

ISSN: 0976-8165

IMPACT FACTOR 7.86

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN
ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL.14 ISSUE 5 OCTOBER 2023

14 Years of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor
Dr. Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

“What is right?” and “What is true?": Theorizing Satire as Ethico-Intellectual Discourse in Aristophanes’s Old Comedy

Sayantani Chowdhury

Assistant Professor (Guest),

S.G.G.S.C.C., D.U.

&

Ph.D. Scholar,

Department of English,

University of Delhi.

Article History: Submitted-30/09/2023, Revised-14/10/2023, Accepted-16/10/2023, Published-31/10/2023.

Abstract:

Since ancient satire emanated from the Old Attic Comedy, it is imperative to return to this form in order to theorize on the genre of satire, and since satire is an exceedingly self-conscious and self-reflexive genre—want to delineate its own forms, functions and thereby theorize itself, it is interesting as well as instrumental to study how early satire or ancient satire imagined and fashioned itself. My paper proceeds with this research question and revisits Aristophanes’s *Clouds*. Through this comic play, comedy and satire are argued and established as supremely intellectual discourses ethically invested in uncovering the right and the truth.

There are two ways, this paper contends, through which Aristophanean Old Comedy underlines satire’s intellectualism: the first is by pitting itself against other intellectual discourses and the second by its mimesis of Athenian life and hypocrisies. The first one—a battle of discourses—is the contestation that forms the crux of *Clouds*. The debate at the heart of this play is regarding who should have the claim to *sophia* (wisdom). Aristophanes harnesses the formalistic devices of Old Comedy to ensconce the comic poet’s art *contra* Socratic sophistry as the seat of wisdom. The second way makes up the thin plotline of the play—the comic downfall of the *agroikos* Strepsiades and his son Pheidippides.

Keywords: satire, Old Comedy, *sophia*, mimesis, Athenian life.

Introduction

“Am I to eat up wisdom like a dog?” (660)¹ complains Strepsiades at one point in Aristophanes's *Clouds* (performed at the City Dionysia in 423 BC). Socrates, the teacher, is, of course, infuriated but as the readers, we realize the significance of this question in hindsight. This paper attempts to unravel *Clouds* in the light of this and other related questions.

While the scope of this paper elides a sustained discussion on if and why Aristophanic comedy qualifies as satire in the first place, it may suffice that Horace, in his *Satires*, traced the beginning of the ‘genre’ to “Cratinus, Eúpolis, and Aristophanes, / and the other men who go to make up the Old Comedy” (1.4.1-2)². Their main purpose, says Horace, was to publicly expose and “brand” notoriety (1.4.3-5). Aristophanes does indeed assume this self-righteous satirizing persona who is responsible, much like Horace would be, for the amelioration of the polis or the society at large, but what is it that he intends to brand and expose through *Clouds*?

As Strepsiades suffers father-beating at the hands of his son Pheidippides, it becomes amply clear that the play not only ridicules and caricatures the figure of Socrates but also goes on to warn of the pernicious consequences of the sort of intellectualism that the ‘Thinkery’ of the play—or the Socratic Academy at large—propagated. The play appears primarily to be a satire of the Socratic or Sophistic mode of knowledge production—its purported access to wisdom and the means of preaching the same. Long after Leo Strauss' *Socrates and Aristophanes* and other accounts³ argued that the Socrates of *Clouds* is very unlike the historical figure we know from Plato, or is, at best, a “pre-Socratic” Socrates (Strauss 11), Martha Nussbaum sought to clarify that rather than a Platonic Socrates or a quasi-historical one, Aristophanes's target is in fact “an underlying intellectualism that dedicates itself to exposing the inadequacies of traditional moral justification” wherein tradition refers to the Socratic way (66-67). This paper hopes to build on Nussbaum's argument and explore how (and why) satire—itsself a highly intellectual discourse—takes on another mode of intellectual thought and practice. The first part of the paper focuses on the

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations of *Clouds* are from Ian Johnston's translation. See Works Cited.

² This quotation is from Niall Rudd's translation; see Works Cited. Horace treats satires as a theme of poetry rather than a genre, but he is generally credited for having led to the popularization and development of satire as a genre. Also, see Gilbert Highet's *The Anatomy of Satire* (1962) for elements of the satirical genre that have evolved from the Old Comedy traditions, viz. the satiric monologue from the parabolic *parrhesia*.

³ See Guthrie, Halliwell, Moore, *et al.*

concept of *sophia* in the context of the play, while the latter part delves into analyzing Aristophanic comedy or satire as a mimetic discourse.

Sophia contra sophistry

The playwright seemingly grafts a little paradox in *Clouds*. Socrates, the teacher-character, is mocked and criticized for training Pheidippides in “sophistry” which turns out, eventually, to be a disaster of training. Sophists like Socrates are implicitly attacked for claiming to possess an abundance of *sophia*, from which stems their skill in sophistry. However, in the parabasis of the play, the playwright claims to be a “wise man” (*sophos*) himself, composing an “intelligent” (*sophôtatê*) comedy for a “clever” (*dexioi*) audience:⁴

So may I win and be considered a wise man.

For I thought you were a discerning audience

and this comedy the most intelligent

of all my plays. (697-700)

One then wonders whether what goes under Aristophanes’s hammer is not what his anvil is also made up of! It is here that the connotations of *sophia* come to be of particular import.

While *sophia* could have a general meaning broadly translated as cleverness, wisdom or skill, it also had very specific contextual meanings. W. K. C. Guthrie’s *The Sophists* bears testimony to the multifarious, ambiguous and evolving meanings of the term in fifth-century Athens. Although initially ‘*sophist*’ could refer to anybody who teaches and more particularly to the poet’s function of imparting moral lessons to the society, it later “came to be used, though not solely, of a particular class, namely professional educators who gave instruction to young men, and public displays of eloquence, for fees” (Guthrie 35). Aristophanes’ satire is directed at this latter kind of *sophia*, which could be learnt in exchange for money.⁵ In fact, the play delineates a clear difference between a *sophos* Aristophanes’s conceptualization of *sophia*—the poet’s kind—and that of the so-called Sophists. One needs to look no further than the parabasis itself in order to understand the difference⁶. Speaking under the garb of the

⁴ These translations have been derived from Matthew Wright, *The Comedian as Critique* (2012).

⁵ Guthrie mentions that Plato and some other major Athenians shared this mistrust of the Sophists. See page 37.

⁶ In all probability, most of this parabasis was added as a revision to the initial version after the play was performed and did not receive the expected recognition. This arguably belongs to the second version which was

chorus leader, the poet holds the intellectual audience culpable for the play's failure at the City Dionysia competition⁷:

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, ... (704-707)

Not without infusing a bit of irony, Aristophanes declares that the covert “intelligence” of this anti-intellectual play was lost on the intellectual audience. He is looking for ‘discrimination’ or discernment among the audience and not an airy intellectualism, but (it is imperative to ask) wherefrom comes this discrimination and why does Sophistic *sophia* lack the same? My contention is that discrimination is invariably interwoven with matters ethical and dialectical, matters that are entirely absent from Socratic intellectualism (as Aristophanes perceives it).

Ethics, *parrhesia* and Comedy

As the teacher and his pupils at the Thinkery engage in deliberations that are impractical, futile and highly incongruous with the real experiences of Athenian life, they establish the rhetorical as their only domain: “the highest good is victory in action, / in deliberation and in verbal wars. (573-574)”. Accordingly, a debt-laden Strepsiades comes to them with hopes of learning rationalism, rhetoric and wisdom in order to be able to rationalize with and outwit the pestering creditors. He does learn to win arguments by rationalizing and rhetorizing, and is successful in chasing the creditors away, but quickly realizes the perils of the training when his son justifies beating his own parents against all norms. The young Pheidippides is not only trained by Socrates in argumentation, but he also witnesses the rhetorical war par excellence between none other than the two kinds of arguments themselves: namely, the Superior and the Inferior (that adumbrates the *agon* of the play). The traditionally superior argument speaks for *nomos* (custom/law) whereas the inferior argument aligns with *physis* (*nature*) as the guiding factor of human behaviour. However, as unparalleled as it is in Aristophanes's oeuvre, this staged *agon* fails to establish what is right: it sees the inferior argument win through a rhetorical manoeuvre and it leads to

never performed. See Hubbard, “Parabolic Self-Criticism and the Two Versions of Aristophanes' *Clouds*” (1986) for an analytical discussion on the same that adumbrates the ethical imperative of the play.

⁷ In the competition, *Clouds* had come third and last.

the negative resolution of the play. This only highlights the fact that discrimination, virtue or *arete* is utterly absent from the training and practice at the Thinkery. “Throughout the play Socrates makes no attempt to teach justice or to urge the just use of rhetorical skill. His attitude is at best morally neutral; at worst he condones deceit”, remarks Martha Nussbaum (48). Only, Strepsiades was very much aware of this; in fact, he went to the Thinkery precisely knowing that “If someone gives them cash, they’ll teach him/ how to win an argument on any cause,/ just or unjust” (119-121).

Strepsiades’ quest and Socrates’ promise converge on the kind of wisdom that is gained through and reflected in only rhetorical prowess, completely precluding questions of ethics and virtue. One must then learn by eating up wisdom like a dog!

Historically, however, Socrates himself and many other Sophists considered *arete* should be *episteme* (Dodds 184), which could be more fruitfully imparted through training than picked up from nature or association (Guthrie 184). Aristophanes’s portrayal does not distort this history but seeks to question its plausibility. He is probably only reiterating what many of his contemporaries felt: “The claim of Sophists that *arete* could be imparted for fees by travelling teachers, instead of being freely transmitted by the precept and example of family and friends, and by association with ‘the right people’, coupled with the qualities of character native to any young man of good birth, was to the conservative-minded profoundly shocking” (Guthrie 250). This focus on training in *sophia* and thereby in *arete* also leads to an emphasis on unbridled individualism, only aggravating the want of discrimination: “the liberation of the individual meant an unlimited freedom of self-assertion; it meant rights without duties, unless self-assertion is a duty ... it enabled them to justify brutality to themselves” (Dodds 191).

On the other side, is the comic poet’s claim on *sophia*—a reclaiming of the time when *sophia* as a special skill was reserved for the poets rather than the paid tutors. Through the plays, the poet evinces that his intellectualism or wisdom is different from that of the Sophists insofar as he encompasses the ethical while jettisoning the merely rhetorical. It commands discrimination. Likewise, much of Aristophanes’s comedy is concerned with “truth” or “what is right” (Wright 18). In the parabasis of *The Acharnians* (425 BC), he says:

Bear me no grudge, spectators, if, a beggar,

I dare to speak before the Athenian people

About the city in a comic play

For what is true even comedy can tell.

And I shall utter startling things but true. (497-511)⁸

Elsewhere in the *Frogs* (405 BC), he says – “It is right for the sacred chorus to give good advice and teaching to the city” (686-7). *Parrhesia* or speaking truth to power (even at his own risk) was as much his right as his task, and this truth (knowledge) was inextricable from concerns of right (ethics). “Comic debunking, while more hidden, is more democratic, more sympathetic, more body-oriented than abstract, philosophical debunking, even if both pursue similar ends” (Linden 15). This was because, firstly, debunking or mockery has the same function as exposing, or enlightening, and secondly, he was speaking before Athenian people about Athenian concerns. The interrelation between these two draws from the mimetic function of satire/Old Comedy.

Satiric mimesis as “refracting mirror”

In *The Comedian as Critique*, Matthew Wright has suggested that Aristophanes’s proclamations were mostly in order to defend comedy from being swept under the carpet in matters of seriousness and significance⁹, but comedy’s distinction lies not only in its knowledge of what is right and true but also in its license to make fun of ‘what is right’ (18). If knowing and preaching the truth/right constitutes one part of the comic poet’s intellectual endeavour, the other major part is that of ‘making fun’ or mocking through representation¹⁰. For Wright, Old Comedy was a “refracting mirror” through which it re-presented the world: “Comedy can be used to illuminate the serious world of ideas, but it would not be quite accurate to say that it reflects those ideas in any straightforward way. Rather, everything appears in exaggerated or distorted form, as it might be in a refracting mirror” (17).

In his Introduction to the translation of Aristophanes’s four comedies, Benjamin B. Rogers too clearly enunciates the ethical and intellectual bedrock of the plays. The comic poet is not merely employing jest and humour—he deals with satire and conceits:

Ridicule of contemporary persons, that is generally good-natured, or systems or prevailing ideas is his main purpose, I think, in his plays. His praise is for the dead.

This ridicule, which ranges from satire to airy conceit, is made humorous by centering

⁸ This quotation is from Benjamin Bickley Rogers’ translation of four plays by Aristophanes. See Works cited.

⁹ As compared to Tragedy.

¹⁰ This lends Old Comedy its *sui generis* “conciliatory moment”; see Linden 5-6.

it in a far-fetched fantastic conception that is not the less available if it is impossible. Facts are exaggerated or invented with superb nonchalance and bewildering semblance of reality” (xiv-xv).

Satire’s ‘refracting mirror’ must therefore still be recognized as a mirror, that is, as having a mimetic function. Ralph Rosen’s *Making Mockery: The Poetics of Ancient Satire* reads the Old Comedies as satires and makes the very point that, like tragedy, comedy/satire is foremost a mimetic form—it represents and reflect—if only through distortion and exaggeration¹¹. Comic mockery and ritual mockery, Rosen says, are “fundamentally performed mimetic phenomena (31). My reiteration is that Aristophanic satire’s wisdom derives in part from this mimetic function because of two reasons. Firstly, comedy’s capability of miming or performing mockery proceeds from being deeply embedded and enmeshed within the realities and politics of Athenian life, which it must then endow its *sui generis* configurations. Secondly, because this allows the playwright to ‘show’ more poignantly what is right, rather than say it in a “contest of words. The contest that superficially presents itself as an even debate” as in the *agon* of *Clouds* (Nussbaum 62). The prologue of the play, for instance, sees Strepsiades trying to get acclimatized with the ways of the Thinkery. Ironically, the Thinkery is anything but a place of thoughts. The play’s mimetic mockery reduces the Thinkery’s pursuits to performative, rhetorical and often irrelevant aspects. In places where Socrates is not mocked, an immoral but unwitting *agroikos* (rustic) Strepsiades can be sympathized with for his socio-financial predicament as well as his ignorance of the urban intellectual ways. Aristophanes’s *sophia* interacts with the needs of the city and the citizens while Socrates’ *sophia* is shown to be being pursued in spite of them.

Again, in the parabasis, Aristophanes gets to address the audience but only through his mimetic mouthpiece—the Chorus Leader. It may apparently seem an inconsistent aspect of the play that the Chorus Leader is dressed as a part of the *Clouds* chorus implying that Aristophanes has to speak under the very garb of the hallowed shape-shifting nebulous gods of the Sophists. This inconsistency is however as deliberate a mimetic ploy as an intelligent incorporation of myth on the part of the playwright because, as A. M. Bowie recalls in *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy*, “clouds regularly feature in myth as the agents of divine retribution, not least in cases where a mortal has received some boon from the gods and has misused it ... More specifically, there is a group of myths in which a ‘cloud’ plays a

¹¹ For a contrasting view, see Linden 5-6, who analyses Hegel’s consideration of satire or irony as “aberrant iterations” of comedy for their lack of the “conciliatory moment” that helps set aside the satirist’s bitterness.

prominent role in the punishment of transgressors” (127). This myth reinforces to certain extent the ethical and mythical grounds of satire.

Nevertheless, the most vital aspect of *sophos* involved in satires is in its mimetic representation of disputes and disputations in such a dialectical way that goes beyond the scope of a simplistic quarrel as in the agon of the *Clouds*. Rosen reminds us that even as “the poet deploys invective, banter, parody, sarcasm or simple complaint in the service of his satire, his attitude is aggressive and confrontational, and as such demands, at least implicitly, that an audience take sides” (117). He seeks to demarcate those who are in collusion with him and those who are “ex-colluded” and therefore turned into the target of his criticism (Goffmann referred to in Ralph Rosen 117). This dialectical demarcation is achieved through the many stylistic features of the Old Comedy like the parabasis and the agon but exceeds them by all means in terms of complexity of addressing ethics and mimetic representation or refraction, reinforcing satire's intellectual paradigm.

Conclusion

While Nussbaum's reading of *Clouds* leads her to conclude that “the play develops interesting criticisms of both the traditional and the intellectualistic models”, this paper argues that, when read as a satire, the play reveals that the chief dialectical opposition it develops is neither between *nomos* and *physis* nor between the traditional and intellectual realms but between two modes of intellectual pursuit: one, where, metaphorically speaking, one has to suspend himself mid-air in a basket or eat up wisdom like a dog; and another, which emanates out of an understanding of Athenian life and therefore colludes in the satirist's framework of things while being acutely aware of his purpose and discourse. Thus, while it might seem like Aristophanes's satire is anti-intellectualism and anti-philosophy, this paper hopes to have evinced the comic poet's bite is actually turned against a certain airy intellectualism and rhetorical philosophy that he believed to be Socratic. It is in the light of this imperative of delineating Old Comedy as a more rooted intellectual discourse, that we should theorize the latter and more evolved forms of satire.

Works Cited:

Bowie, A. M. “Clouds.” *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy*, Cambridge UP, 1996, pp. 102–133.

- Bromberg, Jacques A. "Academic Disciplines in Aristophanes's *Clouds* (200-3)." *The Classical Quarterly New Series*, vol. 62, no. 1, May 2012, pp. 81–91. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41819997. Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.
- Dodds, E. R. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. U Of California P, 1951.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. *The Sophists*. Cambridge UP, 1977. *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Part 1, Vol. 3, 1969.
- Halliwell, Stephen. "Aristophanic Satire." *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 14, no. Satire Special Number, 1984, pp. 6–20. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3508299. Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.
- Hight, Gilbert. *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton UP, 1962.
- Horace, and Persius. *Horace: Satires and Epistles; Persius: Satires*. Edited by Niall Rudd, Penguin Books, 2005.
- Hubbard, Thomas K. "Parabolic Self-Criticism and the Two Versions of Aristophanes's *Clouds*." *Classical Antiquity*, vol. 5, no. 2, Oct. 1986, pp. 182–197. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25010847. Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.
- Linden, Ari. "Thinking through *The Clouds*: Comedy in Hegel and Strauss." *German Quarterly*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2017, pp. 1–22. *Scopus*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12048>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2022.
- Moore, Christopher. "Socrates and Self-Knowledge in Aristophanes' *Clouds*." *The Classical Quarterly New Series*, vol. 65, no. 2, Dec. 2015, pp. 534–551., www.jstor.org/stable/43905690. Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.
- Nussbaum, Martha. "Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom." *Aristophanes: Essays in Interpretation*, Digital ed., Cambridge UP, 2009, pp. 43–98. Vol. 26 of *Yale Classical Studies*.
- Rogers, Benjamin Bickley, translator. *Aristophanes*. Vol. 1, William Heinemann, 1924.
- Rosen, Ralph M. *Making Mockery: The Poetics of Ancient Satire*. Oxford UP, 2007.

“What is right?” and “What is true?": Theorizing Satire as Ethico-Intellectual Discourse in Aristophanes's Old Comedy

Strauss, Leo. *Socrates and Aristophanes*. U of Chicago P, 1966.

Wright, Matthew. *The Comedian as Critic: Greek Old Comedy and Poetics*. Bristol Classical Press, 2012.