

Clouds and socrates



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Socrates is known throughout the world as a renown philosopher from ancient Greece. Growing up as a poor Athenian, the only sources historians have are recorded by other Greeks such as Plato, Xenophon, and the playwright, Aristophanes. Without having an unbiased record, it is difficult to determine whose account of Socrates is an appropriate description.

Historians theorize that the multiple portrayals of Socrates are representative of the respective author's personal opinions. Despite these varying accounts, his knowledge and philosophy endured the fall of ancient Greece and continues to influence scholars today. In the playwright Aristophanes' play *Clouds*, Socrates is portrayed as a bumbling teacher. The portrayal of Socrates in Aristophanes' play, *Clouds*, suggests Aristophanes is not only trying to humor fellow Athenians but also allude to social and political commentary surrounding the danger of Socrates' views. The incoming flush of philosophers and other thinkers during the Intellectual Revolution suggest the fear of Athenian culture and values becoming unstable, and Aristophanes targets Socrates as an easy scapegoat for his overall prejudice.

There are several traits Socrates possesses that label him as an easy target. First, he is a natural born Athenian rather than a metic; majority of the thinkers within Athens originated from elsewhere. Because of the local status, Socrates and his eccentric traits are known by many which ultimately sustains intended audience's interest. He was shabby and unkempt, never had any money nor cared where his next meal was coming from, (Gottlieb 138). Additionally, there was already animosity toward Socrates, so Aristophanes used this to his advantage. Socrates was the mentor of two

disliked men: Critias, one of the 30 Tyrants, and Alcibiades, an aristocrat who spurred both sides of the Peloponnesian War. The people of Athens were not pleased with these facts.

Though *Clouds* may seem to insult mainly Socrates, Aristophanes doesn't allude to having any personal vendettas with Socrates. If Aristophanes despised Socrates, would it be too far fetched to assume he would write Socrates poorly? Like many Athenians, Aristophanes reamed of an earlier day when role models were provided by the 'men of Marathon' rather than silver-tongued sophists, (Pomeroy et al. 2006). One can assume the aristocrats of Athens held resentment mainly against the sophists as they allowed non-noble young men to speak efficiently against any issue. In addition to learning speaking and argumentative skills, the affordable teaching of the sophists also blurred the distinct line between the social classes. Those without wealth were able to gain education, so education was no longer a characteristic specific to the affluent.

The most critical rhetorical elements Aristophanes applies are aimed at the general thinker population. When Strepidides first arrives at the Thinketerium, a student describes the kinds of questions Socrates asks of his students. A few of the questions involve insects and reptiles, Chaeprephon inquired into Socrates' notions regarding out of which end a gnat buzzes, its mouth or its butt, (*Clouds* 5). One could argue these examples are grotesque and Aristophanes uses them as a way to poke fun at the thinker-intellect. Also, Strepidides is easily convinced by everyone he talks to, including Socrates. Strepidides may be a representation for the so-called clueless young men who seem enthralled with the philosophers. Furthermore,

Socrates is depicted as believing in the clouds rather than gods. He convinces Srepidides the clouds create thunder and lightning rather than the standard belief that, Zeus, the god of sky and thunder does. After convincing Strepidides Zeus and other Olympian gods do not exist, Socrates asks, Do you now profess your faith in no other god than our trinity of Chaos, Clouds and Colloquium? (Clouds 13-14). This misinterpretation of Socrates and his religious beliefs assisted in the execution of Socrates in 399 BCE.

As shown above, Socrates is not the main subject of Clouds, but rather, he is used by Aristophanes' as a blanket characterization for the new-coming philosophers who induced the fear of losing Athenian culture with new ideas. Socrates being a well-known philosopher and fellow Athenian makes for ripe picking and is a perfect role in Aristophanes' play. Sadly, Athenians send Socrates to trial, and with the help of Clouds, he is executed for atheism, introducing new gods, and corrupting the youth. Though executed, Socrates' work and teachings were luckily depicted within several sources and are still relevant today.