has no weapon against the harsh criticisms of Sophistry except bad temper, and the peculiar feature of his idealized picture of the boys of an earlier generation is that his interest is strongly focused on their genitals. As K.J. Dover has suggested, it is doubtful that Aristophanes' audience listened to Philosophy with straight faces.<sup>12</sup>

Even the end of the contest is ambivalent: Sophistry wins when he gets Philosophy to admit that in truth everyone—advocates, poets, demagogues, in fact, all the spectators—are "all Buggers," that is, "have been reamed up the rectum with a radish." (The usual Athenian punishment for adultery.)

**Sophistry:** Then how do we stand, my friend?

**Philosophy:** I've been beaten by the Buggers.

(Flinging his cloak to the audience.)

O Buggers, catch my cloak/and welcome me among the Buggers! (Arrowsmith, p.80)

As Cedric Whitman has concluded, ". . . Aristophanes has shown singular skill in playing both ends of these antimonies, scarcely against the middle, but against each other, till both are attenuated and reduced to absurdity."<sup>13</sup>

As far as the poet's "serious" intentions are concerned, we must look to the **parabasis** of the Chorus, where the audience of Old Comedy is traditionally addressed directly on behalf of the poet. Except **The Clouds** is unique in having the Chorus speak as Aristophanes, using the pronoun "I." Doubtless this departure from the normal **parabasis** can be explained by the fact that this is not the original version of **The Clouds**, but a revision Aristophanes wrote several years later and put into circulation as a written text, but did not expect to see produced on stage. His complaint against the audience is quite explicit: "I thought you a bright audience, and that this was

my most brilliant comedy, so I thought you should be the first to taste it. But I was repulsed, worsted by vulgar rivals, though I didn't deserve that."<sup>14</sup> Aristophanes points out that rather than depending on cheap tricks like extra-thick phalluses or violent beatings, he has always used fresh themes with original characters and verses. Those who prefer his plays will be famous for their good judgment. How interesting that his pleas are aimed at the wise in the audience, not the fools who understand only belly laughs.

Could he be identifying himself, the clever (sophos) poet, with the Sophists in his play?<sup>15</sup> In point of fact, he uses their own techniques of persuasion and flattery to win the audience's approval.

Regardless of how his characterization is viewed, Socrates remains one of Aristophanes' greatest comic creations and **The Clouds** one of his funniest plays. Some scholars, shocked at what they deem a malicious slander, have reminded the world that Socrates never gave lessons or took money, was not interested in physics, and hated rhetoric in all its forms. Others have tried to show that it was not inaccurate, and that Socrates had much in common with his caricature. In a sense, both views are correct: Socrates was certainly the most genuine ethical philosopher of his age. But even as Plato presents him, he was surely the most adept, if not slippery, dialectician who ever existed.

Possibly the best solution to the "Socratic dilemma" is the one suggested by Aristophanes himself in two lines from his **Assemblywomen** (translated by Benjamin Bickley Rogers), as advice from the chorus to the audience:

Let the wise and philosophic  
choose me for my wisdom's sake.  
Those who joy in mirth and laughter  
choose me for the jests I make.<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Attributed to Plato by Cedric H. Whitman, "Criticism and Old Comedy," **Aristophanes and the Comic Hero** (Cambridge, 1964), p.15.

<sup>2</sup>K.J. Dover, "Clouds," **Aristophanic Comedy** (Berkeley, 1972), pp.109-110.

<sup>3</sup>Victor Ehrenberg, "Religion and Education," **The People of Aristophanes** (New York, 1962), pp.290-291.

<sup>4</sup>Introduction to his translation of **The Clouds** (Ann Arbor, 1962), p.3.

<sup>5</sup>W.K.C. Guthrie, **A History of Greek Philosophy, III** (Cambridge, 1969), p.360.

<sup>6</sup>Alexis Solomos, "The Clouds and Socrates," **The Living Aristophanes** (Ann Arbor, 1974), pp.110-111.

<sup>7</sup>Ehrenberg, pp.276-277.

<sup>8</sup>Gilbert Murray, "The New Learning: Socrates," **Aristophanes** (Oxford, 1939), pp.85-105.

<sup>9</sup>Whitman, p.142.

<sup>10</sup>Arrowsmith, p.5.

<sup>11</sup>Arrowsmith, p.115.

<sup>12</sup>Dover, p.115.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Lois Spatz, Chapter 3, *Aristophanes* (Boston, 1978.), p.58.

<sup>14</sup>Dover, p.103.

<sup>15</sup>Spatz, p.53.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Kenneth McLeish, *The Theatre of Aristophanes* (New York, 1980), p.22.

## A Chronology

- 450 B.C.? Birth of Aristophanes
- 431 Beginning of Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens
- 429 Death of Pericles
- 428 Aristophanes' first play produced
- 427 Sophists Gorgias and Tisias visit Athens
- 425 Aristophanes: **Archanians** (Lenaia, second prize)
- 424 Aristophanes: **Knights** (Lenaia, first prize)
- 423 Aristophanes: **Clouds** (City Dionysia, third prize) Original version lost;  
extant play is later revision)
- 422 Aristophanes: **Wasps** (Lenaia, second prize)
- 421 Aristophanes: **Peace** (City Dionysia, second prize)  
Peace of Nicias between Athens and Sparta
- 415 Disastrous Athenian Expedition to Sicily
- 414 Aristophanes: **Birds** (City Dionysia, second prize)
- 411 Aristophanes: **Lysistrata** (Lenaia, prize unknown)  
Aristophanes: **Women at the Festival** (City Dionysia, prize unknown)
- 406 Death of Sophocles and Euripides
- 405 Aristophanes: **Frogs** (Lenaia, first prize)
- 404 Surrender of Athens
- 399 Execution of Socrates
- 392 Aristophanes: **Assemblywomen** (festival and prize unknown)
- 388 Aristophanes: **Wealth** (festival and prize unknown)
- 385 B.C.? Death of Aristophanes. It is thought that he wrote about forty plays altogether.

## Bibliography

- Aristophanes. **The Complete Plays of Aristophanes**, ed. Moses Hadas. New York, 1971.
- \_\_\_\_\_. **The Acharnians**, trans. Douglass Parker. Ann Arbor, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. **The Birds**, trans. William Arrowsmith. Ann Arbor, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. **The Clouds**, trans. William Arrowsmith. Ann Arbor, 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. **The Wasps**, trans. Douglass Parker. Ann Arbor, 1962.
- Cornford, Francis MacDonald. **The Origin Of Attic Comedy**. Glouster, Massachusetts, 1968.
- Dover, K.J. **Aristophanic Comedy**. Berkeley, 1972.
- Ehrenberg, Victor. **The People of Aristophanes**. New York, 1962.
- Findlay, J.N. **Plato and Platonism An Introduction**. New York, 1978.
- Henderson, Jeffrey. **The Maculate Muse**. New Haven, 1975.
- Kennedy, George. **The Art of Persuasion in Greece**. Princeton, 1963.
- McLeish, Kenneth. **The Theatre of Aristophanes**. New York, 1980.
- Murray, Gilbert. **Aristophanes**. Oxford, 1933.
- Olson, Elder. **The Theory of Comedy**. Bloomington, 1968.
- Pickard-Cambridge, Sir Arthur. **The Dramatic Festivals of Athens**, 2nd ed. rev. John Gould and D.M. Lewis, Oxford, 1968.
- Solomos, Alexis. **The Living Aristophanes**. trans. Alexis Solomos and Marvin Felheim. Ann Arbor, 1974.
- Spatz, Lois. **Aristophanes**. Boston, 1978.
- Strauss, Leo. **Socrates and Aristophanes**. New York, 1966.
- Webster, T.B.L. **Greek Theatre Production**. London, 1956.
- Whitman, Cedric H. **Aristophanes and the Comic Hero**. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964.

