

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## The Clouds. 423 B.C.E.

Aristophanes

**Story.** In chronological sequence, the *Clouds* is the most recent of the remaining plays of Aristophanes, preceded only by *The Acharnians* and *The Knights*. The two earlier plays were essentially 'political,' targeting the ravages of war, which had demoralized and impoverished Attica, the corruptness of such politicians as Cleon, who had turned politics into a financial jackpot, the overambitious and greedy military men (like Lamachus) who had no interest in the cultural values of their state, and the imbecilic embargoes on goods and produce from other regions of Greece, which were bankrupting as well as starving the Athenians.

**Development.** *The Clouds* grows from the intense comic perspective of the two plays (we know) that precede it. We are dealing with a young (early twenties) playwright, born into war turmoil, highly perceptive of social malaise, and with that conservative judgmental eye that characterizes what the Greeks called Old Comedy. (From Old Comedy, of which we have little left besides eleven plays of Aristophanes, we read the mothering source of the greatest comical work in Western Literature, the writings of Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift and Voltaire). While Athenian literature seems to have boasted a rich comic tradition, parallel and equal to its centuries old tragic development, we have to generalize from what we have of Aristophanes—and from the titles of the plays of his competitors—that the Old Comedy tradition, in Athens, was by and large consistently social satiric. Where the tragic tradition digs into human dignity, to rescue hope for mankind, the comic tradition leans toward social weakness, and mankind's inescapable weakness.

**Plotting.** The concrete of the plot, of the *Clouds*, seques into that sequence of six plays—single title plays, turning around an abstract, like *Clouds*, *Birds*, or *Wealth*—to which Aristophanes devotes a distinctive kind of 'philosophical drama,' typically exploring an 'issue,' as the *Clouds* explores the issues of moral value, sophistry, and ethics. Once again, as in *The Acharnians* and *Knights*, Aristophanes hones in sharply onto a social problem, in this case the problem of the place of the Sophists in the second half of the fifth century, in Athens. While in fact dealing with a movement, Sophistry, which bulked large throughout the career life of Aristophanes, this playwright adopts the camouflaging technique he chose in *The Knights*, where he puts on stage a Paphlagonian and a sausage seller, who act in for Cleon and Aristophanes. Sophistry in practice is represented, in the present play, by Socrates and what is called his *Thinkpot* (*Phrontisterion* in Greek.) It is this institution, in which Socrates, floating in a basket in the clouds, sells practical knowledge about how to 'make bad reasoning seem good reasoning,' make bad or toxic or deceptive social practices seem good, toward which the action of the play gravitates, for it is to this place, where the worse is made to appear the stronger argument, that Strepsiades comes, to get control of his son, and his son comes to rebut and reject his father. The *phrontisterion*, in other words, is where you learn to replicate the new corrosive thought practices of the day, to screw up your parents, to skip out on your bills, and to forget about the gods and mom.

### Characters

Strepsiades,	elderly countryman of Attica
Pheidippides,	his son
Xanthias,	slave of Strepsiades
First Pupil of Socrates	
Socrates,	the philosopher
Mr. Good Reason,	a way of arguing
Mr. Bad Reason,	a way of arguing
First Creditor,	pursuing Strepsiades
Second Creditor,	pursuing Strepsiades

Second Pupil, of Socrates  
Chorus of Clouds

## Themes

**Sophistry.** This philosophical movement, which has recently become all the talk of Athens, has captured the spirit of the times: greed for material possessions, market competitiveness, indifference to traditional family and religious values, and a widespread *see me, look at me* attitude among the young.

**Reasons** Good and bad reasons (ways of arguing) are embodied as two personal characters, in this play, and compete against each other for the respect of Strepsiades and his son. The quarrel between the two forces comes down to the way of honorable and rational thought versus the way of manipulative and self-serving thought. The battle between the two kinds of reason—Socrates is alleged to teach the latter—corresponds, as Aristophanes sees it, to the battle between mainline Greek rationalism and the twisted argumentation of the Sophists. Sophistic thought was often approximated to the thought of Socrates, a popular and shallow assumption which may well have played into the populist thinking that led to Socrates' execution.

**Lifestyle.** The play opens on Strepsiades, wondering what he is going to do with his son Pheidippides, who has become a lazy and self-indulgent teen ager, hanging out around the house, sleeping in; when awake he has only one interest, following the horse races, and hanging out with the horsey crowd.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Strepsiades** The main character is Strepsiades, who 'represents' the sensible mainline Athenian of 'earlier centuries,' that is of Athens before two wars, the beginning of capital competition, and the erosion of old moral values had infiltrated the culture. As the play opens, Strepsiades is realizing that the new world—Sophists, war, taxes—is forcing him to come to grips with new threats: a spendthrift wife and a lazy son, who is interested only in horses, are wrecking his family life, and driving him to Socrates' think tank, where Strepsiades desperately needs advice on living in modern times. Strepsiades is a blood brother to the disgruntled farmer/businessman, Dicaeopolis, in *The Acharnians*.

**Horses.** Strepsiades is being driven crazy by his son's addiction to horse racing. The kid would be video game crazy in our day, and Strepsiades would be clueless, as his forebear was in *The Clouds*.

**Scepticism.** Strepsiades is a god-fearing believer in Zeus, when first we meet him, but after he has visited the Thinkpot, and visited with Socrates, he turns into a sceptic, and picks up the trendy notion that the gods do not exist.

**Creditors.** Strepsiades is plagued by creditors—debts of his wife and son—when first we meet him, but after visiting the Thinkpot, and learning how to reject objectionable monetary advances, he masters the art of simply driving creditors away.

**Regrets.** In the end, when his son has taken to beating him up, using the new tricks he has learned at the Thinkpot, Strepsiades regrets having opened the kid to the new possibilities of rebellion against your dad.

**Parallels.** Gargantua and Pantagrue are a grotesque but exemplary father son pair, in Rabelais' sixteenth century pentalogy. All that is implicitly affectionate, but potentially violent in the dad son relation is wrapped up in that huge relationship. One might say that a tender version of that giant clash is on display in the conflict—and love—between King Henry IV and his son Hal in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*. Hal is a bad boy, haunting the Eastcheap bars with Falstaff, when his father most needs him, for reassurance about the stability of monarchy. In the end, though, at the time of Henry IV's death, Hal musters up his sense of historical incumbency, and provides dad a comforting death.

**Discussion questions.**

How does the Sophist movement fit with the social political milieu of Athens in the second half of the fifth century B.C.E.? Do you think that the caricature of Socrates, in *The Clouds*, had real world consequences for this philosopher?

Compare Dicaeopolis (in *The Acharnians*) with Strepsiades. Have these two Athenians similar complaints about their own time and their own culture world? Compare and relate the two men's positions.

Do you see Aristophanes as a conservative, in the comedies we have read? Is there a fundamental link between comedy and the conservative attitude toward life and society? Is tragedy—to speak of the literary genre—more open and discovering than comedy?