ARISTOPHANES VERSUS SOCRATES:
A BATTLE FOUGHT THROUGH THE CLOUDS

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Aristophanes is considered to be the first great comedic writer of drama. While there were others before him, none were able to satirize, mock, and make fun of political and social characters as well as him. In 423 B.C. the popular poet Aristophanes entered his play, *The Clouds*, in the Great Dionysia, the biggest dramatic festival at the time held in Athens. The play only won third place, but it was evident that Aristophanes was in his top form as he wrote *The Clouds* as a way to attack political forms, religion, and social ideas. But, most importantly, *The Clouds* is a full-fledged attack on Socrates and his philosophical ideas. The purpose of this paper is not to just dissect Aristophanes’ *The Clouds* for the sole purpose of examination towards a personal debate between two notoriously well known figures of Greek history. A deeper understanding of the relationship between the two must be discovered through retracing steps in history. It is important to understand who Aristophanes and Socrates were and evaluate the turning pages of history between the two.

Not much is known about Aristophanes and his life before he became the legendary writer of Greek history. Aristophanes was born sometime between 447 B.C.E. and 445 B.C.E. His father was Philippus, an Athenian of the deme Cydathenean of the tribe Pandionis, and his mother was Zenodora. It is also believed that Aristophanes had two sons, Araros and Philetaerus, each comic poets. Their success as poets is not clear, but there are documents citing Araros producing his work for the first time in Olympiad 101 from 376-373 B.C.E.
At a young age Aristophanes was supplied a firm education in literature and philosophy that allowed him the full use of his imagination. In school, Aristophanes became acquainted early on with Homer and Hesiod. From their books students learned how to read, write, and emulate the physical and spiritual virtues that comprise mankind. Aristophanes also learned much about the gods and how to view them in their private lives. This led to believing that the gods were full of their own downfalls, just like man and that no single person, god, or idea is infallible.

Other biographical information regarding the life and times of Aristophanes can be pieced together from the history surrounding him and his works. Aristophanes’ *Vita* begins by emphasizing his ethical achievements: It was he who first decided to transform comedy—which was still wandering around in the old style—into something more constructive and serious. Comedy had previously been nastier and more shameless because the poets Cratinus and Eupolis had uttered more slander than was appropriate (Lefkowitz 104). Aristophanes was not a lone comic as Cratinus and Eupolis are considered by other masters of Greek comedy, or also referred to as “Attic” comedy. Eupolis even worked with Aristophanes as he assisted him in writing the composition of *The Knights* in 424 B.C.E., but later the two comics feuded. Interestingly enough Eupolis was not a fan of Socrates either as he referred to him as “an idle penniless chatterer who had wit for everything but to earn an honest living” (Nardo 103).

During most of his life, Athens was engaged in the Peloponnesian war which dragged on from 431 B.C.E. to 404 B.C.E. The conflict of the war may seem more important than its actual events were, but information regarding these incidents were left by the historian, Thucydides, who lived during the war, thus fueling his own intellectual
and verbal attack against the world around him. This can be read and examined in his many plays such as *The Archanians* (425 B.C.E), *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.E.), and *The Birds* (414 B.C.E.). While there were other Greek poets before and after Aristophanes, such as Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, the works of Aristophanes make historians and the current population aware of the true Greek world as he publicly denounced and ruthlessly condemned his countrymen only because he loved them (Solomos 15).

Tragedy was written about gods, myths, mortals, and men of the past to praise and learn from the past. These plays were written as a way to teach and showcase history. Comedies were written about the present through satirical backdrops to try to change contemporary issues of their time and no other poet used this to his advantage than Aristophanes:

Aristophanes abolishes history and all ordinary constraints of space and time, of gravity and physiology. If war has become tiresome he makes a private treaty with the enemy or goes to heaven to fetch down the goddess Peace. If Athens has become tiresome he builds a new city in the sky. If living poets are inadequate he goes to hell to fetch back an old one. For their principal dramatic personae the tragic poets were limited to the traditional personages of myth. If Aristophanes wants a character he invents one. To us this does not seem remarkable, but we must remember that not only epic and tragedy and choral lyric but even the dialogues of Plato used only personages who were believed to be historical. And if characters are invented so are their doings. Aristophanes created his own world, and populated it with his own people, as a god might do. (Hadas 106)
One problem can be found in Aristophanes’ works and that is the accessibility of the words used and the stories told. His plays were such a mirror of his times that sometimes the jokes go over heads of current audiences in our present day. The wit and universality that seem restricted to us but not to him could also be turned around and the same case could be made if he were to experience our current theatrical offerings. But allusions to contemporary persons, events, or usages, special connotations of words, and, in a more general view, the intellectual bent of Aristophanic wit sometimes leaves audiences in the dark—just as reflections of contemporary life in modern comedy would be lost on a Greek audience (Hadas 108). Clues can be found through researching the period the Greeks and Aristophanes. In his plays if details are not clear then there is at least an understanding of a present idea.

In his comedies Aristophanes employed many techniques for success. First he created an elaborate imaginary edifice to tell the story through. Secondly, he took popular stories or historical figures and exaggerated their true appearance or created a harsh satirization of said target. Sexual humor was another prominent style of storytelling in his plays and is very present in *The Clouds*. The most important proponent in Aristophanes’ plays was the inclusion of a single comic hero through which the story was told.

Even though we look to Aristophanes as a great influence today, his plays are not as naturalized in the modern cannon as his contemporaries are. Two reasons for this could be that his verbal and visual obscenities have held him back and also because his close connection with the people and events of a very remote speech. Still, it would not be fair to look at the Greek playwright and believe that he did not advance the body of language and style that is used today. According to Jacqueline de Romilly:
Indeed no translation, can convey the extraordinary richness of Aristophanes’ diction. He invents words and combines them, coining for the fun of its monster words that sometimes fill a whole line of verse; he intermingles plays on words, broad jokes, lyrical interludes, parodies, and figurative language. Every passage is a stunning array of all these different techniques. Aristophanes can be frankly obscene; yet there is nothing vulgar about his style. (Romilly 88)

Aristophanes was a keeper of very staunch opinions while he did not hold back from the public. His vocation led him, from the very beginning, to pass censure on morals and on politics; and he returned to this practice whenever possible. This style of comedy had a much greater chance of arousing the enthusiasm of the public, which was already somewhat tired of simple buffoonery (Croiset 29).

Aristophanes constantly caricaturized Euripides even though he saw him as a great influence. According to Aristophanes, “I think Aeschylus wise, but my delight is in Euripides” (Sandbach 39). In politics, he attacked Cleon and his foreign policy in Babylonians (426 B.C.E.) and once again attacked him in The Knights (424 B.C.E) for claiming to be the conquering hero that he was not as he compared him to a pestle by which everything was tossed into confusion and mixed up (Newiger 227). But, he was especially praised and much loved by the citizens for taking pains to show in his plays how free the polity of the Athenians was and how unfettered by any tyrant, that it was on the contrary a democracy and that the people, being free, ruled themselves (Henderson 7).
No matter how often Aristophanes attacked Euripides and Cleon, Socrates was always the main target of his ridicule. Socrates lived from 469-399 B.C.E. and was arguably the most regarded Sophist of his time. Towards the Sophists, Aristophanes had little love:

In order to give force to his attack on the sophists he is willing to make Socrates, who was himself opposed to the sophists, a butt, because Socrates was a familiar figure and his appearance and manner invited ridicule. This does not mean, of course, that Aristophanes’ shrewd attacks on the relaxed discipline favored by the new education are without point (Hadas 113)

The title ‘Sophist’ has been well understood. These ‘teachers of practical wisdom’ were originally not a sect, but a profession, who had no common tenets, and who aimed at inculcating no common views of life (Starkie XL). They accepted the constitutions of the various States as they found them; and their ambition was to fit their pupils for success in the ordinary walks of life, by teaching them to excel as well in speech as in action. Skill in speech was their specialty, but as this was held to be unattainable without a wide culture. They also professed universal knowledge.

That is not to say that the Sophists offered nothing in other fields of academia. The Sophists advanced and popularized the study of geometry and higher arithmetic, astronomy, and geography. Their overall aim was to prepare their pupils for active life, their love of learning and philosophy was not disinterested. They cultivated philosophy only in the interest of their practical aims and like the majority of the educators and
educated in the present day, it was unworthy of a mature man who had more important work to do. Shallowness such as this exposed the Sophists to criticism and eventually brought the Sophist into scrutiny:

Pericles himself, whose aim it was to educate his fellow citizens to be worthy of their great empire, encouraged them; and, at any rate down to the end of the Peloponnesian war, it was only a fanatical conservatism like that of Aristophanes, or a penetrating perception life that of Socrates, which could be seen in such men as Gorgias or Prodicus, anything but enlightened teachers who were at once men of culture and men of the of the world. It is possible that Socrates saw the dangers that lurked in the superficial character of their instruction, which aimed at producing glibness and dexterity, rather than solid accomplishments; and possibly, his taste was shocked by their ostentation, and his conservatism by the large fees which they received. (Starkie XLIII)

Before Athens became the capital of a great empire, the state troubled itself slightly about the education of children. Grammar and music were the sole areas of study and the literary education was completed before the age of fourteen. After that age, a child was handed over to the athletic trainer, until eighteen, when his elementary and secondary education was to be completed. Even in the age of Aristophanes, old-fashioned people were content with this narrow curriculum, which hardly aimed beyond a simple elementary education.
In his teachings Socrates did not focus on the cosmos, but on the study of the case of the human. Socrates’ discourse moved in two directions—outward, to objective definitions, and inward, to discover the inner person, the soul, which, for Socrates, was the source of all truth. It was not a discussion over the span of a cup of coffee, but over a lifetime.

Socrates was not a writer, but a verbal thinker and admitted that he knew nothing. The oracle at Delphi said that therefore Socrates was the wisest of all men. In lieu of this he still spoke to all others as if they were his teachers (Spatz 51). The typical Socratic dialogue has three divisions:

1. A question is posed; Socrates becomes excited and enthusiastic to find someone who claims to know nothing.

2. Socrates finds “minor flaws” in his companion’s definition and slowly begins to unravel it, forcing his partner to admit ignorance.

3. An agreement is reached by the two admittedly ignorant companions to pursue the truth seriously. Almost all the dialogues end inconclusively. Of course, they must do so. Socrates cannot give his disciples the truth. Each of us must find it out for ourselves. (Palmer 57)

Aristophanes saw this as rubbish and set out to take on Socrates like never before in The Clouds. This was, perhaps, one of the reasons why he chose Socrates because he did not in reality have a literal school of his own, but in the public eye was not so very different from the teachers of revolutionary and preposterous ideas (Solomos 108). In the
entire body of the story being told, no major theatrical resource or sign system, linguistic and paralinguistic codes included, is spared being affected, ultimately, by ‘Socratism,’ a medley of notions derived from both Socratic idiosyncrasies and a variety of other contemporary intellectual trends (Reverman 179).

The play begins with an older man named Strepsiades lamenting to the audience about his son, Pheidippides, who is ruining his house and home with his debts. Trying to think of a way out his problems, Strepsiades pleads with his son to attend the Logic Factory behind their house where Pheidippides can be taught by Socrates. The thought behind this is that Pheidippides can be taught logic to argue a way out of his debts. Pheidippides refuses so Strepsiades attends in his place in order to find some way to save his family from the creditors that are soon coming after them. Socrates’ three point idea mentioned earlier is brought to life in the text:

STREPSIADES: They say they’ve two systems

Of logic: you can argue from a basis

Of true, and false. They can teach you

To win with the False and if you can learn

To do this for me I won’t have to pay

An obol, not a single obol

Of all the debts that you’ve run up. (Aristophanes 113)
Once he arrives at the school, Strepsiades meets a student who boasts greatly of Socrates’ intelligence while discovering how many feet a flea can jump and how a gnat makes the buzzing sound that it makes. Both answers prove ridiculous, but impress Strepsiades as he begs to meet this brilliant educator. A moment passes and Strepsiades notices an old man in a basket above his head:

STREPSIADES: Who’s the old bastard up in the basket?

STUDENT: It’s himself.

STREPSIADES: Himself who?

STUDENT: Socrates. (Aristophanes 117)

This first jab from Aristophanes to Socrates is apparently thrown. In the play’s signature scene, Socrates is suspended in the air as the final addition to the tableau presentation of the Thinkery, is one of the most complex and interesting moments of Aristophanic theatricality. As a scene in its entirety, it sets up the arrival and anticipation of Socrates almost perfectly. When Strepsiades arrives he is in full anticipation of meeting this great teacher named Socrates, but instead he is greeted with his students.

Socrates’ actual appearance is delayed while being effectively foreshadowed by the appearance and behavior of those who have been exposed to his influence for some time. Suspense is built up slowly, and audience attention is directed from what is going on at ground level to some height, from the disciples and their activities to the master himself (Reverman 192). Not much attention is drawn to Socrates’ appearance in the text except for him being barefoot. It seems legitimate to infer that characteristics of the
Socratics in the play apply to the master himself: unkempt and poor appearance, probably expressed by wearing a simple cloak, neglect of body care induced by parsimony, and missing shoes (Reverman 189).

Herein lies a setup for some humor in Aristophanes’ play. Once the anticipation and suspense of the great Socrates has come to a halt, the educator seems underwhelming. By the time of this play’s debut, Socrates had become a regular fixture in Greek comedy so his appearance could also have been standard for the Socrates of Greek humor. For the comic portrayal to be funny and make sense, the audience’s preconceptions about Socrates as an individual, vague as they may have been, had to be matched at least to some extent as far as appearance and views were concerned (Reverman 192).

Back to the movement of the action, Socrates takes in Strepsiades as his new student and proclaims to teach him his way of logic. A moment later the Chorus of Clouds enters to celebrate the arrival of a new student in the Logic Factory. The Chorus of Clouds delivers the parabasis that is believed to have been altered during a revised draft of the script after *The Clouds* received third place at the festival.

During the parabasis, the chorus declares this to be Aristophanes’ best play and that it was his greatest effort. It demeans the previous audiences for not understanding or appreciating the work that was put forth towards the writing or the story told. Also, they praise the poet for his originality in The Knights and for his courage in always being brave enough to stand up to and mock Cleon. While not looking to incite a riot, the chorus instructs the audience that they must take Cleon down:
If you make some crazy fantastic plan,

We thunder at you, we sluice down rain.

When you chose that awful tanner Paphlagon,

Bane of the gods, as general, we bent our brows

In chasmal frowns—thunder and lightning crashed,

The moon veered from her course, the sun straight away

Drew his wick into himself and stated that if

You made Cleon general he wouldn’t shine on you

Another day. But, that’s just what you did do!

There’s a saying that when in this city bad counsel prospers,

The worse your mistakes are, the more the gods turn them

To equivalent good—and anyone can see

How this actually happens! So, if you accuse

Cleon of bribery and theft, put him in the pillory.

And then, as before, all the mistakes you’ve made

Will turn out fine for the State and for everybody. (Aristophanes 130-131)

Returning to the plot, Socrates becomes stressful as he cannot communicate to

and teach Strepsiades better than he has been using his argumentative method based on
the “false” and the “true.” The conclusion of Socrates is that Strepsiades is just too old to understand Socrates’ ways. Eventually Strepsiades convinces Pheidippides to take lessons from Socrates. The lessons do pay off as Strepsiades happily jubilates his son’s new found intelligence. When arriving home the father and son are greeted by creditors who are still harassing them for money. Strepsiades becomes frustrated under the realization that the debt will not disappear and that the learning from Socrates was for nothing as it did not pay off in the long run except for creating a callous youth. In the final moments Strepsiades burns down the Logic Factory as the chorus silently watches.

*The Clouds* was first produced at the Dionysia in the archonship of Isarchus in 423 B.C.E. when Cratinus won with *Flagon* and Ameipsias with *Connus* (Henderson 295). Believing this to be a major failure Aristophanes thought that reworking the script would change the opinions of the public. But, for some reason the poet was never able to successfully stage a revised version of *The Clouds*.

*The Clouds* is full of themes and motifs such as “young and old,” “the motivation that money supplies people”, and “the understanding of our own words and what we are saying”. The educational system comes under much scrutiny as another of Aristophanes’ targets due to the prevailing educational system which he considered the cause of the overall degeneration of Athenian thought. Under its influence, the citizens vote for Cleon and carry on a disastrous civil war (Solomos 107).

Aristophanes might have also painted his protagonist in a style modeled after him. Strepsiades is there to learn from the wise Socrates, but his own gut feelings about what he is learning keep him from actually focusing on the task at hand. While Socrates tries to
teach him, Strepsiades can only concentrate on bedbugs. Sent to bed to think, he masturbates instead. If Socrates is the intellectual who represents man’s rationality, Strepsiades is the animal part, unable to apply any kind of reasoning whatsoever. Their meeting demonstrates the incomplete side of each. Also, modeling Strepsiades after himself one would have to wonder what Aristophanes would do if he were Socrates’ student.

Throughout the text there are multiple attacks on Socrates from Aristophanes for the three divisions of the Socratic dialogue that are the basis for the utmost scrutiny and comparison in this paper. A major point of attack in the text is from lines 450-460:

STREPSIADES: I’ll master being a brassy
Smooth-tongued, reckless, shameless,
Go-getting, sophistical faker,
Sharp in the law, a crook,
A quibbling cunning pliable
Liar, a bum, a proper old lag,
A filthy trouble-making
Dish-licker; I’ll be delighted
If I’m called all this to my face— (Aristophanes 126)
While intelligent points are not being made, mud is being slung in the form of a verbal lashing from Strepsiades proclaiming that once he gains intelligence from Socrates that people can call him whatever they want. But, it must be remembered that these are the words of a poet and it was the poet’s job at the time, just as it is the playwright’s now, to comment on society as they saw and lived it while shaping minds towards improving society:

STREPSIADES: How endless, oh great god, how endless

The nights are: will day ever come?

It was hours ago I heard a cock crow,

But the servants are still snoring—nothing’s

What it used to be. There are heaven knows

How many reasons for avoiding

War—and one’s enough: I’m afraid even

To beat the brutes. (Aristophanes 109)

Other points of name calling and antagonizing can be viewed in lines 1109-1112:

SOCRATES: Very well. We will make him

A first-rate sophist.

STREPSIADES: As pale

And miserable as they come! (Aristophanes 149)
Not only was this a light attack on Socrates, but also on the other Sophists associated with higher learning and thought. Aristophanes is making the assumption that forcing ourselves to dig deeper for intellect leads to an unfulfilling life of miserableness. Now, the next point is one that may seem ridiculous, but the Socratic dialogue is completely in question and being heavily ridiculed in the next few excerpts from the script. In the text Aristophanes produces one of the most ludicrous of situations in the play while looking to model what he believes to be ludicrous of Socrates and his method. First, the poet poses a question in the text to present a character who might know nothing:

STREPSIADES: Help! Help! Oh! Oh!

Neighbours, cousins, citizens!

Help me, I’m being beaten up—

Wow, oh, my head! Wow, oh my jaw!

Do you hit your own father?

PHEIDIPPIDES: Yes, father.

STREPSIADES: You parricide!

PHEIDIPPIDES: Do go on! Say what you want to,

The more you curse the more I like it.

STREPSIADES: You filthy pansy!

PHEIDIPPIDES: A spray of roses!
STREPSIADES: You hit your father!

PHEIDIPPIDES: Yes, by Zues. And I’ll prove I was right.

STREPSIADES: Prove you’re right to hit your father?

PHIDIPPIDES: I’ll put it to you and win my case.

STREPSIADES: You’ll win your case?

PHIDIPPIDES: With the greatest of ease.

Whichever system you like.

STREPSIADES: What system?

PHIDIPPIDES: The false or the true. (Aristophanes 157)

From here the argument begins as Pheidippides tries to justify his actions of beating his father, while Strepsiades finds “minor flaws” in his companion’s definition and slowly begins to unravel it, forcing his partner to admit ignorance:

PHIDIPPIDES: Shut up! Kindly allow me to pick up

The reigns of my argument. Ready? Question one.

You beat me when I was little, didn’t you?

STREPSIADES: I did! But always for your own good.

PHIDIPPIDES: Exactly!

Then it isn’t right I should do the same for you
‘For your own good’—if ‘good’ and ‘beating’ are

Synonymous. Why should your body be

Bruiseless and mine not? I was born free, wasn’t I?

‘Children weep: why shouldn’t fathers weep?’

If you argue this is how children learn, by beatings,

I’ll answer: by consent, old age is second childhood,

But since it has the advantage of experience,

If it makes mistakes, surely they should be punished

Twice as severely? (Aristophanes 159-160)

Pheidippides presents an argument that is full of holes, but completely in the style

that the character of Socrates presents constantly in the play. But, there is one more

erroneous point that Pheidippides adds to try to win his argument against his father:

PHEIDIPPIDES: Perhaps, if I say I’d beat mother, too?

STREPSIADES: Your mother? What do you mean?

This is worse than worse!

PHEIDIPPIDES: Suppose by the same sort of argument

I could prove I was right?

STREPSIADES: Do that and
You can take a running jump

Over the cliff and Socrates, too,

And all your confounded Logic! (Aristophanes 160-161)

After this argument and attempting to implement Socrates’ three point Socratic dialogue, the argument does not reach the typical conclusion found through the philosopher’s logic. When looking at and examining the argument, it is assumed that the third point of interest would be that of step three in the Socratic dialogue:

3. An agreement is reached by the two admittedly ignorant companions to pursue the truth seriously. Almost all the dialogues end inconclusively. Of course, they must do so. Socrates cannot give his disciples the truth. Each of us must find it out for ourselves. (Palmer 57)

But, what is introduced and leading here is a twist of the argument. In the sense of the sake of the storytelling versus the introduction of the anticipated third point in the Socratic dialogue, a conclusion is not met. An agreement between the two opposing parties is not met, leaving Strepsiades to basically throw his hands up in the air in a symbolic gesture that basically communicates verbally: “Just forget about it!”

This leads into the final moment of the script where Strepsiades burns down the Logic Factory. While this is just a character in a play burning down a building it can be viewed as so much more. Aristophanes was never a fan or big believer in the ways, words, and ideas of Socrates. In the last moment of a play written by Aristophanes about
Socrates, a building called the Logic Factory is being burned down. In the last gasp of the play Aristophanes is able to get in a last laugh before the end.

Throughout the course of the drama, Socrates is charged with corrupting youth and contributing to social disintegration. Socrates himself ranks this play among the ‘early slanders’ which he considers to be indirectly responsible for the charges brought against him (Nussbaum 45). In Jeffery Henderson’s *Aristophanes Fragments* he shares a translation of Plato’s *Apology* which is Plato’s writings of Socrates’ apology for what is considered his wrong doings towards the youth due to Aristophanes singling him out:

There is a certain Socrates, a clever man, who has theories about what’s up in the air and who investigates what’s down under the ground and who makes the weaker argument the stronger. These people, gentlemen of Athens, the ones who disseminate these rumors, are my dangerous accusers, since their listeners suppose that people who investigate these subjects do not give the gods their due. Besides, these accusers are numerous and they have been accusing me for a longs time, and what is more, they spoke to you at your most impressionable age, when you were children or adolescents, so that they simply won their case by default, since there was no one to defend me. And what is most unreasonable about it all, I have no way of even knowing and telling you their names, unless one of them happens to be a comic poet. All these people, who have tried to turn you against me from envy and by slander, including some who merely passed on what others told them, all these are most difficult to deal with . . . So I must read out what amounts to their deposition, as if
they were my legal accusers: “Socrates is a wrongdoer and a meddler for investigating what’s under the ground and in the sky and for making the weaker argument the stronger and for teaching others to do the very same things” That’s the gist of it. You have seen it for yourselves in Aristophanes’ comedy, where some kind of Socrates is whirled around, declaring that he treads the air and talking all sorts of other nonsense about matters of which I have not the slightest knowledge (Henderson 32-33)

In an ironic twist it could be perceived that Aristophanes was using Socrates’ own system of logic against him to tell a story in The Clouds. Some say that winners write history. While this idea is not up for debate it is interesting to find historical data of the state of Greece in the words of the first great comedic poet. A real life epic battle did not take place between Aristophanes and Socrates, but a war was waged. In this war a fight was witnessed between what many considered in one corner a self professed scholar and in the other corner a nuisance. Through wit, irony, satire, and parody the nuisance was able to win his fight. After centuries of letting the dust settle, it should be noted that Arisophanes’ The Clouds is in fact a full-fledged attack on Socrates and his methods.
Works Consulted


