Aristophanes: Clouds

Introduction

Aristophanes’ Clouds was first performed in 423 BC at the Great Dionysia. The play did not win the 1st prize and was only ranked third, which incited its author to modify it (see below on the question of the two versions of the Clouds).

Clouds is probably the first ‘comedy of ideas’: it does not deal with an entirely fantastical world and is not as full of low-key humour as other comedies from the same period. Its end, too, is not as clearly positive and comical as in other comedies of Aristophanes. This play is also very different from the majority of Aristophanes’ other works as it does not deal closely with contemporary political events and debates, focusing instead on broader issues in the intellectual life of its time. When it was composed, the problem of war was slightly less pressing than when Aristophanes was working on his other plays, as the Athenians were expecting a period of calm in the hostilities with Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. Instead of producing a comedy clearly directed against the prowar party, and specifically against Cleon, who is regularly mocked in Aristophanes’ plays, the poet invented a plot that allowed him to stage the complex changes in the intellectual and religious climate at the time and their potential consequences for the educational system. Those changes were due in no small measure to the activity and teachings of the sophists, who are embodied in the character of Socrates in the Clouds, and to the progress of the first steps in empirical science.

The play openly caricaturizes and criticizes new intellectual trends which went against traditional religious and moral beliefs of the Athenians. Contemporary intellectuals are depicted as corrupting the youth by teaching them that one can win any debate with rhetorical skills, whether one’s arguments are fundamentally right or wrong. Attempts at placing reason and logical thinking above religious beliefs are also amply mocked. Aristophanes defends traditional values and moral virtues against these new trends, which he attributes, somewhat unjustly (see below), to Socrates and his school.

Summary

The Clouds stages Strepsiades, a naïve country bumpkin who had been happy with his simple rural life before falling on hard times when Pheidippides, the son he had with a rich aristocratic city woman, began to dilapidate the family’s fortune because of his taste for luxury and his habit of betting on horses.

At the beginning of the play, the stage is set outside of Strepsiades’ house, who cannot find sleep because of the state of his finances. He wakes up his son, telling him that he has had an idea to solve his debt problems: he wants Pheidippides to enrol in Socrates’ school, the Phrontistêrion (‘Thinkery’ or ‘Thinkstitute’), where students learn how to turn weak arguments into winning ones. If the young man becomes capable of winning any debate, they could beat their creditors in court, and Strepsiades could evade his debts.

The son, however, does not have a high opinion of the students of this school, as he values athletic virtues higher than intellectual ones, and refuses to follow his father’s advice. Strepsiades therefore decides to enrol himself into the school.
He knocks at the door of the *Phrontistérion*. A student answers and tells him about the (comically useless) new research recently pursued at the school. For example, Socrates, the master, has discovered a new unit to measure the distance that fleas are able to jump, and the reason why gnats make such a noise. Strepsiades, easily impressed and more motivated than ever to join the school, is then introduced to Socrates himself, who descends ‘from the sky’ in a basket (probably carried by a crane device in the original performance) where he was observing the sun and meteorological phenomena. The master agrees to take Strepsiades as a student and has him follow a parody of initiation in which the climactic point is his introduction to the chorus of the Clouds, the divinities which Socrates and his school believe in instead of the traditional gods. The *parodos* (entry of the chorus) might have been surprising for the spectators as the first words were probably sung by the chorus before it had entered the orchestra and was thus invisible. The goddesses promise Strepsiades that he will become the best orator in Greece if he joins Socrates’ school.

The chorus of Clouds also addresses the audience directly in the *parabasis* (a direct address to the audience, which was a standard feature of Old Comedy), praising the play as being Aristophanes’ cleverest and blaming the audience for failing to acknowledge it. The choral digression also alludes to contemporary people and events.

After the choral song, Socrates comes back and complains that Strepsiades is proving to be a bad student, unable to learn anything. After one last failed attempt, which consists in having Strepsiades lie under a blanket in the hope that thoughts will incubate and ideas emerge, the master of the school decides to stop trying to teach him. Strepsiades leaves the school without having learnt any useful trick to solve his debt problems. The chorus of Clouds advise him to send his son.

He tries for a second time to persuade Pheidippides to enrol in the *Phrontistérion* and this time his son agrees. Outside of the school, the *agon* (staged debate which is one of the usual elements of Old Comedies) takes place between the Better Argument, who probably looked like an old aristocrat in the original play, and the Worse Argument. While the first personifies traditional aristocratic values and moral beliefs, which lead to a life full of discipline and rigour, the second embodies a caricature of the new teachings that were in fashion in Athens at the time: he can teach his disciples how to get away with any wrong deeds and live a life filled with pleasures of all sorts. The Worse Argument wins the contest and Pheidippides follows him into the school.

After another choral interlude, where the Clouds address the audience asking them to give the play the first prize in the competition and threatening them with natural disasters if they do not, father and son are reunited. Pheidippides, mentally and physically transformed by the time he has spent in Socrates’ school, is now a ‘real’ intellectual and has acquired rhetorical skills that allow him to prove anything and to win any debate. His father is overjoyed and brings him home to celebrate.

Two creditors arrive in turn at Strepsiades’ house and he chases them quickly and unceremoniously, confident that he would win against them in court thanks to Pheidippides’ new skills.

However, the father is soon disillusioned. He reappears on stage complaining that his son has beaten him up. In what could be qualified as a second *agon*, the young man, thanks to his new education, is able to demonstrate that it is right for a son to beat up his father, and goes as far as saying that he himself would also hit his mother. This is too much for Strepsiades, who faces the consequences of wanting to learn how to win debates at any moral cost: he launches a violent attack on the *Phrontistérion*.

**Problems**

**The Clouds and Old Comedy**

The play thus ends in a rather downbeat way, for a comedy, with Strepsiades setting fire to the school of Socrates. This is not the only element in the text of the *Clouds* that we have which departs from the conventions of Old Comedy. In general, this play has a more serious tone than other comedies, and this might have been one
of the reasons for its lack of success when it was first performed in the Great Dionysia in Athens. The end and the exit of the chorus are not marked by any joyous song. The play is also less peppered with low-key and obscene jokes than usual.

Some structural features distinguish this play from other Old Comedies. The chorus, for example, does not consistently side with the central character, and Strepsiades is far from reaching his goal at the end of the play. Moreover, this comedy, unlike others, seem to have two parabaseis (518-562 and a shorter one at 1115-1130) and two agones (in which the wrong side prevails), between the Better and the Worse argument and between Strepsiades and Pheidippides at the end of the play. Some passages also do not adopt conventional metre (e.g., the first parabasis). While it might not be immediately visible to modern readers, this last point would have been clear to the ears of the original audience.

At the level of characterization, the play also departs from the norm. Strepsiades, the ‘hero’ of the plot, never manages to reach his goal, unlike what usually happens in other comedies. He fails to learn anything useful in the Phrontistêrion and we never get to witness that he might have succeeded in winning in court against his creditors. The chorus, too, is somewhat strangely characterized as the new divinities worshipped by Socrates and his school instead of the usual Greek gods, but they reveal themselves as defending traditional values and ethics, which is the exact opposite of what is taught in Socrates’ school.

The two versions of the Clouds

The fact that we only have the text of an incomplete revision of the play might be held responsible for some of the unconventional features mentioned above. In the parabasis (verses 518-525), the chorus of Clouds indeed refers to the fact that the play failed to please its audience:

‘Spectators, I’m going to speak my mind to you candidly
And truthfully, in the name of Dionysos who reared me!
As surely as I wish to win the prize and be thought a clever poet,
It was because I believed you sophisticated spectators
And took this comedy to be the cleverest of all my plays
That I deemed it right for you to be the first to savour a work
That caused me so much effort. Yet I left the theatre defeated
By vulgar rivals, an ignominious fate!’ (Transl. Halliwell 2015)

We thus know that the poet had re-written at least parts of the play, probably between 420 and 416. On the other hand, some elements are only meaningful if they belonged to the version performed in 423, which suggests that the revision of the play was never completed or reperformed, although it might have been the poet’s intention to stage a new version at some occasion after its first failure. The original version of the play is unfortunately lost to us, but might have survived until the Hellenistic period, as has been argued by Dover (1968).

The depiction of Socrates and contemporary intellectuals

The depiction and staging of Socrates is one of the elements of the Clouds that has received much scholarly attention. Indeed, Aristophanes has caricatured in his play, through the figure of Socrates and his ‘Thinkstitute’, the intellectuals of his time.

However, it would be too simplistic to believe that Socrates and his school merely embody the most famous of them, the sophists—intellectuals who travelled from city to city to teach, at considerable cost, young men rhetorical skills. The picture is more complex than that. Spectators, unless they were as little educated as Strepsiades (whose ignorance is amply mocked in the play), were no doubt meant to recognize under the satire a wide range of thinkers and philosophers who flourished in the 5th century or earlier. Aristophanes’ caricatural picture, under the mask of Socrates and his school, encompasses all sorts of intellectual trends: from the first steps of rational science, for example in meteorology or geometry (Thales, Anaximander, the Presocratics), to the early ethnographers, and perhaps the Pythagoreans, until the first atheists and contemporary sophists
(Protagoras, Gorgias), who were taken as emblems of a ‘new education’, based on reasoning rather than belief, and on a use of linguistic skills in debate that does not take into account any moral values. The Socrates of the play, unlike real contemporary intellectuals who usually had specific competences in one or other domain, proposes to teach a mixture of all those trends in his school, where mock-rationality and the refusal to believe in traditional gods is comically mixed with the belief in the Clouds, superior divinities.

Socrates, however, never led anything like a ‘school’, never asked for money to teach people around him and was more interested in knowledge for itself and ethics than in scientific phaenomena and rhetorical skills.

The character called ‘Socrates’ is the Clouds is thus more a general personification of the intellectuals, the philosophers, of the time, and thus more a comic caricature of the real Socrates than a proper way of criticizing him in particular, although the comic character might have shared some traits with its real counterpart (perhaps including physical features, if the actor playing Socrates wore a mask that reproduced recognizable elements of the philosopher’s physiognomy). His ‘portrait’ in the Clouds, at least, does not match his depiction by Plato and Xenophon.

Nonetheless, in Plato’s Apology, Socrates twice refers to the Clouds when he alludes to the sources of his bad reputation. Yet, as Halliwell (2015, 4-5) has compellingly demonstrated, it was not Plato’s intention to portray a Socrates who held the Clouds as responsible for the fact that he was eventually prosecuted. In the two allusions to the play, Plato has made it clear that the comedy was only played on a false image that some Athenians might have had of Socrates, but that no one was supposed to take it otherwise than as a comic caricature.

Editions, translations, and works cited: