

# The Clouds

## by Aristophanes

When the philosopher Socrates was on trial for his life in Athens, in 399 B.C., he chided the jury for thinking that his system of thought was like the one parodied in a play by the Greek comic genius, Aristophanes: "The Clouds."

"The Clouds," presented 24 years earlier, was a slashing attack on the Sophists and their new modes of thinking. It's hard to say why Aristophanes associated Socrates with the Sophists, as he also opposed them. But Socrates was a familiar figure in Athens, always prodding people to think about what they were saying and one of his followers, Alcibiades, an attractive but erratic nobleman, had led Athens into a disastrous battle with the Spartans and even joined the enemy for a while. Someone had to be held responsible for that

Socrates was fat, misshapen, and grotesquely ugly. When the actor came on stage with his Socrates mask, the audience applauded the resemblance. Socrates, who was in the audience, rose to acknowledge the mask-maker's artistry.

The play was a disappointment for Aristophanes. He thought it his finest work, but it took last prize among the three comedies presented that year, possibly due to the public's recognition that Socrates had been slandered. But later on, with Athens losing a long and bitter war it had started, citizens were ready to punish anyone who might have been in any way responsible for their defeat. Socrates was sentenced to die.

The play itself deals with an old farmer, Strepsiades, who had been forced to leave his land and take refuge behind the walls of Athens during the Peloponnesian War. His son, Pheidippides, is a wastrel who spends his time racing horses and partying, and - in the process - running up debts his father can't pay.

Desperate to find a way to elude his debtors, Strepsiades decides to enter "The Thinkery," a school supposedly run by Socrates, one which teaches Sophist methods of winning arguments, even when one is in the wrong. He hopes to use this skill to win court cases when his debtors sue him for repayment.

The problem is that the old man is unable to remember anything. He picks up fragments of what he hears and those fragments pop up later in the show. He also learns from Socrates that the gods don't exist; that the Clouds should be honored as the only supreme beings. The Cloud Chorus enters and performs a series of beautiful songs and dances throughout the play, never quite endorsing Socrates' ideas, but not objecting to them either.

When Strepsiades fails to master the New Way of Thinking, he decides to enroll his son instead. During Pheidippides' time at the Thinkery, two figures are brought onstage to represent the traditional mode of thought and behavior and the new, Sophist approach. They are commonly depicted as men with the heads of roosters. The Sophist bird-man prevails. Having Pheidippides educated at the Thinkery turns out to be a bad idea, as the son becomes too independent, even giving his father a beating, a dramatic role reversal.

Strepsiades then takes out his fury and frustration on the Thinkery, burning it to the ground and routing Socrates and all his students at the play's end.

While scholars consider the play a comic masterpiece, replete with literate references and lyrical sequences, it doesn't translate well to a contemporary audience. It's full of topical references to people, customs, and situations which are lost on modern theatre-goers.

The plays are also filled with scatological lines, situations, and acts; nudity; and phallic and bathroom humor, things which most modern audiences would find offensive.

Because of this, the Genesius Guild creates a more acceptable script and hangs a variety of contemporary references on a skeleton of the plot. The first half of the play stays somewhat close to the original, but the second half veers sharply toward songs and dances familiar to our own time.

As is customary in guild productions of Aristophanes' work, the comedy ends in a wild, three-minute chase, patterned after old Mack Sennett movies: an exhilarating conclusion to the summer season.

Besides their entertainment value, Aristophanic comedies are prized for what they tell us the Athenian society and customs. They also give us the useful information about how plays were staged. If not for Aristophanes, we would know little of the ekkyklema, a platform which was wheeled onstage to reveal an interior scene, or of the hoisting devices which were used to ferry gods from above the stage.

And where tragedies give us insights into Athenian values, aspirations, and beliefs, Aristophanes lets us in on the homely details of everyday life. He also mentions people who were in the audience (everyone in the city attended these plays) and twits them for personal foibles and faults.

The plays also tell us something about the remarkable character of the Athenians who attended them. Aristophanes made savage attacks on Kleon, the popular leader of the democratic faction. Yet he was awarded first prize again and again. His plays also depended on the audience's sophistication for his humor to have effect. The populace was obviously intimately familiar with literature and poetry and up on the latest plays - especially those by Euripides.

Aristophanes so consistently lampooned the tragedies of Euripides, that one playwright coined a term for it: euripidaristophanization.

Aristophanes was of the aristocratic class of Knights, not the top of the heap, by any means, but close to the oligarchs and firmly in their political camp. He thought little of democracy and used this play - among others - to demonstrate how democracy had eroded the "old values" which had built the empire.

However, he faults both the old and the new. Strepsiades seems to represent the exhausted past, no longer true to the gods and unable to maintain the kind of discipline and beliefs that fueled Athen's rise to glory. Aristophanes thought the drive for empire had fatally weakened the state and blamed the aristocrats for letting it happen.

He was even more scornful of democratic changes, especially the teachings of the Sophists who, like modern debaters, could take one side of an issue as easily as the other. Winning an argument became more important than stating the truth, as it was received from ages past.

Aristophanes promoted the values of an agrarian society and scorned the ways of urban life. That's an argument that persists to this day and is just one of the reasons that careful study of Aristophanes' comedies yields more than mere laughter.