

The Clouds by Aristophanes (Excerpt)

Aristophanes was born c. 445 B.C. and died sometime around 388. He is considered to be the greatest comic playwright of antiquity. In this play, he is poking fun at one of his contemporaries, the philosopher Socrates. Aristophanes uses "Socrates" as representative of the educational problems facing contemporary Athens. In the 5th Century BCE, influential teachers known as "sophists" were at the helm of education and the training they provided in rhetoric and persuasion was critical for those with political ambition. Enriched by tuition fees, sophists were often portrayed as having a certain mercenary slickness and suspected of teaching manipulative tricks rather than the pursuit of truth or the Good Life.

STREPSIADES

Who is this man suspended up in a basket?

DISCIPL

That's himself.

STREPSIADES

Who's himself?

DISCIPL

Socrates.

STREPSIADES

Socrates! Oh! I pray you, call him right loudly for me.

DISCIPL

Call him yourself; I have no time to waste. (He departs. The machine swings in SOCRATES in a basket.)

STREPSIADES

Socrates! my little Socrates!

SOCRATES (loftily)

Mortal, what do you want with me?

STREPSIADES

First, what are you doing up there? Tell me, I beseech you.

SOCRATES (POMPOUSLY)

I am traversing the air and contemplating the sun.

STREPSIADES

Thus it's not on the solid ground, but from the height of this basket, that you slight the gods, if indeed....

SOCRATES

I have to suspend my brain and mingle the subtle essence of my mind with this air, which is of the like nature, in order clearly to penetrate the things of heaven. I should have discovered nothing, had I remained on the ground to consider from below the things that are above; for the earth by its force attracts the sap of the mind to itself. It's just the same with the watercress.

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STREPSIADES

What? Does the mind attract the sap of the watercress? Ah! my dear little Socrates, come down to me! I have come to ask you for lessons.

SOCRATES (descending)

And for what lessons?

STREPSIADES

I want to learn how to speak. I have borrowed money, and my merciless creditors do not leave me a moment's peace; all my goods are at stake.

SOCRATES

And how was it you did not see that you were getting so much into debt?

STREPSIADES

My ruin has been the madness for horses, a most rapacious evil; but teach me one of your two methods of reasoning, the one whose object is not to repay anything, and, may the gods bear witness, that I am ready to pay any fee you may name.

SOCRATES

By which gods will you swear? To begin with, the gods are not a coin current with us.

STREPSIADES

But what do you swear by then? By the iron money of Byzantium?

SOCRATES

Do you really wish to know the truth of celestial matters?

STREPSIADES

Why, yes, if it's possible.

SOCRATES

....and to converse with the clouds, who are our genii?

STREPSIADES

Without a doubt.

SOCRATES

Then be seated on this sacred couch.

STREPSIADES (sitting down)

I am seated.

SOCRATES

Now take this chaplet.

STREPSIADES

Why a chaplet? Alas! Socrates, would you sacrifice me, like Athamas?

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SOCRATES

No, these are the rites of initiation.

STREPSIADES

And what is it I am to gain?

SOCRATES (pouring flour on Strepsiades)

You will become a thorough rattle-pate, a hardened old stager, the fine flour of the talkers....But come, keep quiet.

STREPSIADES

By Zeus! That's no lie! Soon I shall be nothing but wheat-flour, if you powder me in that fashion.

SOCRATES

Silence, old man, give heed to the prayers. (In an hierophantic tone) Oh! most mighty king, the boundless air, that keepest the earth suspended in space, thou bright Aether and ye venerable goddesses, the Clouds, who carry in your loins the thunder and the lightning, arise, ye sovereign powers and manifest yourselves in the celestial spheres to the eyes of your sage.

STREPSIADES

Not yet! Wait a bit, till I fold my mantle double, so as not to get wet. And to think that I did not even bring my traveling cap! What a misfortune!

SOCRATES (ignoring this)

Come, oh! Clouds, whom I adore, come and show yourselves to this man, whether you be resting on the sacred summits of Olympus, crowned with hoar-frost, or tarrying in the gardens of Ocean, your father, forming sacred choruses with the Nymphs; whether you be gathering the waves of the Nile in golden vases or dwelling in the Maeotic marsh or on the snowy rocks of Mimas, hearken to my prayer and accept my offering. May these sacrifices be pleasing to you.

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