

Aristophanes
Clouds



Translated by Ian Johnston

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by

Ian Johnston

Malaspina University-College

Nanaimo, British Columbia

Canada

Richer Resources Publications

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USA

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Translator's Note

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable help provided by K. J. Dover's commentary on the play (Oxford University Press, 1968) and by Alan H. Sommerstein's notes in his edition of *Clouds* (Aris & Phillips, 1982).

Note that the normal line numbers refer to this text and the ones in square brackets refer to the lines in the Greek text. In the line numbers, a short indented line has normally been included with the short line above it, so that two partial lines make up a single line in the reckoning.

Historical Note

Aristophanes (c. 448 BC to c. 388 BC) was a major comic playwright in Athens. His surviving works are the only complete examples we have of Old Comedy.

Clouds was first produced in the drama festival in Athens—the City Dionysia—in 423 BC, where it placed third. Subsequently the play was revised, but the revisions were never completed. The text which survives is the revised version, which was apparently not performed in Aristophanes' time but which circulated in manuscript form. This revised version does contain some anomalies which have not been fully sorted out (e.g., the treatment of Cleon, who died between the original text and the revisions). At the time of the first production, the Athenians had been at war with the Spartans, off and on, for a number of years.

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Clouds

Dramatis Personae

STREPSIADES: a middle-aged Athenian

PHEIDIPPIDES: a young Athenian, son of Strepsiades

XANTHIAS: a slave serving Strepsiades

STUDENT: one of Socrates' pupils in the Thinkery

SOCRATES: chief teacher in the Thinkery

CHORUS OF CLOUDS

THE BETTER ARGUMENT: an older man

THE WORSE ARGUMENT: a young man

PASIAS: one of Strepsiades' creditors

WITNESS: a friend of Pasias

AMYNIAS: one of Strepsiades' creditors

STUDENTS OF SOCRATES

[In the centre of the stage area is a house with a door to Socrates' educational establishment, the Thinkery.¹ On one side of the stage is Strepsiades' house, in front of which are two beds. Outside the Thinkery there is a small clay statue of a round goblet, and outside Strepsiades' house there is a small clay statue of Hermes. It is just before dawn. Strepsiades and Pheidippides are lying asleep in the two beds. Strepsiades tosses and turns restlessly. Pheidippides lets a very loud fart in his sleep. Strepsiades sits up wide awake]

STREPSIADES

Damn! Lord Zeus, how this night drags on and on!
It's endless. Won't daylight ever come?
I heard a cock crowing a while ago,
but my slaves kept snoring. In the old days,
they wouldn't have dared. Damn and blast this war—
so many problems. Now I'm not allowed

¹ *Thinkery*: The Greek word *phrontisterion* (meaning *school* or *academy*) is translated here as Thinkery, a term borrowed from William Arrowsmith's translation.

to punish my own slaves.¹ And then there's him—
this fine young man, who never once wakes up,
but farts the night away, all snug in bed,
wrapped up in five wool coverlets. Ah well, 10 [10]
I guess I should snuggle down and snore away.

[Strepsiades lies down again and tries to sleep. Pheidippides farts again. Strepsiades finally gives up trying to sleep]

STREPSIADES

I can't sleep. I'm just too miserable,
what with being eaten up by all this debt—
thanks to this son of mine, his expenses,
his racing stables. He keeps his hair long
and rides his horses—he's obsessed with it—
his chariot and pair. He dreams of horses.²
And I'm dead when I see the month go by—
with the moon's cycle now at twenty days,
as interest payments keep on piling up.³ 20

[Calling to a slave]

Hey, boy! Light the lamp. Bring me my accounts.

[Enter the slave Xanthias with light and tablets]

Let me take these and check my creditors.
How many are there? And then the interest— 20
I'll have to work that out. Let me see now . . .
What do I owe? "Twelve minai to Pasiast?"
Twelve minai to Pasiast! What's that for?
Oh yes, I know—that's when I bought that horse,

¹During the war it was easy for slaves to run away into enemy territory, so their owners had to treat them with much more care.

²Wearing one's hair long and keeping race horses were characteristics of the sons of very rich families.

³The interest on Strepsiades' loans would increase once the lunar month came to an end.

the pedigree nag. What a fool I am!
I'd sooner have a stone knock out my eye.¹

PHEIDIPPIDES: *[talking in his sleep]*

Philo, that's unfair! Drive your chariot straight. 30

STREPSIADES

That there's my problem—that's what's killing me.
Even fast asleep he dreams of horses!

PHEIDIPPIDES: *[in his sleep]*

In this war-chariot race how many times
do we drive round the track?

STREPSIADES

You're driving me,
your father, too far round the bend. Let's see,
after Pasion, what's the next debt I owe? [30]
"Three minai to Amynias." For what?
A small chariot board and pair of wheels?

PHEIDIPPIDES: *[in his sleep]*

Let the horse have a roll. Then take him home.

STREPSIADES

You, my lad, have been rolling in my cash. 40
Now I've lost in court, and other creditors
are going to take out liens on all my stuff
to get their interest.

PHEIDIPPIDES *[waking up]*

What's the matter, dad?
You've been grumbling and tossing around there
all night long.

STREPSIADES

I keep getting bitten—
some bum biter in the bedding.

¹Twelve minai is 100 drachmas, a considerable sum. The Greek reads "the horse branded with a koppa mark." That brand was a guarantee of its breeding.

PHEIDIPPIDES

Ease off, dad.

Let me get some sleep.

STREPSIADES

All right, keep sleeping.

Just bear in mind that one fine day these debts
will all be your concern. [40]

[Pheidippides rolls over and goes back to sleep]

Damn it, anyway.

I wish that matchmaker had died in pain— 50
the one who hooked me and your mother up.

I'd had a lovely time up to that point,
a crude, uncomplicated, country life,
lying around just as I pleased, with honey bees,
and sheep and olives, too. Then I married—
the niece of Megacles—who was the son
of Megacles. I was a country man,
and she came from the town—a real snob,
extravagant, just like Coesyra.¹

When I married her and we both went to bed, 60
I stunk of fresh wine, drying figs, sheep's wool— [50]
an abundance of good things. As for her,
she smelled of perfume, saffron, long kisses,
greed, extravagance, lots and lots of sex.²
Now, I'm not saying she was a lazy bones.
She used to weave, but used up too much wool.
To make a point I'd show this cloak to her

¹Megacles was a common name in a very prominent aristocratic family in Athens. Coesyra was the mother of a Megacles from this family, a woman well known for her wasteful expenditures and pride.

²The Greek has “of Colias and Genetyllis” names associated with festivals celebrating women's sexual and procreative powers.

and say, “Woman, your weaving’s far too thick.”¹

[The lamp goes out]

XANTHIAS

We’ve got no oil left in the lamp.

STREPSIADES

Damn it!

Why’d you light such a thirsty lamp? Come here.

70

I need to thump you.

XANTHIAS

Why should you hit me?

STREPSIADES

Because you stuck too thick a wick inside.

[The slave ignores StrepsiaDES and walks off into the house]

After that, when this son was born to us—

[60]

I’m talking about me and my good wife—

we argued over what his name should be.

She was keen to add “-hippos” to his name,
like Xanthippos, Callipedes, or Chaerippos.²

Me, I wanted the name Pheidonides,
his grandpa’s name. Well, we fought about it,
and then, after a while, at last agreed.

80

And so we called the boy Pheidippides.

She used to cradle the young lad and say,
“When you’re grown up, you’ll drive your chariot
to the Acropolis, like Megacles,

in a full-length robe . . .” I’d say, “No—

[70]

you’ll drive your goat herd back from Phelleus,

³Packing the wool tight in weaving uses up more wool and therefore costs more. StrepsiaDES holds up his cloak, which is by now full of holes.

¹-*hippos* means “horse.” The mother presumably wanted her son to have the marks of the aristocratic classes. Xanthippos was the name of Pericles’ father and his son. The other names are less obviously aristocratic or uncommon.

like your father, dressed in leather hides . . .”

He never listened to a thing I said.

And now he’s making my finances sick—
a racing fever. But I’ve spent all night
thinking of a way to deal with this whole mess,
and I’ve found one route, something really good—
it could work wonders. If I could succeed,
if I could convince him, I’d be all right.
Well, first I’d better wake him up. But how?
What would be the gentlest way to do it?

90

[StrepsiaDES leans over and gently nudges Pheidippides]

Pheidippides . . . my little Pheidippides . . .

PHEIDIPPIDES *[very sleepily]*

What is it, father?

[80]

STREPSIADES

Give me a kiss—
then give me your right hand.

[Pheidippides sits up, leans over, and does what his father has asked]

PHEIDIPPIDES

All right. There.

What’s going on?

STREPSIADES

Tell me this—do you love me?

100

PHEIDIPPIDES

Yes, I do, by Poseidon, lord of horses.

STREPSIADES

Don’t give me that lord of horses stuff—
he’s the god who’s causing all my troubles.
But now, my son, if you really love me,
with your whole heart, then follow what I say.

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PHEIDIPPIDES

What do you want to tell me I should do?

STREPSIADES

Change your life style as quickly as you can,
then go and learn the stuff I recommend.

PHEIDIPPIDES

So tell me—what are you asking me?

STREPSIADES

You'll do just what I say?

PHEIDIPPIDES

Yes, I'll do it—

110 [90]

I swear by Dionysus.

STREPSIADES

All right then.

Look over there—you see that little door,
there on that little house?

PHEIDIPPIDES

Yes, I see it.

What are you really on about, father?

STREPSIADES

That's the Thinkery—for clever minds.
In there live men who argue and persuade.
They say that heaven's an oven damper—
it's all around us—we're the charcoal.
If someone gives them cash, they'll teach him
how to win an argument on any cause,
just or unjust.

120

PHEIDIPPIDES

Who are these men?

STREPSIADES

I'm not sure
just what they call themselves, but they're good men,

[100]

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fine, deep-thinking intellectual types.

PHEIDIPIDES

Nonsense! They're a worthless bunch. I know them—
you're talking about pale-faced charlatans,
who haven't any shoes, like those rascals
Socrates and Chaerephon.¹

STREPSIADES

Shush, be quiet.

Don't prattle on such childish rubbish.
If you care about your father's daily food,
give up racing horses and, for my sake, 130
join their company.

PHEIDIPIDES

By Dionysus, no!

Not even if you give me as a gift
pheasants raised by Leogoras.²

STREPSIADES

Come on, son— [110]

you're the dearest person in the world to me.
I'm begging you. Go there and learn something.

PHEIDIPIDES

What is it you want me to learn?

STREPSIADES

They say

that those men have two kinds of arguments—
the Better, whatever that may mean,
and the Worse. Now, of these two arguments,
the Worse can make an unjust case and win. 140
So if, for me, you'll learn to speak like this,
to make an unjust argument, well then,

¹Chaerephon was a well-known associate of Socrates

¹Pheasants were a rich rarity in Athens. Leogoras was a very wealthy Athenian.

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all those debts I now owe because of you
I wouldn't have to pay—no need to give
an obol's worth to anyone.¹

PHEIDIPPIDES

There's no way.

I can't do that. With no colour in my cheeks
I wouldn't dare to face those rich young Knights.²

[120]

STREPSIADES

Then, by Demeter, you won't be eating
any of my food—not you, not your yoke horse,
nor your branded thoroughbred. To hell with you— 150
I'll toss you right out of this house.³

PHEIDIPPIDES

All right—

but Uncle Megacles won't let me live
without my horses. I'm going in the house.
I don't really care what you're about to do.

[Pheidippides stands up and goes inside the house. StrepsiaDES gets out of bed]

STREPSIADES

Well, I'll not take this set back lying down.
I'll pray to the gods and then go there myself—
I'll get myself taught in that Thinkery.
Still, I'm old and slow—my memory's shot.
How'm I going to learn hair-splitting arguments, 160
all that fancy stuff? But I have to go. [130]

²An *obol* was a relatively small amount, about a third of a day's pay for a jury member.

¹*Knights* is a term used to describe the affluent young men who made up the cavalry. Pheidippides has been mixing with people far beyond his father's means.

²A yoke horse was part of the four-horse team which was harnessed to a yoke on the inside.

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Why do I keep hanging back like this?
I should be knocking on the door.

[Strepsiades marches up to the door of the Thinkery and knocks]

Hey, boy . . . little boy!

STUDENT *[from inside]*

Go to Hell!

[The door opens and the student appears]

Who's been knocking on the door?

STREPSIADES

I'm Strepsiades, the son of Pheidon,
from Cicyna.

STUDENT

By god, what a stupid man,
to kick the door so hard. You just don't think.
You made a newly found idea miscarry!

STREPSIADES

I'm sorry. But I live in the country,
far away from here. Tell me what's happened.
What's miscarried?

STUDENT

It's not right to mention it,
except to students.

170 [140]

STREPSIADES

You needn't be concerned—
you can tell me. I've come here as a student,
to study at the Thinkery.

STUDENT

I'll tell you, then.
But you have to think of these as secrets,
our holy mysteries. A while ago,
a flea bit Chaerephon right on the eye brow

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and then jumped onto Socrates' head.
So Socrates then questioned Chaerephon
about how many lengths of its own feet
a flea could jump.

STREPSIADES

How'd he measure that?

180

STUDENT

Most ingeniously. He melted down some wax,
then took the flea and dipped two feet in it.
Once that cooled, the flea had Persian slippers.
He took those off and measured out the space.

[150]

STREPSIADES

By Lord Zeus, what intellectual brilliance!

STUDENT

Would you like to hear more of Socrates,
another one of his ideas? What do you say?

STREPSIADES

Which one? Tell me . . .

[The student pretends to be reluctant]

I'm begging you.

STUDENT

All right.

Chaerephon of Sphettus once asked Socrates
whether, in his opinion, a gnat buzzed
through its mouth or through its anal sphincter.

190

STREPSIADES

What did Socrates say about the gnat?

STUDENT

He said that the gnat's intestinal tract
was narrow—therefore air passing through it,
because of the constriction, was pushed with force

[160]

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towards the rear. So then that orifice,
being a hollow space beside a narrow tube,
transmits the noise caused by the force of air.

STREPSIADES

So a gnat's arse hole is a giant trumpet!
O triply blessed man who could do this, 200
anatomize the anus of a gnat!
A man who knows a gnat's guts inside out
would have no trouble winning law suits.

STUDENT

Just recently he lost a great idea—
a lizard stole it!

STREPSIADES

How'd that happen? Tell me. [170]

STUDENT

He was studying movements of the moon—
its trajectory and revolutions.
One night, as he was gazing up, open mouthed,
staring skyward, a lizard on the roof
relieved itself on him.

STREPSIADES

A lizard crapped on Socrates! 210
That's good!

STUDENT

Then, last night we had no dinner.

STREPSIADES

Well, well. What did Socrates come up with?
How did he get you all some food to eat?

STUDENT

He spread some ashes thinly on the table,
then seized a spit, went to the wrestling school,
picked up a queer, and robbed him of his cloak,

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then sold the cloak to purchase dinner.¹

STREPSIADES

And we still admire Thales after that?² [180]

Come on, now, open up the Thinkery—

let me see Socrates without delay. 220

I'm dying to learn. So open up the door.

[The doors of the Thinkery slide open to reveal Socrates' students studying on a porch (not inside a room). They are in variously absurd positions and are all very thin and pale]

By Hercules, who are all these creatures!

What country are they from?

STUDENT

You look surprised.

What do they look like to you?

STREPSIADES

Like prisoners—

those Spartan ones from Pylos.³ But tell me—

Why do these ones keep staring at the earth?

STUDENT

They're searching out what lies beneath the ground.

STREPSIADES

Ah, they're looking for some bulbs. Well now,

you don't need to worry any longer,

not about that. I know where bulbs are found, 230 [190]

¹I adopt Sommerstein's useful reading of this very elliptical passage, which interprets the Greek word *diabetes* as meaning a passive homosexual (rather than its usual meaning, "a pair of compasses"—both senses deriving from the idea of spreading legs apart). The line about selling the cloak is added to clarify the sense.

²Thales was a very famous thinker from the sixth century.

³The Athenians had captured a number of Spartans at Pylos in 425 and brought them to Athens where they remained in captivity and in poor physical condition.

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lovely big ones, too. What about them?
What are they doing like that, all doubled up?

STUDENT

They're sounding out the depths of Tartarus.

STREPSIADES

Why are their arse holes gazing up to heaven?

STUDENT

Directed studies in astronomy.

[The Student addresses the other students in the room]

Go inside. We don't want Socrates
to find you all in here.

STREPSIADES

Not yet, not yet.

Let them stay like this, so I can tell them
what my little problem is.

STUDENT

It's not allowed.

They can't spend too much time outside,
not in the open air.

240

[The students get up from their studying positions and disappear into the interior of the Thinkery. Strepsiades starts inspecting the equipment on the walls and on the tables]

STREPSIADES

My goodness,

what is this thing? Explain it to me.

[200]

STUDENT

That there's astronomy.

STREPSIADES

And what's this?

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STUDENT

That's geometry.

STREPSIADES

What use is that?

STUDENT

It's used to measure land.

STREPSIADES

You mean those lands
handed out by lottery.¹

STUDENT

Not just that—
it's for land in general.

STREPSIADES

A fine idea—
useful . . . democratic, too.

STUDENT

Look over here—
here's a map of the entire world. See?
Right there, that's Athens.

STREPSIADES

What do you mean?
I don't believe you. There are no jury men—
I don't see them sitting on their benches.

250

STUDENT

No, no—this space is really Attica.²

STREPSIADES

Where are the citizens of Cicynna,

[210]

¹Athenians sometimes apportioned by lot land outside the state which they had appropriated from other people.

²Attica is the territory surrounding and belonging to Athens.

the people in my deme? ¹

STUDENT

They're right here.

This is Euboea, as you can see,
beside us, really stretched a long way out.

STREPSIADES

I know—we pulled it apart, with Pericles.²
Whereabouts is Sparta?

STUDENT

Where is it? Here.

STREPSIADES

It's close to us. You must rethink the place—
shift it—put it far away from us.

260

STUDENT

Can't do that.

STREPSIADES [*threatening*]

Do it, by god, or I'll make you cry!

[*Strepsades notices Socrates descending from above in a basket
suspended from a rope*]

Hey, who's the man in the basket—up there?

STUDENT

The man himself.

STREPSIADES

Who's that?

STUDENT

Socrates.

²A deme was a political unit in Athens. Membership in a particular deme was a matter of inheritance from one's father.

³In 446 BC the Athenians under Pericles put down a revolt in Euboea, a large island just off the coast of Attica.

STREPSIADES

Socrates! Hey, call out to him for me—
make it loud.

[220]

STUDENT

You'll have to call to him yourself.
I'm too busy now.

[The Student exits into the interior of the house]

STREPSIADES

Oh, Socrates . . .
my dear little Socrates . . . hello . . .

SOCRATES

Why call on me, you creature of a day?

STREPSIADES

Well, first of all, tell me what you're doing.

270

SOCRATES

I tread the air, as I contemplate the sun.

STREPSIADES

You're looking down upon the gods up there,
in that basket? Why not do it from the ground,
if that's what you're doing?

SOCRATES

Impossible!
I'd never come up with a single thing
about celestial phenomena,
if I did not suspend my mind up high,
to mix my subtle thoughts with what's like them—
the air. If I turned my mind to lofty things,
but stayed there on the ground, I'd never make
the least discovery. For the earth, you see,
draws moist thoughts down by force into itself—
the same process takes place with watercress.

[230]

280

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STREPSIADES

What are you talking about? Does the mind
draw moisture into watercress? Come down,
my dear little Socrates, down here to me,
so you can teach me what I've come to learn.

[Socrates' basket slowly descends]

SOCRATES

Why have you come?

STREPSIADES

I want to learn to argue.
I'm being pillaged—ruined by interest [240]
and by creditors I can't pay off— 290
they're slapping liens on all my property.

SOCRATES

How come you got in such a pile of debt
without your knowledge?

STREPSIADES

I've been ravaged
by disease—I'm horse sick. It's draining me
in the most dreadful way. But please teach me
one of your two styles of arguing, the one
which never has to discharge any debt.
Whatever payment you want me to make,
I promise you I'll pay—by all the gods.

SOCRATES

What gods do you intend to swear by? 300
To start with, the gods hold no currency with us.

STREPSIADES

Then, what currency do you use to swear?
Is it iron coin, like in Byzantium?

SOCRATES

Do you want to know the truth of things divine, [250]

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the way they really are?

STREPSIADES

Yes, by god, I do,

if that's possible.

SOCRATES

And to commune and talk

with our own deities the Clouds?

STREPSIADES

Yes, I do.

SOCRATES

Then sit down on the sacred couch.

STREPSIADES

All right.

I'm sitting down.

SOCRATES

Take this wreath.

STREPSIADES

Why a wreath?

Oh dear, Socrates, don't offer me up
in sacrifice, like Athamas.¹

310

SOCRATES

No, no.

We go through all this for everyone—
it's their initiation.

STREPSIADES

What do I get?

SOCRATES

You'll learn to be a clever talker,
to rattle off a speech, to strain your words

[260]

¹Athamas was a character in one of Sophocles' lost plays who was prepared for sacrifice. He was rescued by Hercules.

like flour. Just keep still.

[Socrates sprinkles flour all over Strepsiades]

STREPSIADES

By god, that's no lie!

I'll turn into flour if you keep sprinkling me.

SOCRATES

Old man, be quiet. Listen to the prayer.

[Socrates shuts his eyes to recite his prayer]

O Sovereign Lord, O Boundless Air,
who keeps the earth suspended here in space,
O Bright Sky, O Sacred Goddesses—
the Thunder-bearing Clouds—arise,
you holy ladies, issue forth on high,
before the man who holds you in his mind.

320

STREPSIADES: *[lifting his cloak to cover his head]*

Not yet, not yet. Not till I wrap this cloak
like this so I don't get soaked. What bad luck,
to leave my home without a cap on.

SOCRATES *[ignoring Strepsiades]*

Come now, you highly honoured Clouds, come—
manifest yourselves to this man here—
whether you now sit atop Olympus,
on those sacred snow-bound mountain peaks,
or form the holy choruses with nymphs
in gardens of their father Ocean,
or gather up the waters of the Nile
in golden flagons at the river's mouths,
or dwell beside the marsh of Maeotis
or snowy rocks of Mimas—hear my call,
accept my sacrifice, and then rejoice
in this holy offering I make.

330 [270]

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CHORUS [*offstage*]

Everlasting Clouds— 340
let us arise, let us reveal
our moist and natural radiance—
moving from the roaring deep
of father Ocean to the tops
of tree-lined mountain peaks, [280]
where we see from far away
the lofty heights, the sacred earth,
whose fruits we feed with water,
the murmuring of sacred rivers,
the roaring of the deep-resounding sea. 350
For the unwearied eye of heaven
blazes forth its glittering beams.
Shake off this misty shapelessness
from our immortal form and gaze upon
the earth with our far-reaching eyes. [290]

SOCRATES

Oh you magnificent and holy Clouds,
you've clearly heard my call.

[*To Strepsiades*]

Did you hear that voice
intermingled with the awesome growl of thunder?

STREPSIADES

Oh you most honoured sacred goddesses,
in answer to your thunder call I'd like to fart— 360
it's made me so afraid—if that's all right . . .

[*Strepsiades pull down his pants and farts loudly in the direction of
the offstage Chorus*]

Oh, oh, whether right nor not, I need to shit.

SOCRATES

Stop being so idiotic, acting like

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a stupid damn comedian. Keep quiet.
A great host of deities is coming here—
they're going to sing.

CHORUS [*still offstage*]

Oh you maidens bringing rain—
let's move on to that brilliant place, [300]
to gaze upon the land of Pallas,
where such noble men inhabit 370
Cecrops' lovely native home,¹
where they hold those sacred rites
no one may speak about,
where the temple of the mysteries
is opened up in holy festivals,²
with gifts for deities in heaven—
what lofty temples, holy statues,
most sacred supplication to the gods,
with garlands for each holy sacrifice,
and festivals of every kind 380 [310]
in every season of the year,
including, when the spring arrives,
that joyful Dionysian time,
with rousing choruses of song,
resounding music of the pipes.

STREPSIADES

By god, Socrates, tell me, I beg you,
who these women are who sing so solemnly.
Are they some special kind of heroines?

SOCRATES

No—they're heavenly Clouds, great goddesses
for lazy men—from them we get our thoughts, 390

¹*Cecrops*: a legendary king of Athens. *Pallas* is Pallas Athena, patron goddess of Athens.

²The holy festivals are the Eleusinian mysteries, a traditionally secret and sacred festival for those initiated into the band of cult worshippers.

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our powers of speech, our comprehension,
our gift for fantasy and endless talk,
our power to strike responsive chords in speech
and then rebut opponents' arguments.

STREPSIADES

Ah, that must be why, as I heard their voice,
my soul took wing, and now I'm really keen
to babble on of trivialities,
to argue smoke and mirrors, to deflate
opinions with a small opinion of my own,
to answer someone's reasoned argument
with my own counter-argument. So now,
I'd love to see them here in front of me,
if that can be done.

[320]

400

SOCRATES

Just look over there—
towards Mount Parnes. I see them coming,
slowly moving over here.¹

STREPSIADES

Where? Point them out.

SOCRATES

They're coming down here through the valleys—
a whole crowd of them—there in the thickets,
right beside you.

STREPSIADES

This is weird. I don't see them.

SOCRATES [*pointing*]

There—in the entrance way.

STREPSIADES

Ah, now I see—
but I can barely make them out.

¹*Mount Parnes*: a mountain range to the north of Athens.

[The Clouds enter from the wings]

SOCRATES

There—

410

surely you can see them now, unless your eyes
are swollen up like pumpkins.

STREPSIADES

I see them.

My god, what worthy noble presences!
They're taking over the entire space.

SOCRATES

You weren't aware that they are goddesses?
You had no faith in them?

STREPSIADES

I'd no idea.

I thought clouds were mist and dew and vapour.

[330]

SOCRATES

You didn't realize these goddesses
support a multitude of charlatans—
prophetic seers from Thurium, quacks
who specialize in books on medicine,
lazy long-haired types with onyx signet rings,
poets who produce the twisted choral music
for dithyrambic songs, those with airy minds—
all those men so active doing nothing
the Clouds support, since in their poetry
these people celebrate the Clouds.

420

STREPSIADES

Ah ha, so that's why they poeticize
"the whirling radiance of watery clouds
as they advance so ominously,"
"waving hairs of hundred-headed Typho,"¹

430

¹Typho is a monster with a hundred heads, father of the storm winds (hence, our word typhoon).

with “roaring tempests,” and then “liquid breeze,”
or “crook-taloned, sky-floating birds of prey,”
“showers of rain from dewy clouds”—and then,
as a reward for this, they stuff themselves
on slices carved from some huge tasty fish
or from a thrush.¹

SOCRATES

Yes, thanks to these Clouds.

[340]

Is that not truly just?

STREPSIADES

All right, tell me this—
if they’re really clouds, what’s happened to them?
They look just like mortal human women.
The clouds up there are not the least like that.

440

SOCRATES

What are they like?

STREPSIADES

I don’t know exactly.
They look like wool once it’s been pulled apart—
not like women, by god, not in the least.
These ones here have noses.

SOCRATES

Let me ask you something.

Will you answer me?

STREPSIADES

Ask me what you want.

Fire away.

SOCRATES

Have you ever gazed up there

²Meat from a thrush was considered a delicacy, something that might be given to the winner of a public competition. These lines are mocking the dithyrambic poets (perhaps in comparison with the writers of comic drama).

and seen a cloud shaped like a centaur,
or a leopard, wolf, or bull?

STREPSIADES

Yes, I have.

So what?

SOCRATES

They become anything they want.

450

So if they see some hairy savage type,
one of those really wild and wooly men,
like Xenophantes' son, they mock his moods,
transforming their appearance into centaurs.¹

[350]

STREPSIADES

What if they glimpse a thief of public funds,
like Simon? What do they do then?²

SOCRATES

They expose

just what he's truly like—they change at once,
transform themselves to wolves.

STREPSIADES

Ah ha, I see.

So that's why yesterday they changed to deer.
They must have caught sight of Cleonymos—
the man who threw away his battle shield—
they knew he was fearful coward.³

460

SOCRATES

And now it's clear they've seen Cleisthenes—

¹*Xenophantes' son* is a reference to Hieronymos, a dithyrambic and tragic poet. A centaur was known for its savage temper and wild appearance.

²Simon was an allegedly corrupt Athenian public official.

³Cleonymos was an Athenian accused of dropping his shield and running away from a battle.

that's why, as you can see, they've changed to women.¹

STREPSIADES [*to the Chorus of Clouds*]

All hail to you, lady goddesses.

And now, if you have ever spoken out
to other men, let me hear your voice,
you queenly powers.

CHORUS LEADER

Greetings to you, old man born long ago,
hunter in love with arts of argument—
you, too, high priest of subtlest nonsense,
tell us what you want. Of all the experts
in celestial matters at the present time,
we take note of no one else but you—
and Prodicus—because he's sharp and wise,
while you go swaggering along the street,
in bare feet, shifting both eyes back and forth.²
You keep moving on through many troubles,
looking proud of your relationship with us.

470

[360]

STREPSIADES

By the Earth, what voices these Clouds have—
so holy, reverent, and marvelous!

480

SOCRATES

Well, they're the only deities we have—
the rest are just so much hocus pocus.

STREPSIADES

Hang on—by the Earth, isn't Zeus a god,
the one up there on Mount Olympus?

¹Cleisthenes was a well known homosexual whom Aristophanes never tires of holding up to ridicule.

²*Prodicus* was a well-known Athenian intellectual, who wrote on a wide variety of subjects. Linking Socrates and Prodicus as intellectual equals would strike many Athenians as quite absurd.

SOCRATES

What sort of god is Zeus? Why spout such rubbish?
There's no such being as Zeus.

STREPSIADES

What do you mean?

Then who brings on the rain? First answer that.

SOCRATES

Why, these women do. I'll prove that to you
with persuasive evidence. Just tell me—
where have you ever seen the rain come down
without the Clouds being there? If Zeus brings rain,
then he should do so when the sky is clear,
when no one can see any Clouds at all.

490 [370]

STREPSIADES

By Apollo, you've made a good point there—
it helps your argument. I used to think
rain was really Zeus pissing through a sieve.
Tell me who causes thunder? That scares me.

SOCRATES

These Clouds do, as they roll around.

STREPSIADES

But how?

Explain that, you who dares to know it all.

500

SOCRATES

When they are filled with water to the brim
and then, suspended there with all that rain,
are forced to move, they bump into each other.
They're so big, they burst with a great boom.

STREPSIADES

But what's forcing them to move around?
Doesn't Zeus do that?

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SOCRATES

No—that’s the aerial Vortex.¹

STREPSIADES

Vortex? Well, that’s something I didn’t know. [380]
So Zeus is now no more, and Vortex rules
instead of him. But you still have not explained
a thing about those claps of thunder. 510

SOCRATES

Weren’t you listening to me? I tell you,
when the Clouds are full of water and collide,
they’re so thickly packed they make a noise.

STREPSIADES

Come on now—who’d ever believe that stuff?

SOCRATES

I’ll explain, using you as a test case.
Have you ever gorged yourself on stew
at the Panathenaea and later
had an upset stomach—then suddenly
some violent movement made it rumble?²

STREPSIADES

Yes, by Apollo! It does weird things— 520
I feel unsettled. That small bit of stew
rumbles around and makes strange noises,
just like thunder. At first it’s quite quiet— [390]
“pappax pappax”—then it starts getting louder—
“papapappax”—and when I take a shit,
it really thunders “PAPAPAPPAX!!!”—
just like these Clouds.

¹ *Vortex*: the Greek word is *dinos* meaning a *whirl* or *eddy*. I adopt Sommerstein’s suggestion for this word here.

² *Panathenaea* is a major annual festival in Athens

SOCRATES

So think about it—
if your small gut can make a fart like that,
why can't the air, which goes on for ever,
produce tremendous thunder. Then there's this— 530
consider how alike these phrases sound,
“thunder clap” and “fart and crap.”

STREPSIADES

All right, but then explain this to me—
Where does lightning come from, that fiery blaze,
which, when it hits, sometimes burns us up,
sometimes just singes us and lets us live?
Clearly Zeus is hurling that at perjurers.

SOCRATES

You stupid driveling idiot, you stink
of olden times, the age of Cronos! ¹ If Zeus
is really striking at the perjurers, 540
how come he's not burned Simon down to ash,
or else Cleonymos or Theorus?
They perjure themselves more than anyone. [400]
No. Instead he strikes at his own temple
at Sunium, our Athenian headland,
and at his massive oak trees there. Why?
What's his plan? Oak trees can't be perjured.

STREPSIADES

I don't know. But that argument of yours
seems good. All right, then, what's a lightning bolt?

SOCRATES

When a dry wind blows up into the Clouds 550
and gets caught in there, it makes them inflate,
like the inside of a bladder. And then

¹Cronos is the divine father of Zeus; the age of Cronos is part of the mythic past.

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it has to burst them all apart and vent,
rushing out with violence brought on
by dense compression—its force and friction
cause it to consume itself in fire.

STREPSIADES

By god, I went through that very thing myself—
at the feast for Zeus. I was cooking food,
a pig's belly, for my family. I forgot
to slit it open. It began to swell—
then suddenly blew up, splattering blood
in both my eyes and burning my whole face.

560 [410]

CHORUS LEADER

Oh you who seeks from us great wisdom,
how happy you will be among Athenians,
among the Greeks, if you have memory,
if you can think, if in that soul of yours
you've got the power to persevere,
and don't get tired standing still or walking,
nor suffer too much from the freezing cold,
with no desire for breakfast, if you abstain
from wine, from exercise, and other foolishness,
if you believe, as all clever people should,
the highest good is victory in action,
in deliberation and in verbal wars.

570

STREPSIADES

Well, as for a stubborn soul and a mind
thinking in a restless bed, while my stomach,
lean and mean, feeds on bitter herbs, don't worry.
I'm confident about all that—I'm ready
to be hammered on your anvil into shape.

[420]

SOCRATES

So now you won't acknowledge any gods
except the ones we do—Chaos, the Clouds,

580

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the Tongue—just these three?

STREPSIADES

Absolutely—

I'd refuse to talk to any other gods,
if I ran into them—and I decline
to sacrifice or pour libations to them.
I'll not provide them any incense.

CHORUS LEADER

Tell us then what we can do for you.
Be brave—for if you treat us with respect,
if you admire us, and if you're keen
to be a clever man, you won't go wrong.

590

STREPSIADES

O you sovereign queens,
from you I ask one really tiny favour—
to be the finest speaker in all Greece,
within a hundred miles.

[430]

CHORUS LEADER

You'll get that from us.

From now on, in time to come, no one will win
more votes among the populace than you.

STREPSIADES

No speaking on important votes for me!
That's not what I'm after. No, no. I want
to twist all legal verdicts in my favour,
to evade my creditors.

CHORUS LEADER

You'll get that,

600

just what you desire. For what you want
is nothing special. So be confident—
give yourself over to our agents here.

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STREPSIADES

I'll do that—I'll place my trust in you.
Necessity is weighing me down—the horses,
those thoroughbreds, my marriage—all that
has worn me out. So now, this body of mine [440]
I'll give to them, with no strings attached,
to do with as they like—to suffer blows,
go without food and drink, live like a pig, 610
to freeze or have my skin flayed for a pouch—
if I can just get out of all my debt
and make men think of me as bold and glib,
as fearless, impudent, detestable,
one who cobbles lies together, makes up words,
a practised legal rogue, a statute book,
a chattering fox, sly and needle sharp,
a slippery fraud, a sticky rascal,
foul whipping boy or twisted villain, [450]
troublemaker, or idly prattling fool. 620
If they can make those who run into me
call me these names, they can do what they want—
no questions asked. If, by Demeter, they're keen,
they can convert me into sausages
and serve me up to men who think deep thoughts.

CHORUS

Here's a man whose mind's now smart,
no holding back—prepared to start.
When you have learned all this from me [460]
you know your glory will arise
among all men to heaven's skies. 630

STREPSIADES

And what will I get out of this?

CHORUS

For all time, you'll live with me
a life most people truly envy.

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STREPSIADES

You mean one day I'll really see that?

CHORUS

Hordes will sit outside your door
wanting your advice and more— [470]
to talk, to place their trust in you
for their affairs and lawsuits, too,
things which merit your great mind.
They'll leave you lots of cash behind. 640

CHORUS LEADER: *[to Socrates]*

So get started with this old man's lessons,
what you intend to teach him first of all—
rouse his mind, test his intellectual powers.

SOCRATES

Come on then, tell me the sort of man you are—
once I know that, I can bring to bear on you
my latest batteries with full effect. [480]

STREPSIADES

What's that? By god, are you assaulting me?

SOCRATES

No—I want to learn some things from you.
What about your memory?

STREPSIADES

To tell the truth,
it works two ways. If someone owes me something, 650
I remember really well. But if it's poor me
that owes the money, I forget a lot.

SOCRATES

Do you have any natural gift for speech?

STREPSIADES

Not for speaking—only for evading debt.

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SOCRATES

So how will you be capable of learning?

STREPSIADES

Easily—that shouldn't be your worry.

SOCRATES

All right. When I throw out something wise
about celestial matters, you make sure
you snatch it right away.

[490]

STREPSIADES

What's that about?

Am I to eat up wisdom like a dog?

660

SOCRATES [*aside*]

This man's an ignorant barbarian!
Old man, I fear you may need a beating.

[*to StrepsiaDES*]

Now, what do you do if someone hits you?

STREPSIADES

If I get hit, I wait around a while,
then find witnesses, hang around some more,
then go to court.

SOCRATES

All right, take off your cloak.

STREPSIADES

Have I done something wrong?

SOCRATES

No. It's our custom
to go inside without a cloak.

STREPSIADES

But I don't want

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to search your house for stolen stuff.¹

SOCRATES

What are you going on about? Take it off. 670

STREPSIADES [*removing his cloak and his shoes*]

So tell me this—if I pay attention [500]
and put some effort into learning,
which of your students will I look like?

SOCRATES

In appearance there'll be no difference
between yourself and Chaerephon.

STREPSIADES

Oh, that's bad.
You mean I'll be only half alive?

SOCRATES

Don't talk such rubbish! Get a move on
and follow me inside. Hurry up!

STREPSIADES

First, put a honey cake here in my hands. 680
I'm scared of going down in there. It's like
walking in Trophonios' cave.²

SOCRATES

Go inside.
Why keep hanging round this doorway?

[*Socrates picks up Strepsiadēs' cloak and shoes. Then Strepsiadēs and Socrates exit into the interior of the Thinkery*]

CHORUS LEADER

Go. And may you enjoy good fortune, [510]

¹Legally an Athenian who believed someone had stolen his property could enter the suspect's house to search. But he first had to remove any garments in which he might conceal something which he might plant in the house.

²*Trophonios' cave* was a place people went to get prophecies. A suppliant carried a honey cake as an offering to the snakes in the cave.

a fit reward for all your bravery.

CHORUS

We hope this man
thrives in his plan.
For at his stage
of great old age
he'll take a dip
in new affairs
to act the sage.

690

CHORUS LEADER [*stepping forward to address the audience*]

You spectators, I'll talk frankly to you now,
and speak the truth, in the name of Dionysus,
who has cared for me ever since I was a child.
So may I win and be considered a wise man. [520]
For I thought you were a discerning audience
and this comedy the most intelligent
of all my plays. Thus, I believed it worth my while
to produce it first for you, a work which cost me
a great deal of effort. But I left defeated,
beaten by vulgar men—which I did not deserve.
I place the blame for this on you intellectuals,
on whose behalf I went to all that trouble.
But still I won't ever willingly abandon
the discriminating ones among you all,
not since that time when my play about two men—
one was virtuous, the other one depraved—
was really well received by certain people here, 700
whom it pleases me to mention now. As for me,
I was still unmarried, not yet fully qualified [530]
to produce that child. But I exposed my offspring,
and another woman carried it away.

700

710

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In your generosity you raised and trained it.¹
 Since then I've had sworn testimony from you
 that you have faith in me. So now, like old Electra,
 this comedy has come, hoping she can find,
 somewhere in here, spectators as intelligent.
 If she sees her brother's hair, she'll recognize it.² 720
 Consider how my play shows natural restraint.
 First, she doesn't have stitched leather dangling down,
 with a thick red knob, to make the children giggle.³
 She hasn't mocked bald men or danced some drunken reel. [540]
 There's no old man who talks and beats those present
 with a stick to hide bad jokes. She doesn't rush on stage
 with torches or raise the cry "Alas!" or "Woe is me!"
 No—she's come trusting in herself and in the script.
 And I'm a poet like that. I don't preen myself.
 I don't seek to cheat you by re-presenting here 730
 the same material two or three times over.
 Instead I base my art on framing new ideas,
 all different from the rest, and each one very deft.
 When Cleon was all-powerful, I went for him.
 I hit him in the gut. But once he was destroyed,
 I didn't have the heart to kick at him again. [550]
 Yet once Hyperbolos let others seize on him,
 they've not ceased stomping on the miserable man—

¹*trained it*: This passage is a reference to Aristophanes' first play, *The Banqueters*, and to those who helped him get the work produced. The child mentioned is a metaphorical reference to that work or to his artistic talent generally. The other woman is a metaphorical reference to Callistratos, who produced *The Banqueters*.

²Electra was the sister of Orestes and spent a long time waiting to be reunited with him. That hope kept her going. When she saw her brother's lock of hair on their father's tomb, she was overjoyed that he had come back. The adjective "old" refers to the story, which was very well known to the audience.

³These lines may indicate that in *Clouds* the male characters did not wear the traditional phalluses.

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and on his mother, too.¹ The first was Eupolis—
he dredged up his *Maricas*, a wretched rehash 740
of my play *The Knights*—he’s such a worthless poet—
adding an aging female drunk in that stupid dance,
a woman Phrynichos invented years ago,
the one that ocean monster tried to gobble up.²
Then Hermippos wrote again about Hyperbolos.
Now all the rest are savaging the man once more,
copying my images of eels. If anyone
laughs at those plays, I hope mine don’t amuse him. [570]
But if you enjoy me and my inventiveness,
then future ages will commend your worthy taste. 750

CHORUS

For my dance I first here call
on Zeus, high-ruling king of all
among the gods—and on Poseidon,
so great and powerful—the one
who with his trident wildly heaves
the earth and all the brine-filled seas,
and on our famous father Sky,
the most revered, who can supply [570]
all things with life. And I invite
the Charioteer whose dazzling light 760
fills this wide world so mightily
for every man and deity.

CHORUS LEADER

The wisest in this audience should here take note—
you’ve done us wrong, and we confront you with the blame.
We confer more benefits than any other god

¹Cleon was a very powerful Athenian politician after Pericles. Aristophanes savagely attacked him in *Knights*. Cleon was killed in battle (in 422). Hyperbolos became a very influential politician after Cleon’s death.

²Eupolis, Phrynichos, and Hermippos are comic playwrights, rivals of Aristophanes.

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upon your city, yet we're the only ones
to whom you do not sacrifice or pour libations,
though we're the gods who keep protecting you.
If there's some senseless army expedition, [580]
then we respond by thundering or bringing rain. 770
And when you were selecting as your general
that Paphlagonian tanner hated by the gods,¹
we frowned and then complained aloud—our thunder pealed
among the lightning bursts, the moon moved off her course,
the sun at once pulled his wick back inside himself,
and said if Cleon was to be your general
then he'd give you no light. Nonetheless, you chose him.
They say this city likes to make disastrous choices,
but that the gods, no matter what mistakes you make,
convert them into something better. If you want 780
your recent choice to turn into a benefit,
I can tell you how—it's easy. Condemn the man— [590]
that seagull Cleon—for bribery and theft.
Set him in the stocks, a wooden yoke around his neck.
Then, even if you've made a really big mistake,
for you things will be as they were before your vote,
and for the city this affair will turn out well.²

CHORUS

Phoebus Apollo, stay close by,
lord of Delos, who sits on high,
by lofty Cynthos mountain sides; 790
and holy lady, who resides
in Ephesus, in your gold shrine,

¹Paphlagonian tanner is a reference to Cleon, who earned his money from tanneries. Paphlagonia is an area in Asia Minor. The word here implies that Cleon was not a true Athenian.

¹The seagull was a bird symbolic of thievery and greed. The contradiction in these speeches in the attitude to Cleon (who died the year following the original production) may be accounted for by the incomplete revision of the script.

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where Lydian girls pray all the time; [600]
Athena, too, who guards our home,
her aegis raised above her own,
and he who holds Parnassus peaks
and shakes his torches as he leaps,
lord Dionysus, whose shouts call
amid the Delphic bacchanal.¹

CHORUS LEADER

When we were getting ready to move over here, 800
Moon met us and told us, first of all, to greet,
on her behalf, the Athenians and their allies.
Then she said she was upset—the way you treat her [610]
is disgraceful, though she brings you all benefits—
not just in words but in her deeds. To start with,
she saves you at least one drachma every month
for torchlight— in the evening, when you go outside,
you all can say, “No need to buy a torch, my boy,
Moon’s light will do just fine.” She claims she helps you all
in other ways, as well, but you don’t calculate 810
your calendar the way you should—no, instead
you make it all confused, and that’s why, she says,
the gods are always making threats against her,
when they are cheated of a meal and go back home
because their celebration has not taken place
according to a proper count of all the days.²
And then, when you should be making sacrifice, [620]
you’re torturing someone or have a man on trial.
And many times, when we gods undertake a fast,
because we’re mourning Memnon or Sarpedon, 820

²The holy lady is a reference to the goddess Artemis. The aegis is a divine emblem which has invincible powers to strike fear into the god’s enemies. Here it is invoked as a protection for Athens, Athena’s city. Dionysus lived in Delphi when Apollo was absent from the shrine during the winter.

¹Athenians followed a lunar calendar, but there were important discrepancies due to a very careless control over inserting extra days.

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you're pouring out libations, having a good laugh.¹
That's the reason, after his choice by lot this year
to sit on the religious council, Hyperbolos
had his wreath of office snatched off by the gods.
That should make him better understand the need
to count the days of life according to the moon.²

[Enter Socrates from the interior of the Thinkery]

SOCRATES

By Respiration, Chaos, and the Air,
I've never seen a man so crude, stupid,
clumsy, and forgetful. He tries to learn
the tiny trifles, but then he forgets
before he's even learned them. Nonetheless,
I'll call him outside here into the light.

830 [630]

[Socrates calls back into the interior of the Thinkery]

Strepsiades, where are you? Come on out—
and bring your bed.

STREPSIADES *[from inside]*

I can't carry it out—
the bugs won't let me.

SOCRATES

Get a move on. Now!

[Strepsiades enters carrying his bedding]

SOCRATES

Put it there. And pay attention.

STREPSIADES *[putting the bed down]*

²Memnon, the son of Dawn, was killed at Troy, as was Sarpedon, a son of Zeus, and leader of the Lycian allies of the Trojans.

³*religious council*: The Amphictyonic Council, which controlled some important religious shrines, was made up of delegates from different city states. In Athens the delegate was chosen by lot. It's not clear how the gods could have removed the wreath in question.

There!

SOCRATES

Come now, of all the things you never learned
what to you want to study first? Tell me.

[Strepsiades is very puzzled by the question]

SOCRATES

Poetic measures? Diction? Rhythmic verse?

STREPSIADES

I'll take measures. Just the other day
the man who deals in barley cheated me—
about two quarts.

840

[640]

SOCRATES

That's not what I mean.
Which music measure is most beautiful—
the triple measure or quadruple measure?

STREPSIADES

As a measure nothing beats a gallon.

SOCRATES

My dear man, you're just talking nonsense.

STREPSIADES

Then make me a bet—I say a gallon
is made up of quadruple measures.

SOCRATES

Oh damn you—you're such a country bumpkin—
so slow! Maybe you can learn more quickly
if we deal with rhythm.

850

STREPSIADES

Will these rhythms
help to get me food?

SOCRATES

Well, to begin with,

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they'll make you elegant in company—
and you'll recognize the different rhythms,
the enoplian and the dactylic,
which is like a digit.¹

[650]

STREPSIADES

Like a digit!

By god, that's something I do know!

SOCRATES

Then tell me.

STREPSIADES

When I was a lad a digit meant this!

[Strepsiades sticks his middle finger straight up under Socrates' nose]

SOCRATES

You're just a crude buffoon!

STREPSIADES

No, you're a fool—

I don't want to learn any of that stuff.

860

SOCRATES

Well then, what?

STREPSIADES

You know, that other thing—

how to argue the most unjust cause.

SOCRATES

But you need to learn these other matters
before all that. Now, of the quadrupeds
which one can we correctly label male?

STREPSIADES

Well, I know the males, if I'm not witless—

[660]

¹The dactyl is named from the Greek word for finger because it consists of one long stress followed by two short stresses, like the structure of bones in a finger. The phrase "which is like a digit" has been added to make the point clearer.

the ram, billy goat, bull, dog, and fowl.

SOCRATES

And the females?

STREPSIADES

The ewe, nanny goat,
cow, bitch and fowl.¹

SOCRATES

You see what you're doing?
You're using that word "fowl" for both of them,
Calling males what people use for females.

870

STREPSIADES

What's that? I don't get it.

SOCRATES

What's not to get?
"Fowl" and "Fowl" . . .

STREPSIADES

By Poseidon, I see your point.
All right, what should I call them?

SOCRATES

Call the male a "fowl"—
and call the other one "fowlette."

STREPSIADES

"Fowlette?"
By the Air, that's good! Just for teaching that
I'll fill your kneading basin up with flour,

¹I adopt Sommerstein's suggested insertion of this line and a half in order to clarify what now follows in the conversation, which hinges on the gender of words (masculine, feminine, or neuter) and the proper ascription of a specific gender to words which describe male and female objects. The word "fowl" applies to both male and females and therefore is not, strictly speaking masculine. This whole section is a satire on the "nitpicking" attention to language attributed to the sophists.

right to the brim.¹

SOCRATES

Once again, another error!

[670]

You called it basin—a masculine word—
when it's feminine.

STREPSIADES

How so? Do I call

880

the basin masculine?

SOCRATES

Indeed you do.

It's just like Cleonymos.²

STREPSIADES

How's that?

Tell me.

SOCRATES

You treated the word basin

just as you would treat Cleonymos.

STREPSIADES [*totally bewildered by the conversation*]

But my dear man, he didn't have a basin—
not Cleonymos—not for kneading flour.

His round mortar was his prick—the wanker—
and he kneaded that to masturbate.³

But what should I call a basin from now on?

SOCRATES

Call it a basinette, just as you'd say
the word Sostratette.

890

¹A kneading basin is a trough for making bread.

²Cleonymos is an Athenian politician who allegedly ran away from the battle field, leaving his shield behind.

³*to masturbate*: the Greek here says literally “Cleonymos didn't have a kneading basin but kneaded himself with a round mortar [i.e., masturbated].”

STREPSIADES

Basinette—it's feminine?

SOCRATES

It is indeed.

STREPSIADES

All right, then, I should say
Cleonymette and basinette.

[680]

SOCRATES

You've still got to learn about people's names—
which ones are male and which are female.

STREPSIADES

I know which ones are feminine.

SOCRATES

Go on.

STREPSIADES

Lysilla, Philinna, Cleitagora,
Demetria . . .

SOCRATES

Which names are masculine?

STREPSIADES

There are thousands of them—Philoxenos,
Melesias, Amynias . . .

SOCRATES

You fool,
those names are not all masculine.¹

900

¹The three names mentioned belong to well known Athenians, who may have all been famous for their dissolute life style. Socrates is taking issue with the spelling of the last two names which (in some forms) look like feminine names. Strepsiadés, of course, thinks Socrates is talking about the sexuality of the people.

You have just read the first 50 pages of Ian Johnston's new translation of Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

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A Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston is a retired university-college instructor living in Nanaimo, BC, Canada. Texts of his lectures and translations are available on the Internet at the following web address:

<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm>

For a brief introduction to Aristophanes' *Clouds*, please consult the following link:

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Aristophanes

Clouds

Translated by Ian Johnston

The comic drama *Clouds* (423 BC) is one of the most famous and popular satires ever written. In it Aristophanes, the greatest comic dramatist of ancient times, takes issue with the intellectual and moral depravity of his fellow Athenians, particularly with their thirst for radical innovations in traditional ways of thinking and for their unscrupulous self-interest. The play is particularly famous for its portrayal of Socrates, the target of much of the very robust satire. Here, he is pictured as a caricature of the arch sophist, eager to earn money by training young Athenians so that they can successfully use corrupt notions of language, law, and just dealing to their own advantage. The portrait is clearly at considerable odds with what we know about Socrates from other sources; nonetheless his character here is very famous as an unforgettable picture of a sly intellectual rogue. The Athenians come in for their share of humorous satiric criticism as well, given how greedy they are to use people like Socrates to escape unwelcome obligations. Aristophanes obviously exaggerates considerably for comic effect, but the ominous tone in the play's ending reminds us that some years later these citizens turned against the historical Socrates and condemned him to death.

Ian Johnston's new verse translation of Aristophanes' *Clouds* stays close to the original text yet offers an accessible and fluent English version, which conveys the full range of Aristophanes' style - ribald humor, lyric expressiveness, and underlying ironic seriousness - in a text full of dramatic energy. The translation also offers explanatory footnotes to assist the reader with any potentially confusing references.

About the Translator



Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in Canada and England. He has a BSc from McGill in Geology and Chemistry, a BA from Bristol in English and Greek, and an MA from Toronto in English. For many years he taught as a college and university-college instructor in British Columbia teaching English, Classics and Liberal Studies. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. His translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in both book and audiobook form. He is now retired and living in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

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