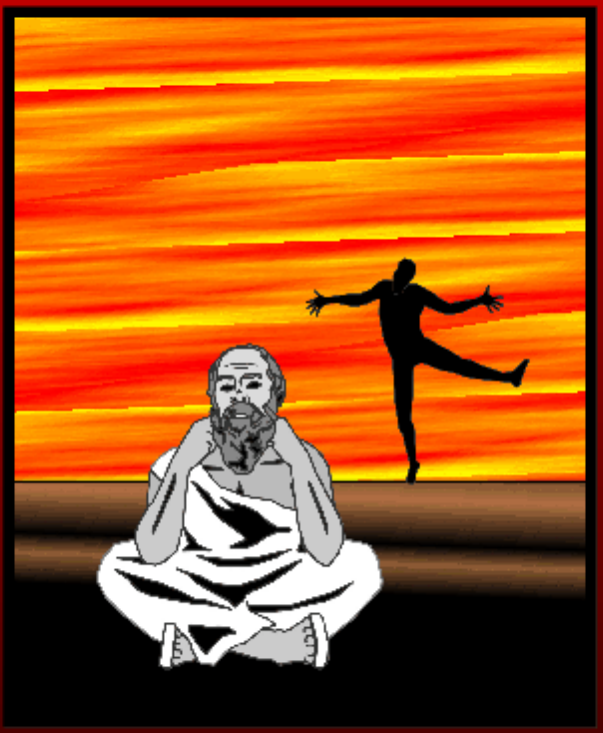
Aristophanes

Clouds



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Translator's Note

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable help provided by K. J. Dover's commentary on the play (Oxford University Press, 1968) and by Alan H. Sommerstein's notes in his edition of *Clouds* (Aris & Phillips, 1982).

Note that the normal line numbers refer to this text and the ones in square brackets refer to the lines in the Greek text. In the line numbers, a short indented line has normally been included with the short line above it, so that two partial lines make up a single line in the reckoning.

Historical Note

Aristophanes (c. 448 BC to c. 388 BC) was a major comic playwright in Athens. His surviving works are the only complete examples we have of Old Comedy.

Clouds was first produced in the drama festival in Athens—the City Dionysia—in 423 BC, where it placed third. Subsequently the play was revised, but the revisions were never completed. The text which survives is the revised version, which was apparently not performed in Aristophanes' time but which circulated in manuscript form. This revised version does contain some anomalies which have not been fully sorted out (e.g., the treatment of Cleon, who died between the original text and the revisions). At the time of the first production, the Athenians had been at war with the Spartans, off and on, for a number of years.

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Dramatis Personae

STREPSIADES: a middle-aged Athenian
PHEIDIPPIDES: a young Athenian, son of Strepsiades
XANTHIAS: a slave serving Strepsiades
STUDENT: one of Socrates' pupils in the Thinkery
SOCRATES: chief teacher in the Thinkery
CHORUS OF CLOUDS
THE BETTER ARGUMENT: an older man
THE WORSE ARGUMENT: a young man
PASIAS: one of Strepsiades' creditors
WITNESS: a friend of Pasias
AMYNIAS: one of Strepsiades' creditors
STUDENTS OF SOCRATES

[In the centre of the stage area is a house with a door to Socrates' educational establishment, the Thinkery.[1] *On one side of the stage is Strepsiades' house, in front of which are two beds. Outside the Thinkery there is a small clay statue of a round goblet, and outside Strepsiades' house there is a small clay statue of Hermes. It is just before dawn. Strepsiades and Pheidippides are lying asleep in the two beds. Strepsiades tosses and turns restlessly. Pheidippides lets a very loud fart in his sleep. Strepsiades sits up wide awake]*

STREPSIADES

Damn! Lord Zeus, how this night drags on and on!
It's endless. Won't daylight ever come?
I heard a cock crowing a while ago,
but my slaves kept snoring. In the old days,
they wouldn't have dared. Damn and blast this war—
so many problems. Now I'm not allowed

[1] *Thinkery*: The Greek word *phrontisterion* (meaning *school* or *academy*) is translated here as Thinkery, a term borrowed from William Arrowsmith's translation.

to punish my own slaves.[1] And then there's him—
this fine young man, who never once wakes up,
but farts the night away, all snug in bed,
wrapped up in five wool coverlets. Ah well,
I guess I should snuggle down and snore away.

[Strepsiades lies down again and tries to sleep. Pheidippides farts again. Strepsiades finally gives up trying to sleep]

STREPSIADES

I can't sleep. I'm just too miserable,
what with being eaten up by all this debt—
thanks to this son of mine, his expenses,
his racing stables. He keeps his hair long
and rides his horses—he's obsessed with it—
his chariot and pair. He dreams of horses.[2]
And I'm dead when I see the month go by—
with the moon's cycle now at twenty days,
as interest payments keep on piling up.[3]

[Calling to a slave]

Hey, boy! Light the lamp. Bring me my accounts.

[Enter the slave Xanthias with light and tablets]

Let me take these and check my creditors.
How many are there? And then the interest—
I'll have to work that out. Let me see now . . .
What do I owe? "Twelve minai to Pasias?"
Twelve minai to Pasias! What's that for?
Oh yes, I know—that's when I bought that horse,
the pedigree nag. What a fool I am!

[1]During the war it was easy for slaves to run away into enemy territory, so their owners had to treat them with much more care.

[2]Wearing one's hair long and keeping race horses were characteristics of the sons of very rich families.

[3]The interest on Strepsiades' loans would increase once the lunar month came to an end.

I'd sooner have a stone knock out my eye.[1]

PHEIDIPPIDES: *[talking in his sleep]*
Philo, that's unfair! Drive your chariot straight.

STREPSIADES
That there's my problem—that's what's killing me.
Even fast asleep he dreams of horses!

PHEIDIPPIDES: *[in his sleep]*
In this war-chariot race how many times
do we drive round the track?

STREPSIADES
You're driving me,
your father, too far round the bend. Let's see,
after Pasias, what's the next debt I owe? [30]
"Three minai to Amynias." For what?
A small chariot board and pair of wheels?

PHEIDIPPIDES: *[in his sleep]*
Let the horse have a roll. Then take him home.

STREPSIADES
You, my lad, have been rolling in my cash.
Now I've lost in court, and other creditors
are going to take out liens on all my stuff
to get their interest.

PHEIDIPPIDES *[waking up]*
What's the matter, dad?
You've been grumbling and tossing around there
all night long.

STREPSIADES
I keep getting bitten—
some bum biter in the bedding.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Ease off, dad.

[1]Twelve minai is 100 drachmas, a considerable sum. The Greek reads "the horse branded with a koppa mark." That brand was a guarantee of its breeding.

Let me get some sleep.

STREPSIADES

All right, keep sleeping.
Just bear in mind that one fine day these debts [40]
will all be your concern.

[Pheidippides rolls over and goes back to sleep]

Damn it, anyway.
I wish that matchmaker had died in pain— 50
the one who hooked me and your mother up.
I'd had a lovely time up to that point,
a crude, uncomplicated, country life,
lying around just as I pleased, with honey bees,
and sheep and olives, too. Then I married—
the niece of Megacles—who was the son
of Megacles. I was a country man,
and she came from the town—a real snob,
extravagant, just like Coesyra.[1]
When I married her and we both went to bed, 60
I stunk of fresh wine, drying figs, sheep's wool— [50]
an abundance of good things. As for her,
she smelled of perfume, saffron, long kisses,
greed, extravagance, lots and lots of sex.[2]
Now, I'm not saying she was a lazy bones.
She used to weave, but used up too much wool.
To make a point I'd show this cloak to her
and say, "Woman, your weaving's far too thick." [3]

[The lamp goes out]

[1]Megacles was a common name in a very prominent aristocratic family in Athens. Coesyra was the mother of a Megacles from this family, a woman well known for her wasteful expenditures and pride.

[2]The Greek has "of Colias and Genetyllis" names associated with festivals celebrating women's sexual and procreative powers.

[3]Packing the wool tight in weaving uses up more wool and therefore costs more. Strepsiades holds up his cloak, which is by now full of holes.

XANTHIAS

We've got no oil left in the lamp.

STREPSIADES

Damn it!

Why'd you light such a thirsty lamp? Come here.

I need to thump you.

XANTHIAS

Why should you hit me?

STREPSIADES

Because you stuck too thick a wick inside.

[The slave ignores Strepsiades and walks off into the house]

After that, when this son was born to us— [60]
I'm talking about me and my good wife—
we argued over what his name should be.
She was keen to add "-hippos" to his name,
like Xanthippos, Callipedes, or Chaerippos.[1]
Me, I wanted the name Pheidonides,
his grandpa's name. Well, we fought about it,
and then, after a while, at last agreed.
And so we called the boy Pheidippides.
She used to cradle the young lad and say,
"When you're grown up, you'll drive your chariot
to the Acropolis, like Megacles,
in a full-length robe . . ." I'd say, "No— [70]
you'll drive your goat herd back from Phelleus,
like your father, dressed in leather hides . . ."
He never listened to a thing I said.
And now he's making my finances sick—
a racing fever. But I've spent all night
thinking of a way to deal with this whole mess,
and I've found one route, something really good—
it could work wonders. If I could succeed,

[1] *-hippos* means "horse." The mother presumably wanted her son to have the marks of the aristocratic classes. Xanthippos was the name of Pericles' father and his son. The other names are less obviously aristocratic or uncommon.

if I could convince him, I'd be all right.
Well, first I'd better wake him up. But how?
What would be the gentlest way to do it?

[Strepsiades leans over and gently nudges Pheidippides]

Pheidippides . . . my little Pheidippides . . .

PHEIDIPPIDES *[very sleepily]*
What is it, father? [80]

STREPSIADES
Give me a kiss—
then give me your right hand.

[Pheidippides sits up, leans over, and does what his father has asked]

PHEIDIPPIDES
All right. There.
What's going on?

STREPSIADES
Tell me this—do you love me? 100

PHEIDIPPIDES
Yes, I do, by Poseidon, lord of horses.

STREPSIADES
Don't give me that lord of horses stuff—
he's the god who's causing all my troubles.
But now, my son, if you really love me,
with your whole heart, then follow what I say.

PHEIDIPPIDES
What do you want to tell me I should do?

STREPSIADES
Change your life style as quickly as you can,
then go and learn the stuff I recommend.

PHEIDIPPIDES
So tell me—what are you asking me?

STREPSIADES
You'll do just what I say?

PHEIDIPPIDES
Yes, I'll do it— [90]
I swear by Dionysus.

STREPSIADES
All right then.
Look over there—you see that little door,
there on that little house?

PHEIDIPPIDES
Yes, I see it.
What are you really on about, father?

STREPSIADES
That's the Thinkery—for clever minds.
In there live men who argue and persuade.
They say that heaven's an oven damper—
it's all around us—we're the charcoal.
If someone gives them cash, they'll teach him
how to win an argument on any cause,
just or unjust.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Who are these men?

STREPSIADES
I'm not sure [100]
just what they call themselves, but they're good men,
fine, deep-thinking intellectual types.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Nonsense! They're a worthless bunch. I know them—
you're talking about pale-faced charlatans,
who haven't any shoes, like those rascals
Socrates and Chaerephon.[1]

[1]Chaerephon was a well-known associate of Socrates

STREPSIADES

Shush, be quiet.
Don't prattle on such childish rubbish.
If you care about your father's daily food,
give up racing horses and, for my sake,
join their company.

PHEIDIPPIDES

By Dionysus, no!
Not even if you give me as a gift
pheasants raised by Leogoras.[1]

STREPSIADES

Come on, son— [110]
you're the dearest person in the world to me.
I'm begging you. Go there and learn something.

PHEIDIPPIDES

What is it you want me to learn?

STREPSIADES

They say
that those men have two kinds of arguments—
the Better, whatever that may mean,
and the Worse. Now, of these two arguments,
the Worse can make an unjust case and win.
So if, for me, you'll learn to speak like this,
to make an unjust argument, well then,
all those debts I now owe because of you
I wouldn't have to pay—no need to give
an obol's worth to anyone.[2]

PHEIDIPPIDES

There's no way.
I can't do that. With no colour in my cheeks

[1]Pheasants were a rich rarity in Athens. Leogoras was a very wealthy Athenian.

[2]An *obol* was a relatively small amount, about a third of a day's pay for a jury member.

I wouldn't dare to face those rich young Knights.[1] [120]

STREPSIADES

Then, by Demeter, you won't be eating
any of my food—not you, not your yoke horse,
nor your branded thoroughbred. To hell with you— 150
I'll toss you right out of this house.[2]

PHEIDIPPIDES

All right—
but Uncle Megacles won't let me live
without my horses. I'm going in the house.
I don't really care what you're about to do.

[Pheidippides stands up and goes inside the house. Strepsiades gets out of bed]

STREPSIADES

Well, I'll not take this set back lying down.
I'll pray to the gods and then go there myself—
I'll get myself taught in that Thinkery.
Still, I'm old and slow—my memory's shot.
How'm I going to learn hair-splitting arguments, [130]
all that fancy stuff? But I have to go. 160
Why do I keep hanging back like this?
I should be knocking on the door.

[Strepsiades marches up to the door of the Thinkery and knocks]

Hey, boy . . . little boy!

STUDENT *[from inside]*

Go to Hell!

[The door opens and the student appears]

Who's been knocking on the door?

[1] *Knights* is a term used to describe the affluent young men who made up the cavalry. Pheidippides has been mixing with people far beyond his father's means.

[2] A yoke horse was part of the four-horse team which was harnessed to a yoke on the inside.

STREPSIADES

I'm Strepsiades, the son of Pheidon,
from Cicynna.

STUDENT

By god, what a stupid man,
to kick the door so hard. You just don't think.
You made a newly found idea miscarry!

STREPSIADES

I'm sorry. But I live in the country,
far away from here. Tell me what's happened.
What's miscarried?

STUDENT

It's not right to mention it,
except to students.

STREPSIADES

You needn't be concerned—
you can tell me. I've come here as a student,
to study at the Thinkery.

STUDENT

I'll tell you, then.
But you have to think of these as secrets,
our holy mysteries. A while ago,
a flea bit Chaerephon right on the eye brow
and then jumped onto Socrates' head.
So Socrates then questioned Chaerephon
about how many lengths of its own feet
a flea could jump.

STREPSIADES

How'd he measure that?

STUDENT

Most ingeniously. He melted down some wax,
then took the flea and dipped two feet in it.
Once that cooled, the flea had Persian slippers.
He took those off and measured out the space.

STREPSIADES
By Lord Zeus, what intellectual brilliance!

STUDENT
Would you like to hear more of Socrates,
another one of his ideas? What do you say?

STREPSIADES
Which one? Tell me . . .

[The student pretends to be reluctant]

I'm begging you.

STUDENT
All right.
Chaerephon of Sphettus once asked Socrates
whether, in his opinion, a gnat buzzed
through its mouth or through its anal sphincter.

STREPSIADES
What did Socrates say about the gnat?

STUDENT
He said that the gnat's intestinal tract [160]
was narrow—therefore air passing through it,
because of the constriction, was pushed with force
towards the rear. So then that orifice,
being a hollow space beside a narrow tube,
transmits the noise caused by the force of air.

STREPSIADES
So a gnat's arse hole is a giant trumpet!
O triply blessed man who could do this,
anatomize the anus of a gnat!
A man who knows a gnat's guts inside out
would have no trouble winning law suits.

STUDENT
Just recently he lost a great idea—
a lizard stole it!

STREPSIADES

How'd that happen? Tell me. [170]

STUDENT

He was studying movements of the moon—
its trajectory and revolutions.
One night, as he was gazing up, open mouthed,
staring skyward, a lizard on the roof
relieved itself on him.

STREPSIADES

A lizard crapped on Socrates! 210
That's good!

STUDENT

Then, last night we had no dinner.

STREPSIADES

Well, well. What did Socrates come up with?
How did he get you all some food to eat?

STUDENT

He spread some ashes thinly on the table,
then seized a spit, went to the wrestling school,
picked up a queer, and robbed him of his cloak,
then sold the cloak to purchase dinner.[1]

STREPSIADES

And we still admire Thales after that? [2] [180]
Come on, now, open up the Thinkery—
let me see Socrates without delay. 220
I'm dying to learn. So open up the door.

[The doors of the Thinkery slide open to reveal Socrates' students studying on a porch (not inside a room). They are in variously

[1]I adopt Sommerstein's useful reading of this very elliptical passage, which interprets the Greek word *diabetes* as meaning a passive homosexual (rather than its usual meaning, "a pair of compasses"—both senses deriving from the idea of spreading legs apart). The line about selling the cloak is added to clarify the sense.

[2]Thales was a very famous thinker from the sixth century.

absurd positions and are all very thin and pale]

By Hercules, who are all these creatures!
What country are they from?

STUDENT

You look surprised.
What do they look like to you?

STREPSIADES

Like prisoners—
those Spartan ones from Pylos.[1] But tell me—
Why do these ones keep staring at the earth?

STUDENT

They're searching out what lies beneath the ground.

STREPSIADES

Ah, they're looking for some bulbs. Well now,
you don't need to worry any longer,
not about that. I know where bulbs are found, 230 [190]
lovely big ones, too. What about them?
What are they doing like that, all doubled up?

STUDENT

They're sounding out the depths of Tartarus.

STREPSIADES

Why are their arse holes gazing up to heaven?

STUDENT

Directed studies in astronomy.

[The Student addresses the other students in the room]

Go inside. We don't want Socrates
to find you all in here.

STREPSIADES

Not yet, not yet.

[1]The Athenians had captured a number of Spartans at Pylos in 425 and brought them to Athens where they remained in captivity and in poor physical condition.

Let them stay like this, so I can tell them
what my little problem is.

STUDENT

It's not allowed.
They can't spend too much time outside,
not in the open air.

[The students get up from their studying positions and disappear into the interior of the Thinkery. Strepsiades starts inspecting the equipment on the walls and on the tables]

STREPSIADES

My goodness,
what is this thing? Explain it to me.

STUDENT

That there's astronomy.

STREPSIADES

And what's this?

STUDENT

That's geometry.

STREPSIADES

What use is that?

STUDENT

It's used to measure land.

STREPSIADES

You mean those lands
handed out by lottery.[1]

STUDENT

Not just that—
it's for land in general.

STREPSIADES

A fine idea—

[1]Athenians sometimes apportioned by lot land outside the state which they had appropriated from other people.

useful . . . democratic, too.

STUDENT

Look over here—
here's a map of the entire world. See?
Right there, that's Athens.

STREPSIADES

What do you mean?
I don't believe you. There are no jury men—
I don't see them sitting on their benches.

STUDENT

No, no—this space is really Attica.[1]

STREPSIADES

Where are the citizens of Cicynna, [210]
the people in my deme? [2]

STUDENT

They're right here.
This is Euboea, as you can see,
beside us, really stretched a long way out.

STREPSIADES

I know—we pulled it apart, with Pericles.[3]
Where abouts is Sparta?

STUDENT

Where is it? Here.

STREPSIADES

It's close to us. You must rethink the place—
shift it—put it far away from us.

STUDENT

Can't do that.

[1]Attica is the territory surrounding and belonging to Athens.

[2]A deme was a political unit in Athens. Membership in a particular deme was a matter of inheritance from one's father.

[3]In 446 BC the Athenians under Pericles put down a revolt in Euboea, a large island just off the coast of Attica.

STREPSIADES *[threatening]*
Do it, by god, or I'll make you cry!

[Strepsiades notices Socrates descending from above in a basket suspended from a rope]

Hey, who's the man in the basket—up there?

STUDENT
The man himself.

STREPSIADES
Who's that?

STUDENT
Socrates.

STREPSIADES
Socrates! Hey, call out to him for me— [220]
make it loud.

STUDENT
You'll have to call to him yourself.
I'm too busy now.

[The Student exits into the interior of the house]

STREPSIADES
Oh, Socrates . . .
my dear little Socrates . . . hello . . .

SOCRATES
Why call on me, you creature of a day?

STREPSIADES
Well, first of all, tell me what you're doing. 270

SOCRATES
I tread the air, as I contemplate the sun.

STREPSIADES
You're looking down upon the gods up there,
in that basket? Why not do it from the ground,
if that's what you're doing?

SOCRATES

Impossible!
I'd never come up with a single thing
about celestial phenomena,
if I did not suspend my mind up high,
to mix my subtle thoughts with what's like them— [230]
the air. If I turned my mind to lofty things,
but stayed there on the ground, I'd never make 280
the least discovery. For the earth, you see,
draws moist thoughts down by force into itself—
the same process takes place with watercress.

STREPSIADES

What are you talking about? Does the mind
draw moisture into watercress? Come down,
my dear little Socrates, down here to me,
so you can teach me what I've come to learn.

[Socrates' basket slowly descends]

SOCRATES

Why have you come?

STREPSIADES

I want to learn to argue.
I'm being pillaged—ruined by interest [240]
and by creditors I can't pay off— 290
they're slapping liens on all my property.

SOCRATES

How come you got in such a pile of debt
without your knowledge?

STREPSIADES

I've been ravaged
by disease—I'm horse sick. It's draining me
in the most dreadful way. But please teach me
one of your two styles of arguing, the one
which never has to discharge any debt.
Whatever payment you want me to make,

I promise you I'll pay—by all the gods.

SOCRATES

What gods do you intend to swear by? 300
To start with, the gods hold no currency with us.

STREPSIADES

Then, what currency do you use to swear?
Is it iron coin, like in Byzantium?

SOCRATES

Do you want to know the truth of things divine, [250]
the way they really are?

STREPSIADES

Yes, by god, I do,
if that's possible.

SOCRATES

And to commune and talk
with our own deities the Clouds?

STREPSIADES

Yes, I do.

SOCRATES

Then sit down on the sacred couch.

STREPSIADES

All right.
I'm sitting down.

SOCRATES

Take this wreath.

STREPSIADES

Why a wreath?
Oh dear, Socrates, don't offer me up 310
in sacrifice, like Athamas.[1]

[1]Athamas was a character in one of Sophocles' lost plays who was prepared for sacrifice. He was rescued by Hercules.

SOCRATES

No, no.
We go through all this for everyone—
it's their initiation.

STREPSIADES

What do I get?

SOCRATES

You'll learn to be a clever talker, [260]
to rattle off a speech, to strain your words
like flour. Just keep still.

[Socrates sprinkles flour all over Strepsiades]

STREPSIADES

By god, that's no lie!
I'll turn into flour if you keep sprinkling me.

SOCRATES

Old man, be quiet. Listen to the prayer.

[Socrates shuts his eyes to recite his prayer]

O Sovereign Lord, O Boundless Air,
who keeps the earth suspended here in space, 320
O Bright Sky, O Sacred Goddesses—
the Thunder-bearing Clouds—arise,
you holy ladies, issue forth on high,
before the man who holds you in his mind.

STREPSIADES: *[lifting his cloak to cover his head]*

Not yet, not yet. Not till I wrap this cloak
like this so I don't get soaked. What bad luck,
to leave my home without a cap on.

SOCRATES *[ignoring Strepsiades]*

Come now, you highly honoured Clouds, come—
manifest yourselves to this man here—
whether you now sit atop Olympus, 330 [270]
on those sacred snow-bound mountain peaks,
or form the holy choruses with nymphs

in gardens of their father Ocean,
or gather up the waters of the Nile
in golden flagons at the river's mouths,
or dwell beside the marsh of Maeotis
or snowy rocks of Mimas—hear my call,
accept my sacrifice, and then rejoice
in this holy offering I make.

CHORUS *[offstage]*
Everlasting Clouds—
let us arise, let us reveal
our moist and natural radiance—
moving from the roaring deep
of father Ocean to the tops
of tree-lined mountain peaks, [280]
where we see from far away
the lofty heights, the sacred earth,
whose fruits we feed with water,
the murmuring of sacred rivers,
the roaring of the deep-resounding sea.
For the unwearied eye of heaven
blazes forth its glittering beams.
Shake off this misty shapelessness
from our immortal form and gaze upon
the earth with our far-reaching eyes. [290]

SOCRATES
Oh you magnificent and holy Clouds,
you've clearly heard my call.

[To Strepsiades]

Did you hear that voice
intermingled with the awesome growl of thunder?

STREPSIADES
Oh you most honoured sacred goddesses,
in answer to your thunder call I'd like to fart—
it's made me so afraid—if that's all right . . .

[Strepsiades pull down his pants and farts loudly in the direction of the offstage Chorus]

Oh, oh, whether right nor not, I need to shit.

SOCRATES

Stop being so idiotic, acting like
a stupid damn comedian. Keep quiet.
A great host of deities is coming here—
they're going to sing.

CHORUS *[still offstage]*

Oh you maidens bringing rain—
let's move on to that brilliant place, [300]
to gaze upon the land of Pallas,
where such noble men inhabit 370
Cecrops' lovely native home,[1]
where they hold those sacred rites
no one may speak about,
where the temple of the mysteries
is opened up in holy festivals,[2]
with gifts for deities in heaven—
what lofty temples, holy statues,
most sacred supplication to the gods,
with garlands for each holy sacrifice,
and festivals of every kind 380 [310]
in every season of the year,
including, when the spring arrives,
that joyful Dionysian time,
with rousing choruses of song,
resounding music of the pipes.

STREPSIADES

By god, Socrates, tell me, I beg you,
who these women are who sing so solemnly.

[1] *Cecrops*: a legendary king of Athens. *Pallas* is Pallas Athena, patron goddess of Athens.

[2] The holy festivals are the Eleusinian mysteries, a traditionally secret and sacred festival for those initiated into the band of cult worshippers.

Are they some special kind of heroines?

SOCRATES

No—they're heavenly Clouds, great goddesses
for lazy men—from them we get our thoughts,
our powers of speech, our comprehension,
our gift for fantasy and endless talk,
our power to strike responsive chords in speech
and then rebut opponents' arguments.

STREPSIADES

Ah, that must be why, as I heard their voice,
my soul took wing, and now I'm really keen
to babble on of trivialities,
to argue smoke and mirrors, to deflate [320]
opinions with a small opinion of my own,
to answer someone's reasoned argument
with my own counter-argument. So now,
I'd love to see them here in front of me,
if that can be done.

SOCRATES

Just look over there—
towards Mount Parnes. I see them coming,
slowly moving over here.[1]

STREPSIADES

Where? Point them out.

SOCRATES

They're coming down here through the valleys—
a whole crowd of them—there in the thickets,
right beside you.

STREPSIADES

This is weird. I don't see them.

SOCRATES *[pointing]*

There—in the entrance way.

[1] *Mount Parnes*: a mountain range to the north of Athens.

STREPSIADES

Ah, now I see—
but I can barely make them out.

[The Clouds enter from the wings]

SOCRATES

There—
surely you can see them now, unless your eyes
are swollen up like pumpkins.

STREPSIADES

I see them.
My god, what worthy noble presences!
They're taking over the entire space.

SOCRATES

You weren't aware that they are goddesses?
You had no faith in them?

STREPSIADES

I'd no idea.
I thought clouds were mist and dew and vapour. [330]

SOCRATES

You didn't realize these goddesses
support a multitude of charlatans—
prophetic seers from Thurium, quacks
who specialize in books on medicine,
lazy long-haired types with onyx signet rings,
poets who produce the twisted choral music
for dithyrambic songs, those with airy minds—
all those men so active doing nothing
the Clouds support, since in their poetry
these people celebrate the Clouds.

STREPSIADES

Ah ha, so that's why they poeticize
"the whirling radiance of watery clouds
as they advance so ominously,"

"waving hairs of hundred-headed Typho," [1]
with "roaring tempests," and then "liquid breeze,"
or "crook-taloned, sky-floating birds of prey,"
"showers of rain from dewy clouds"—and then,
as a reward for this, they stuff themselves
on slices carved from some huge tasty fish
or from a thrush.[2]

SOCRATES

Yes, thanks to these Clouds. [340]
Is that not truly just?

STREPSIADES

All right, tell me this—
if they're really clouds, what's happened to them?
They look just like mortal human women. 440
The clouds up there are not the least like that.

SOCRATES

What are they like?

STREPSIADES

I don't know exactly.
They look like wool once it's been pulled apart—
not like women, by god, not in the least.
These ones here have noses.

SOCRATES

Let me ask you something.
Will you answer me?

STREPSIADES

Ask me what you want.
Fire away.

[1]Typho is a monster with a hundred heads, father of the storm winds (hence, our word typhoon).

[2]Meat from a thrush was considered a delicacy, something that might be given to the winner of a public competition. These lines are mocking the dithyrambic poets (perhaps in comparison with the writers of comic drama).

SOCRATES

Have you ever gazed up there
and seen a cloud shaped like a centaur,
or a leopard, wolf, or bull?

STREPSIADES

Yes, I have.
So what?

SOCRATES

They become anything they want.
So if they see some hairy savage type,
one of those really wild and wooly men,
like Xenophantes' son, they mock his moods,
transforming their appearance into centaurs.[1] [350]

STREPSIADES

What if they glimpse a thief of public funds,
like Simon? What do they do then? [2]

SOCRATES

They expose
just what he's truly like—they change at once,
transform themselves to wolves.

STREPSIADES

Ah ha, I see.
So that's why yesterday they changed to deer.
They must have caught sight of Cleonymos—
the man who threw away his battle shield—
they knew he was fearful coward.[3]

SOCRATES

And now it's clear they've seen Cleisthenes—

[1] *Xenophantes' son* is a reference to Hieronymos, a dithyrambic and tragic poet. A centaur was known for its savage temper and wild appearance.

[2] Simon was an allegedly corrupt Athenian public official.

[3] Cleonymos was an Athenian accused of dropping his shield and running away from a battle.

that's why, as you can see, they've changed to women.[1]

STREPSIADES *[to the Chorus of Clouds]*
All hail to you, lady goddesses.
And now, if you have ever spoken out
to other men, let me hear your voice,
you queenly powers.

CHORUS LEADER
Greetings to you, old man born long ago,
hunter in love with arts of argument—
you, too, high priest of subtlest nonsense,
tell us what you want. Of all the experts [360]
in celestial matters at the present time,
we take note of no one else but you—
and Prodicus—because he's sharp and wise,
while you go swaggering along the street,
in bare feet, shifting both eyes back and forth.[2]
You keep moving on through many troubles,
looking proud of your relationship with us.

STREPSIADES
By the Earth, what voices these Clouds have—
so holy, reverent, and marvelous!

SOCRATES
Well, they're the only deities we have—
the rest are just so much hocus pocus.

STREPSIADES
Hang on—by the Earth, isn't Zeus a god,
the one up there on Mount Olympus?

[1]Cleisthenes was a well known homosexual whom Aristophanes never tires of holding up to ridicule.

[2]*Prodicus* was a well-known Athenian intellectual, who wrote on a wide variety of subjects. Linking Socrates and Prodicus as intellectual equals would strike many Athenians as quite absurd.

SOCRATES

What sort of god is Zeus? Why spout such rubbish?
There's no such being as Zeus.

STREPSIADES

What do you mean?
Then who brings on the rain? First answer that.

SOCRATES

Why, these women do. I'll prove that to you
with persuasive evidence. Just tell me— 490 [370]
where have you ever seen the rain come down
without the Clouds being there? If Zeus brings rain,
then he should do so when the sky is clear,
when no one can see any Clouds at all.

STREPSIADES

By Apollo, you've made a good point there—
it helps your argument. I used to think
rain was really Zeus pissing through a sieve.
Tell me who causes thunder? That scares me.

SOCRATES

These Clouds do, as they roll around.

STREPSIADES

But how?
Explain that, you who dares to know it all. 500

SOCRATES

When they are filled with water to the brim
and then, suspended there with all that rain,
are forced to move, they bump into each other.
They're so big, they burst with a great boom.

STREPSIADES

But what's forcing them to move around?
Doesn't Zeus do that?

SOCRATES

No—that's the aerial Vortex.[1]

STREPSIADES

Vortex? Well, that's something I didn't know. [380]
So Zeus is now no more, and Vortex rules
instead of him. But you still have not explained
a thing about those claps of thunder. 510

SOCRATES

Weren't you listening to me? I tell you,
when the Clouds are full of water and collide,
they're so thickly packed they make a noise.

STREPSIADES

Come on now—who'd ever believe that stuff?

SOCRATES

I'll explain, using you as a test case.
Have you ever gorged yourself on stew
at the Panathenaea and later
had an upset stomach—then suddenly
some violent movement made it rumble? [2]

STREPSIADES

Yes, by Apollo! It does weird things— 520
I feel unsettled. That small bit of stew
rumbles around and makes strange noises,
just like thunder. At first it's quite quiet— [390]
"pappax pappax"—then it starts getting louder—
"papapappax"—and when I take a shit,
it really thunders "PAPAPAPPAX!!!"—
just like these Clouds.

SOCRATES

So think about it—
if your small gut can make a fart like that,

[1] *Vortex*: the Greek word is *dinos* meaning a *whirl* or *eddy*. I adopt Sommerstein's suggestion for this word here.

[2] *Panathenaea* is a major annual festival in Athens

why can't the air, which goes on for ever,
produce tremendous thunder. Then there's this—
consider how alike these phrases sound,
"thunder clap" and "fart and crap."

STREPSIADES

All right, but then explain this to me—
Where does lightning come from, that fiery blaze,
which, when it hits, sometimes burns us up,
sometimes just singes us and lets us live?
Clearly Zeus is hurling that at perjurers.

SOCRATES

You stupid driveling idiot, you stink
of olden times, the age of Cronos! [1] If Zeus
is really striking at the perjurers,
how come he's not burned Simon down to ash,
or else Cleonymos or Theorus?
They perjure themselves more than anyone. [400]
No. Instead he strikes at his own temple
at Sunium, our Athenian headland,
and at his massive oak trees there. Why?
What's his plan? Oak trees can't be perjured.

STREPSIADES

I don't know. But that argument of yours
seems good. All right, then, what's a lightning bolt?

SOCRATES

When a dry wind blows up into the Clouds
and gets caught in there, it makes them inflate,
like the inside of a bladder. And then
it has to burst them all apart and vent,
rushing out with violence brought on
by dense compression—its force and friction
cause it to consume itself in fire.

[1] Cronos is the divine father of Zeus; the age of Cronos is part of the mythic past.

STREPSIADES

By god, I went through that very thing myself—
at the feast for Zeus. I was cooking food,
a pig's belly, for my family. I forgot
to slit it open. It began to swell— [410]
then suddenly blew up, splattering blood
in both my eyes and burning my whole face.

CHORUS LEADER

Oh you who seeks from us great wisdom,
how happy you will be among Athenians,
among the Greeks, if you have memory,
if you can think, if in that soul of yours
you've got the power to persevere,
and don't get tired standing still or walking,
nor suffer too much from the freezing cold,
with no desire for breakfast, if you abstain
from wine, from exercise, and other foolishness,
if you believe, as all clever people should,
the highest good is victory in action,
in deliberation and in verbal wars.

STREPSIADES

Well, as for a stubborn soul and a mind [420]
thinking in a restless bed, while my stomach,
lean and mean, feeds on bitter herbs, don't worry.
I'm confident about all that—I'm ready
to be hammered on your anvil into shape.

SOCRATES

So now you won't acknowledge any gods
except the ones we do—Chaos, the Clouds,
the Tongue—just these three?

STREPSIADES

Absolutely—
I'd refuse to talk to any other gods,
if I ran into them—and I decline
to sacrifice or pour libations to them.

I'll not provide them any incense.

CHORUS LEADER

Tell us then what we can do for you.
Be brave—for if you treat us with respect,
if you admire us, and if you're keen
to be a clever man, you won't go wrong.

STREPSIADES

O you sovereign queens,
from you I ask one really tiny favour—
to be the finest speaker in all Greece, [430]
within a hundred miles.

CHORUS LEADER

You'll get that from us.
From now on, in time to come, no one will win
more votes among the populace than you.

STREPSIADES

No speaking on important votes for me!
That's not what I'm after. No, no. I want
to twist all legal verdicts in my favour,
to evade my creditors.

CHORUS LEADER

You'll get that,
just what you desire. For what you want
is nothing special. So be confident—
give yourself over to our agents here.

STREPSIADES

I'll do that—I'll place my trust in you.
Necessity is weighing me down—the horses,
those thoroughbreds, my marriage—all that
has worn me out. So now, this body of mine [440]
I'll give to them, with no strings attached,
to do with as they like—to suffer blows,
go without food and drink, live like a pig,
to freeze or have my skin flayed for a pouch—

if I can just get out of all my debt
and make men think of me as bold and glib,
as fearless, impudent, detestable,
one who cobbles lies together, makes up words,
a practised legal rogue, a statute book,
a chattering fox, sly and needle sharp,
a slippery fraud, a sticky rascal,
foul whipping boy or twisted villain, [450]
troublemaker, or idly prattling fool. 620
If they can make those who run into me
call me these names, they can do what they want—
no questions asked. If, by Demeter, they're keen,
they can convert me into sausages
and serve me up to men who think deep thoughts.

CHORUS
Here's a man whose mind's now smart,
no holding back—prepared to start.
When you have learned all this from me [460]
you know your glory will arise
among all men to heaven's skies. 630

STREPSIADES
And what will I get out of this?

CHORUS
For all time, you'll live with me
a life most people truly envy.

STREPSIADES
You mean one day I'll really see that?

CHORUS
Hordes will sit outside your door
wanting your advice and more— [470]
to talk, to place their trust in you
for their affairs and lawsuits, too,
things which merit your great mind.
They'll leave you lots of cash behind. 640

CHORUS LEADER: *[to Socrates]*
So get started with this old man's lessons,
what you intend to teach him first of all—
rouse his mind, test his intellectual powers.

SOCRATES
Come on then, tell me the sort of man you are—
once I know that, I can bring to bear on you
my latest batteries with full effect. [480]

STREPSIADES
What's that? By god, are you assaulting me?

SOCRATES
No—I want to learn some things from you.
What about your memory?

STREPSIADES
To tell the truth,
it works two ways. If someone owes me something, 650
I remember really well. But if it's poor me
that owes the money, I forget a lot.

SOCRATES
Do you have any natural gift for speech?

STREPSIADES
Not for speaking—only for evading debt.

SOCRATES
So how will you be capable of learning?

STREPSIADES
Easily—that shouldn't be your worry.

SOCRATES
All right. When I throw out something wise
about celestial matters, you make sure
you snatch it right away. [490]

STREPSIADES
What's that about?
Am I to eat up wisdom like a dog? 660

SOCRATES *[aside]*
This man's an ignorant barbarian!
Old man, I fear you may need a beating.

[to Strepsiades]

Now, what do you do if someone hits you?

STREPSIADES
If I get hit, I wait around a while,
then find witnesses, hang around some more,
then go to court.

SOCRATES
All right, take off your cloak.

STREPSIADES
Have I done something wrong?

SOCRATES
No. It's our custom
to go inside without a cloak.

STREPSIADES
But I don't want
to search your house for stolen stuff.[1]

SOCRATES
What are you going on about? Take it off. 670

STREPSIADES *[removing his cloak and his shoes]*
So tell me this—if I pay attention [500]
and put some effort into learning,
which of your students will I look like?

SOCRATES
In appearance there'll be no difference
between yourself and Chaerephon.

[1]Legally an Athenian who believed someone had stolen his property could enter the suspect's house to search. But he first had to remove any garments in which he might conceal something which he might plant in the house.

STREPSIADES

Oh, that's bad.
You mean I'll be only half alive?

SOCRATES

Don't talk such rubbish! Get a move on
and follow me inside. Hurry up!

STREPSIADES

First, put a honey cake here in my hands.
I'm scared of going down in there. It's like
walking in Trophonios' cave.[1]

SOCRATES

Go inside.
Why keep hanging round this doorway?

[Socrates picks up Strepsiades' cloak and shoes. Then Strepsiades and Socrates exit into the interior of the Thinkery]

CHORUS LEADER

Go. And may you enjoy good fortune,
a fit reward for all your bravery.

CHORUS

We hope this man
thrives in his plan.
For at his stage
of great old age
he'll take a dip
in new affairs
to act the sage.

CHORUS LEADER *[stepping forward to address the audience]*

You spectators, I'll talk frankly to you now,
and speak the truth, in the name of Dionysus,
who has cared for me ever since I was a child.
So may I win and be considered a wise man.
For I thought you were a discerning audience

[1] *Trophonios' cave* was a place people went to get prophecies. A suppliant carried a honey cake as an offering to the snakes in the cave.

and this comedy the most intelligent
of all my plays. Thus, I believed it worth my while
to produce it first for you, a work which cost me
a great deal of effort. But I left defeated,
beaten by vulgar men—which I did not deserve.
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,
not since that time when my play about two men—
one was virtuous, the other one depraved—
was really well received by certain people here,
whom it pleases me to mention now. As for me,
I was still unmarried, not yet fully qualified [530]
to produce that child. But I exposed my offspring,
and another woman carried it away.
In your generosity you raised and trained it.[1]
Since then I've had sworn testimony from you
that you have faith in me. So now, like old Electra,
this comedy has come, hoping she can find,
somewhere in here, spectators as intelligent.
If she sees her brother's hair, she'll recognize it.[2]
Consider how my play shows natural restraint.
First, she doesn't have stitched leather dangling down,
with a thick red knob, to make the children giggle.[3]
She hasn't mocked bald men or danced some drunken reel. [540]

[1] *trained it*: This passage is a reference to Aristophanes' first play, *The Banqueters*, and to those who helped him get the work produced. The child mentioned is a metaphorical reference to that work or to his artistic talent generally. The other woman is a metaphorical reference to Callistratos, who produced *The Banqueters*.

[2] Electra was the sister of Orestes and spent a long time waiting to be reunited with him. That hope kept her going. When she saw her brother's lock of hair on their father's tomb, she was overjoyed that he had come back. The adjective "old" refers to the story, which was very well known to the audience.

[3] These lines may indicate that in *Clouds* the male characters did not wear the traditional phalluses.

There's no old man who talks and beats those present
with a stick to hide bad jokes. She doesn't rush on stage
with torches or raise the cry "Alas!" or "Woe is me!"
No—she's come trusting in herself and in the script.
And I'm a poet like that. I don't preen myself.
I don't seek to cheat you by re-presenting here
the same material two or three times over.
Instead I base my art on framing new ideas,
all different from the rest, and each one very deft.
When Cleon was all-powerful, I went for him.
I hit him in the gut. But once he was destroyed,
I didn't have the heart to kick at him again.
Yet once Hyperbolos let others seize on him,
they've not ceased stomping on the miserable man—
and on his mother, too.[1] The first was Eupolis—
he dredged up his *Maricas*, a wretched rehash
of my play *The Knights*—he's such a worthless poet—
adding an aging female drunk in that stupid dance,
a woman Phrynichos invented years ago,
the one that ocean monster tried to gobble up.[2]
Then Hermippos wrote again about Hyperbolos.
Now all the rest are savaging the man once more,
copying my images of eels. If anyone
laughs at those plays, I hope mine don't amuse him.
But if you enjoy me and my inventiveness,
then future ages will commend your worthy taste.

CHORUS

For my dance I first here call
on Zeus, high-ruling king of all
among the gods—and on Poseidon,
so great and powerful—the one

[1]Cleon was a very powerful Athenian politician after Pericles. Aristophanes savagely attacked him in *Knights*. Cleon was killed in battle (in 422). Hyperbolos became a very influential politician after Cleon's death.

[2]Eupolis, Phrynichos, and Hermippos are comic playwrights, rivals of Aristophanes.

who with his trident wildly heaves
the earth and all the brine-filled seas,
and on our famous father Sky,
the most revered, who can supply [570]
all things with life. And I invite
the Charioteer whose dazzling light 760
fills this wide world so mightily
for every man and deity.

CHORUS LEADER
The wisest in this audience should here take note—
you've done us wrong, and we confront you with the blame.
We confer more benefits than any other god
upon your city, yet we're the only ones
to whom you do not sacrifice or pour libations,
though we're the gods who keep protecting you.
If there's some senseless army expedition, [580]
then we respond by thundering or bringing rain. 770
And when you were selecting as your general
that Paphlagonian tanner hated by the gods,[1]
we frowned and then complained aloud—our thunder pealed
among the lightning bursts, the moon moved off her course,
the sun at once pulled his wick back inside himself,
and said if Cleon was to be your general
then he'd give you no light. Nonetheless, you chose him.
They say this city likes to make disastrous choices,
but that the gods, no matter what mistakes you make,
convert them into something better. If you want 780
your recent choice to turn into a benefit,
I can tell you how—it's easy. Condemn the man— [590]
that seagull Cleon—for bribery and theft.
Set him in the stocks, a wooden yoke around his neck.
Then, even if you've made a really big mistake,
for you things will be as they were before your vote,

[1]Paphlagonian tanner is a reference to Cleon, who earned his money from tanneries. Paphlagonia is an area in Asia Minor. The word here implies that Cleon was not a true Athenian.

and for the city this affair will turn out well.[1]

CHORUS

Phoebus Apollo, stay close by,
lord of Delos, who sits on high,
by lofty Cynthos mountain sides;
and holy lady, who resides
in Ephesus, in your gold shrine,
where Lydian girls pray all the time;
Athena, too, who guards our home,
her aegis raised above her own,
and he who holds Parnassus peaks
and shakes his torches as he leaps,
lord Dionysus, whose shouts call
amid the Delphic bacchanal.[2]

CHORUS LEADER

When we were getting ready to move over here,
Moon met us and told us, first of all, to greet,
on her behalf, the Athenians and their allies.
Then she said she was upset—the way you treat her
is disgraceful, though she brings you all benefits—
not just in words but in her deeds. To start with,
she saves you at least one drachma every month
for torchlight— in the evening, when you go outside,
you all can say, "No need to buy a torch, my boy,
Moon's light will do just fine." She claims she helps you all
in other ways, as well, but you don't calculate
your calendar the way you should—no, instead
you make it all confused, and that's why, she says,

[1]The seagull was a bird symbolic of thievery and greed. The contradiction in these speeches in the attitude to Cleon (who died the year following the original production) may be accounted for by the incomplete revision of the script.

[2]The holy lady is a reference to the goddess Artemis. The aegis is a divine emblem which has invincible powers to strike fear into the god's enemies. Here it is invoked as a protection for Athens, Athena's city. Dionysus lived in Delphi when Apollo was absent from the shrine during the winter.

the gods are always making threats against her,
when they are cheated of a meal and go back home
because their celebration has not taken place
according to a proper count of all the days.[1]
And then, when you should be making sacrifice, [620]
you're torturing someone or have a man on trial.
And many times, when we gods undertake a fast,
because we're mourning Memnon or Sarpedon, 820
you're pouring out libations, having a good laugh.[2]
That's the reason, after his choice by lot this year
to sit on the religious council, Hyperbolos
had his wreath of office snatched off by the gods.
That should make him better understand the need
to count the days of life according to the moon.[3]

[Enter Socrates from the interior of the Thinkery]

SOCRATES

By Respiration, Chaos, and the Air,
I've never seen a man so crude, stupid,
clumsy, and forgetful. He tries to learn
the tiny trifles, but then he forgets 830 [630]
before he's even learned them. Nonetheless,
I'll call him outside here into the light.

[Socrates calls back into the interior of the Thinkery]

Strepsiades, where are you? Come on out—
and bring your bed.

STREPSIADES *[from inside]*

I can't carry it out—

[1]Athenians followed a lunar calendar, but there were important discrepancies due to a very careless control over inserting extra days.

[2]Memnon, the son of Dawn, was killed at Troy, as was Sarpedon, a son of Zeus, and leader of the Lycian allies of the Trojans.

[3]*religious council*: The Amphictyonic Council, which controlled some important religious shrines, was made up of delegates from different city states. In Athens the delegate was chosen by lot. It's not clear how the gods could have removed the wreath in question.

the bugs won't let me.

SOCRATES

Get a move on. Now!

[Strepsiades enters carrying his bedding]

SOCRATES

Put it there. And pay attention.

STREPSIADES *[putting the bed down]*

There!

SOCRATES

Come now, of all the things you never learned
what to you want to study first? Tell me.

[Strepsiades is very puzzled by the question]

SOCRATES

Poetic measures? Diction? Rhythmic verse?

STREPSIADES

I'll take measures. Just the other day 840
the man who deals in barley cheated me— [640]
about two quarts.

SOCRATES

That's not what I mean.
Which music measure is most beautiful—
the triple measure or quadruple measure?

STREPSIADES

As a measure nothing beats a gallon.

SOCRATES

My dear man, you're just talking nonsense.

STREPSIADES

Then make me a bet—I say a gallon
is made up of quadruple measures.

SOCRATES

Oh damn you—you're such a country bumpkin—

so slow! Maybe you can learn more quickly
if we deal with rhythm.

STREPSIADES

Will these rhythms
help to get me food?

SOCRATES

Well, to begin with,
they'll make you elegant in company—
and you'll recognize the different rhythms,
the enoplian and the dactylic,
which is like a digit.[1]

STREPSIADES

Like a digit!
By god, that's something I do know!

SOCRATES

Then tell me.

STREPSIADES

When I was a lad a digit meant this!

[Strepsiades sticks his middle finger straight up under Socrates' nose]

SOCRATES

You're just a crude buffoon!

STREPSIADES

No, you're a fool—
I don't want to learn any of that stuff.

SOCRATES

Well then, what?

STREPSIADES

You know, that other thing—
how to argue the most unjust cause.

[1]The dactyl is named from the Greek word for finger because it consists of one long stress followed by two short stresses, like the structure of bones in a finger. The phrase "which is like a digit" has been added to make the point clearer.

SOCRATES

But you need to learn these other matters
before all that. Now, of the quadrupeds
which one can we correctly label male?

STREPSIADES

Well, I know the males, if I'm not witless— [660]
the ram, billy goat, bull, dog, and fowl.

SOCRATES

And the females?

STREPSIADES

The ewe, nanny goat,
cow, bitch and fowl.[1]

SOCRATES

You see what you're doing?
You're using that word "fowl" for both of them, 870
Calling males what people use for females.

STREPSIADES

What's that? I don't get it.

SOCRATES

What's not to get?
"Fowl" and "Fowl" . . .

STREPSIADES

By Poseidon, I see your point.
All right, what should I call them?

SOCRATES

Call the male a "fowl"—
and call the other one "fowlette."

[1]I adopt Sommerstein's suggested insertion of this line and a half in order to clarify what now follows in the conversation, which hinges on the gender of words (masculine, feminine, or neuter) and the proper ascription of a specific gender to words which describe male and female objects. The word "fowl" applies to both male and females and therefore is not, strictly speaking masculine. This whole section is a satire on the "nitpicking" attention to language attributed to the sophists.

STREPSIADES

"Fowlette?"

By the Air, that's good! Just for teaching that
I'll fill your kneading basin up with flour,
right to the brim.[1]

SOCRATES

Once again, another error! [670]

You called it basin—a masculine word—
when it's feminine.

STREPSIADES

How so? Do I call 880

the basin masculine?

SOCRATES

Indeed you do.

It's just like Cleonymos.[2]

STREPSIADES

How's that?

Tell me.

SOCRATES

You treated the word basin
just as you would treat Cleonymos.

STREPSIADES *[totally bewildered by the conversation]*

But my dear man, he didn't have a basin—
not Cleonymos—not for kneading flour.
His round mortar was his prick—the wanker—
and he kneaded that to masturbate.[3]
But what should I call a basin from now on?

[1]A kneading basin is a trough for making bread.

[2]Cleonymos is an Athenian politician who allegedly ran away from the battle field, leaving his shield behind.

[3]*to masturbate*: the Greek here says literally "Cleonymos didn't have a kneading basin but kneaded himself with a round mortar [i.e., masturbated]."

SOCRATES
Call it a basinette, just as you'd say
the word Sostratette.

STREPSIADES
Basinette—it's feminine?

SOCRATES
It is indeed.

STREPSIADES
All right, then, I should say
Cleonymette and basinette. [680]

SOCRATES
You've still got to learn about people's names—
which ones are male and which are female.

STREPSIADES
I know which ones are feminine.

SOCRATES
Go on.

STREPSIADES
Lysilla, Philinna, Cleitagora,
Demetria . . .

SOCRATES
Which names are masculine?

STREPSIADES
There are thousands of them—Philoxenos,
Melesias, Amynias . . .

SOCRATES
You fool,
those names are not all masculine.[1]

[1]The three names mentioned belong to well known Athenians, who may have all been famous for their dissolute life style. Socrates is taking issue with the spelling of the last two names which (in some forms) look like feminine names. Strepsiades, of course, thinks Socrates is talking about the sexuality of the people.

STREPSIADES: What?

You don't think of them as men?

SOCRATES

Indeed I don't.

If you met Amynias, how would you greet him?

STREPSIADES

How? Like this, "Here, Amynia, come here." [1] [690]

SOCRATES

You see? You said "Amynia," a woman's name.

STREPSIADES

And that's fair enough, since she's unwilling
to do army service. But what's the point?
Why do I need to learn what we all know?

SOCRATES

That's irrelevant, by god. Now lie down—
[indicating the bed] right here.

STREPSIADES

And do what?

SOCRATES

You should contemplate— 910

think one of your own problems through.

STREPSIADES

Not here,

I beg you—no. If I have to do it,
let me do my contemplating on the ground.

SOCRATES

No—you've got no choice.

STREPSIADES *[crawling very reluctantly into the bedding]*

Now I'm done for—

[1] *Amynia*: in Greek (as in Latin) the name changes when it is used as a direct form of address; in this case the last letter is dropped, leaving a name ending in *-a*, normally a feminine ending.

these bugs are going to punish me today.

[Socrates exits back into the Thinkery]

CHORUS

Now ponder and think,
focus this way and that.
Your mind turn and toss.
And if you're at a loss,
then quickly go find
a new thought in your mind.
From your eyes you must keep
all soul-soothing sleep.

STREPSIADES

Oh, god . . . ahhhhh . . .

CHORUS

What's wrong with you? Why so distressed?

STREPSIADES

I'm dying a miserable death in here!
These Corinthian crawlers keep biting me.[1]
gnawing on my ribs,
slurping up my blood,
yanking off my balls,
tunneling up my arse hole—
they're killing me!

CHORUS

Don't complain so much.

STREPSIADES

Why not? When I've lost my goods,
lost the colour in my cheeks, lost my blood,
lost my shoes, and, on top of all these troubles,
I'm here like some night watchman singing out—
it won't be long before I'm done for.

[1]The phrase *Corinthian crawlers* is obviously a reference to bed bugs, but the link with Corinth is unclear (perhaps it was a slang expression).

{Enter Socrates from inside the Thinkery]

SOCRATES
What are you doing? Aren't you thinking something?

STREPSIADES
Me? Yes I am, by Poseidon.

SOCRATES
What about?

STREPSIADES
Whether there's going to be any of me left
once these bugs have finished.

SOCRATES
You imbecile,
why don't you drop dead!

[Socrates exits back into the Thinkery]

STREPSIADES
But my dear man,
I'm dying right now.

CHORUS LEADER
Don't get soft. Cover up—
get your whole body underneath the blanket.
You need to find a good idea for fraud,
a sexy way to cheat.

STREPSIADES
Damn it all—
instead of these lambskins here, why won't someone
throw over me a lovely larcenous scheme? [730]

[Strepsiades covers his head with the wool blankets. Enter Socrates from the Thinkery. He looks around thinking what to do]

SOCRATES
First, I'd better check on what he's doing.
You in there, are you asleep?

STREPSIADES *[uncovering his head]*
No, I'm not.

SOCRATES
Have you grasped anything?

STREPSIADES
No, by god, I haven't.

SOCRATES
Nothing at all?

STREPSIADES
I haven't grasped a thing—
except my right hand's wrapped around my cock.

SOCRATES
Then cover your head and think up something—
get a move on!

STREPSIADES
What should I think about?
Tell me that, Socrates.

SOCRATES
First you must formulate
what it is you want. Then tell me.

STREPSIADES
You've heard
what I want a thousand times—I want to know
about interest, so I'll not have to pay 960
a single creditor.

SOCRATES
Come along now,
cover up.

[Strepsiades covers his head again, and Socrates speaks to him through the blanket]

Now, carve your slender thinking [740]
into tiny bits, and think the matter through,

with proper probing and analysis.

STREPSIADES
Ahhh . . . bloody hell!

SOCRATES
Don't shift around.
If one of your ideas is going nowhere,
let it go, leave it alone. Later on,
start it again and weigh it one more time.

STREPSIADES
My dear little Socrates . . .

SOCRATES
Yes, old man,
what is it?

STREPSIADES
I've got a lovely scheme
to avoid paying interest.

SOCRATES
Lay it out.

STREPSIADES
All right. Tell me now . . .

SOCRATES
What is it?

STREPSIADES
What if I purchased a Thessalian witch
and in the night had her haul down the moon—
then shut it up in a circular box,
just like a mirror, and kept watch on it.

SOCRATES
How would that provide you any help?

STREPSIADES
Well, if no moon ever rose up anywhere,
I'd pay no interest.

SOCRATES

And why is that?

STREPSIADES

Because they lend out money by the month.

SOCRATES

That's good. I'll give you another problem—
it's tricky. If in court someone sued you
to pay five talents, what would you do
to get the case discharged.

STREPSIADES

How? I don't know.
I'll have to think. [760]

SOCRATES

These ideas of yours—
don't keep them wound up all the time inside you.
Let your thinking loose—out into the air—
with thread around its foot, just like a bug.[1]

STREPSIADES

Hey, I've devised a really clever way
to make that lawsuit disappear—it's so good,
you'll agree with me.

SOCRATES

What's your way?

STREPSIADES

At the drug seller's shop have you seen
that beautiful stone you can see right through,
the one they use to start a fire?

SOCRATES

You mean glass?

STREPSIADES

Yes.

[1] *bug*: Children sometimes tied a thread around the foot of a large flying bug and played with it.

SOCRATES

So what?

STREPSIADES

What if I took that glass,
and when the scribe was writing out the charge, [770]
I stood between him and the sun—like this—
some distance off, and made his writing melt,
just the part about my case?[1]

SOCRATES

By the Graces,
that's a smart idea!

STREPSIADES

Hey, I'm happy— 1000
I've erased my law suit for five talents.

SOCRATES

So hurry up and tackle this next problem.

STREPSIADES

What is it?

SOCRATES

How would you evade a charge
and launch a counter-suit in a hearing
you're about to lose without a witness?

STREPSIADES

No problem there—it's easy.

SOCRATES

So tell me.

STREPSIADES

I will. If there was a case still pending,
another one before my case was called,
I'd run off and hang myself. [780]

[1]The scribe would be writing on a wax tablet, which the heat would melt.

SOCRATES

That's nonsense.

STREPSIADES

No, by the gods, it's not. If I were dead,
no one could bring a suit against me.

SOCRATES

That's rubbish. Just get away from here.
I'll not instruct you any more.

STREPSIADES

Why not?
Come on, Socrates, in god's name.

SOCRATES

There's no point—
as soon as you learn anything, it's gone,
you forget it right away. Look, just now,
what was the very first thing you were taught?

STREPSIADES

Well, let's see . . . The first thing—what was it?
What was that thing we knead the flour in?
Damn it all, what was it?

SOCRATES

To hell with you!
You're the most forgetful, stupidest old man . . . [790]
Get lost!

STREPSIADES

Oh dear! Now I'm in for it.
What going to happen to me? I'm done for,
if I don't learn to twist my words around.
Come on, Clouds, give me some good advice.

CHORUS LEADER

Old man, here's our advice: if you've a son
and he's full grown, send him in there to learn—
he'll take your place.

STREPSIADES

Well, I do have a son—
a really good and fine one, too—trouble is
he doesn't want to learn. What should I do?

CHORUS LEADER

You just let him do that?

STREPSIADES

He's a big lad—
and strong and proud—his mother's family
are all high-flying women like Coesyra.
But I'll take him in hand. If he says no,
then I'll evict him from my house for sure.
[to Socrates] Go inside and wait for me a while.

[Strepsiades moves back across the stage to his own house]

CHORUS *[to Socrates]*

Don't you see you'll quickly get
from us all sorts of lovely things
since we're your only god?
This man here is now all set
to follow you in anything,
you simply have to prod.
You know the man is in a daze.
He's clearly keen his son should learn.
So lap it up—make haste—
get everything that you can raise.
Such chances tend to change and turn
into a different case.

[Socrates exits into the Thinkery. Strepsiades and Pheidippides come out of their house. Strepsiades is pushing his son in front of him]

STREPSIADES

By the foggy air, you can't stay here—
not one moment longer! Off with you—
go eat Megacles out of house and home!

PHEIDIPPIDES
Hey, father—you poor man, what's wrong with you?
By Olympian Zeus, you're not thinking straight.

STREPSIADES
See that—"Olympian Zeus"! Ridiculous—
to believe in Zeus—and at your age, too!

PHEIDIPPIDES
Why laugh at that? [820]

STREPSIADES
To think you're such a child—
and your views so out of date. Still, come here,
so you can learn a bit. I'll tell you things.
When you understand all this, you'll be a man.
But you mustn't mention this to anyone. 1060

PHEIDIPPIDES
All right, what is it?

STREPSIADES
You just swore by Zeus.

PHEIDIPPIDES
That's right. I did.

STREPSIADES
You see how useful learning is?
Pheidippides, there's no such thing as Zeus.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Then what is there?

STREPSIADES
Vortex now is king—
he's pushed out Zeus.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Bah, that's nonsense!

STREPSIADES
You should know that's how things are right now.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Who says that?

STREPSIADES
Socrates of Melos[1] [830]
and Chaerephon—they know about fleas' footprints.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Have you become so crazy you believe
these fellows? They're disgusting!

STREPSIADES
Watch your tongue. 1070
Don't say nasty things about such clever men—
men with brains, who like to save their money.
That's why not one of them has ever shaved,
or oiled his skin, or visited the baths
to wash himself. You, on the other hand,
keep on bathing in my livelihood,
as if I'd died.[2] So now get over there,
as quickly as you can. Take my place and learn.

PHEIDIPPIDES
But what could anyone learn from those men
that's any use at all? [840]

STREPSIADES
You have to ask? 1080
Why, wise things—the full extent of human thought.
You'll see how thick you are, how stupid.
Just wait a moment here for me.

[Strepsiades goes into his house]

PHEIDIPPIDES
Oh dear,
What will I do? My father's lost his wits.

[1] *Melos*: Strepsiades presumably is confusing Socrates with Diagoras, a well known materialistic atheist, who came from Melos (whereas Socrates did not).

[2] *died*: Part of the funeral rituals in a family required each member to bathe thoroughly.

Do I haul him off to get committed,
on the ground that he's a lunatic,
or tell the coffin-makers he's gone mad.

[Strepsiades returns with two birds, one in each hand. He holds out one of them]

STREPSIADES
Come on now, what do you call this? Tell me.

PHEIDIPPIDES
It's a fowl.

STREPSIADES
That's good. What's this?

PHEIDIPPIDES
That's a fowl.

STREPSIADES
They're both the same? You're being ridiculous. 1090
From now on, don't do that. Call this one "fowl," [850]
and this one here "fowlette."

PHEIDIPPIDES
"Fowlette"? That's it?
That's the sort of clever stuff you learned in there,
by going in with these Sons of Earth? [1]

STREPSIADES
Yes, it is—
and lots more, too. But everything I learned,
I right away forgot, because I'm old.

PHEIDIPPIDES
That why you lost your cloak?

STREPSIADES
I didn't lose it—
I gave it to knowledge—a donation.

[1] *Sons of Earth*: a phrase usually referring to the Titans who warred against the Olympian gods. Here it also evokes a sense of the materialism of Socrates' doctrine in the play and, of course, ironically ridicules the Thinkery.

PHEIDIPPIDES

And your sandals—what you do with them,
you deluded man?

STREPSIADES

Just like Pericles,
I lost them as a "necessary expense."
But come on, let's go.[1] Move it. If your dad [860]
asks you to do wrong, you must obey him.
I know I did just what you wanted long ago,
when you were six years old and had a lisp—
with the first obol I got for jury work,
at the feast of Zeus I got you a toy cart.

PHEIDIPPIDES

You're going to regret this one fine day.

STREPSIADES

Good—you're doing what I ask.

[Strepsiades calls inside the Thinkery]

Socrates,
come out here . . .

[Enter Socrates from inside the Thinkery]

Here—I've brought my son to you.
He wasn't keen, but I persuaded him.

SOCRATES

He's still a child—he doesn't know the ropes.

PHEIDIPPIDES

Go hang yourself up on some rope [870]
and get beaten like a worn-out cloak.

[1] *"necessary expense"*: refers to the well-known story of Pericles who in 445 BC used this phrase in official state accounts to refer to an expensive but secret bribe he paid to a Spartan general to withdraw his armies from Athenian territories around Athens. No one asked any embarrassing questions about the entry.

STREPSIADES

Damn you! Why insult your teacher?

SOCRATES

Look how he says "hang yourself"—it sounds
like baby talk. No crispness in his speech.[1]
With such a feeble tone how will he learn
to answer to a charge or summons
or speak persuasively? And yet it's true
Hyperbolos could learn to master that—
it cost him one talent.[2]

STREPSIADES

Don't be concerned.
Teach him. He's naturally intelligent.
When he was a little boy—just that tall—
even then at home he built small houses,
carved out ships, made chariots from leather, [880]
and fashioned frogs from pomegranate peel.
You can't imagine! Get him to learn
those two forms of argument—the Better,
whatever that may be, and the Worse.
If not both, then at least the unjust one—
every trick you've got.

SOCRATES

He'll learn on his own
from the two styles of reasoning. I'll be gone.

STREPSIADES

But remember this—he must be able
to speak against all just arguments.

[Enter the Better Argument from inside the Thinkery, talking to the Worse Argument who is still inside]

[1] *speech*: the Greek says "with his lips sagging [or loosely apart]." Socrates is criticizing Pheidippides' untrained voice.

[2] *talent*: an enormous fee to pay for lessons in rhetoric. Socrates is, of course, getting Strepsiades ready to pay a lot for his son's education.

BETTER ARGUMENT
Come on. Show yourself to the people here—
I guess you're bold enough for that. [890]

[The Worse Argument emerges from the Thinkery]

WORSE ARGUMENT
Go where you please.
The odds are greater I can wipe you out
with lots of people there to watch us argue.

BETTER ARGUMENT
You'll wipe me out? Who'd you think you are? 1140

WORSE ARGUMENT
An argument.

BETTER ARGUMENT
Yes, but second rate.

WORSE ARGUMENT
You claim that you're more powerful than me,
but I'll still conquer you.

BETTER ARGUMENT
What clever tricks
do you intend to use?

WORSE ARGUMENT
I'll formulate
new principles.

BETTER ARGUMENT *[indicating the audience]*
Yes, that's in fashion now,
thanks to these idiots.

WORSE ARGUMENT
No, no. They're smart.

BETTER ARGUMENT
I'll destroy you utterly.

WORSE ARGUMENT
And how?

Tell me that.

BETTER ARGUMENT
By arguing what's just.

WORSE ARGUMENT
That I can overturn in my response,
by arguing there's no such thing as Justice.

BETTER ARGUMENT
It doesn't exist? That's what you maintain?

WORSE ARGUMENT
Well, if it does, where is it?

BETTER ARGUMENT
With the gods.

WORSE ARGUMENT
Well, if Justice does exist, how come Zeus
hasn't been destroyed for chaining up his dad.[1]

BETTER ARGUMENT
This is going from bad to worse. I feel sick.
Fetch me a basin.

WORSE ARGUMENT
You silly old man—
you're so ridiculous.

BETTER ARGUMENT
And you're quite shameless,
you bum fucker.

WORSE ARGUMENT
Those words you speak—like roses!

BETTER ARGUMENT
Buffoon!

WORSE ARGUMENT
You adorn my head with lilies.

[1]Zeus overthrew his father, Cronos, and the Titans and imprisoned them deep inside the earth.

BETTER ARGUMENT
You destroyed your father!

WORSE ARGUMENT
You don't mean to,
but you're showering me with gold.

BETTER ARGUMENT
No, not gold—
before this age, those names were lead.

WORSE ARGUMENT
But now,
your insults are a credit to me.

BETTER ARGUMENT
You're too obstreperous.

WORSE ARGUMENT
You're archaic.

BETTER ARGUMENT
It's thanks to you that none of our young men
is keen to go to school. The day will come
when the Athenians will all realize
how you teach these silly fools.

WORSE ARGUMENT
You're dirty—
it's disgusting.

BETTER ARGUMENT
But you're doing very well— [920]
although in earlier days you were a beggar,
claiming to be Telephos from Mysia,
eating off some views of Pandeletos,
which you kept in your wallet.[1]

[1]Telephos from Mysia was a hero in a play by Euripides in which a king was portrayed as a beggar. Pandeletos was an Athenian politician. The imputation here is that the Worse Argument once did very badly, barely surviving on his wits and borrowed ideas.

WORSE ARGUMENT

That was brilliant—
you just reminded me . . .

BETTER ARGUMENT

It was lunacy!
Your own craziness—the city's, too.
It fosters you while you corrupt the young.

WORSE ARGUMENT

You can't teach this boy—you're old as Cronos.

BETTER ARGUMENT

Yes, I must—if he's going to be redeemed [930]
and not just prattle empty verbiage.

WORSE ARGUMENT *[to Pheidippides]*

Come over here—leave him to his foolishness. 1180

BETTER ARGUMENT

You'll regret it, if you lay a hand on him.

CHORUS LEADER

Stop this fighting, all these abusive words.

[addressing first the Better Argument and then the Worse Argument]

Instead, explain the things you used to teach
to young men long ago—then you lay out
what's new in training now. He can listen
as you present opposing arguments
and then decide which school he should attend.

BETTER ARGUMENT

I'm willing to do that.

WORSE ARGUMENT

All right with me.

CHORUS LEADER

Come on then, which one of you goes first? [940]

WORSE ARGUMENT

I'll grant him that right. Once he's said his piece,
I'll shoot it down with brand-new expressions
and some fresh ideas. By the time I'm done,
if he so much as mutters, he'll get stung
on his face and eyes by my opinions—
like so many hornets—he'll be destroyed.

CHORUS

Trusting their skill in argument,
their phrase-making propensity,
these two men here are now intent
to show which one will prove to be
the better man in oratory.
For wisdom now is being hard pressed—
my friends, this is the crucial test.

CHORUS LEADER *[addressing the Better Argument]*

First, you who crowned our men in days gone by
with so much virtue in their characters,
let's hear that voice which brings you such delight—
explain to us what makes you what you are.

BETTER ARGUMENT

All right, I'll set out how we organized
our education in the olden days,
when I talked about what's just and prospered,
when people wished to practise self-restraint.
First, there was a rule—children made no noise,
no muttering. Then, when they went outside,
walking the streets to the music master's house,
groups of youngsters from the same part of town
went in straight lines and never wore a cloak,
not even when the snow fell thick as flour.
There he taught them to sing with thighs apart.[1]
They had memorize their songs—such as,

[1] *thighs apart*: Keeping the thighs together was supposed to enable boys to stimulate themselves sexually.

"Dreadful Pallas Who Destroys Whole Cities,"
and "A Cry From Far Away." These they sang
in the same style their fathers had passed down.
If any young lad fooled around or tried
to innovate with some new flourishes,
like the contorted sounds we have today
from those who carry on the Phrynis style,[1]
he was beaten, soundly thrashed, his punishment
for tarnishing the Muse. At the trainer's house,
when the boys sat down, they had to keep
their thighs stretched out, so they would not expose
a thing which might excite erotic torments
in those looking on. And when they stood up,
they smoothed the sand, being careful not to leave
imprints of their manhood there for lovers.
Using oil, no young lad rubbed his body
below his navel—thus on his sexual parts
there was a dewy fuzz, like on a peach.
He didn't make his voice all soft and sweet
to talk to lovers as he walked along,
or with his glances coyly act the pimp.
When he was eating, he would not just grab
a radish head, or take from older men
some dill or parsley, or eat dainty food.
He wasn't allowed to giggle, or sit there
with his legs crossed.

WORSE ARGUMENT

Antiquated rubbish!
Filled with festivals for Zeus Polieus,
cicadas, slaughtered bulls, and Cedeides.[2]

[1] *Phrynis style*: Phrynis was a musician who introduced certain innovations in music around 450 BC.

[2] *Cedeides* was a dithyrambic poet well known for his old-fashioned style. The other references are all too ancient customs and rituals (like the old tradition of wearing a cicada broach or the ritual killing of oxen).

BETTER ARGUMENT

But the point is this—these very features
in my education brought up those men
who fought at Marathon. But look at you—
you teach these young men now right from the start
to wrap themselves in cloaks. It enrages me
when the time comes for them to do their dance
at the Panathenaea festival
and one of them holds his shield low down,
over his balls, insulting Tritogeneia.[1]
And so, young man, that's why you should choose me, [990]
the Better Argument. Be resolute.
You'll find out how to hate the market place,
to shun the public baths, to feel ashamed
of shameful things, to fire up your heart
when someone mocks you, to give up your chair
when older men come near, not to insult
your parents, nor act in any other way
which brings disgrace or which could mutilate
your image as an honourable man.
You'll learn not to run off to dancing girls,
in case, while gaping at them, you get hit
with an apple thrown by some little slut,
and your fine reputation's done for,
and not to contradict your father,
or remind him of his age by calling him
Iapetus—not when he spent his years
in raising you from infancy.[2]

WORSE ARGUMENT

My boy, if you're persuaded by this man, [1000]
then by Dionysus, you'll finish up

[1] *Marathon* was the site of a battle in 490 BC in which a small band of Greeks, mainly Athenians, defeated the Persian armies which had landed near Athens. The Panathenaea was a major religious festival in Athens. Tritogeneia was one of Athena's titles.

[2] *Iapetus* was a Titan, a brother of Cronos, and hence very ancient.

just like Hippocrates' sons—and then
they'll all call you a sucker of the tit.[1]

BETTER ARGUMENT

You'll spend your time in the gymnasium—
your body will be sleek, in fine condition.
You won't be hanging round the market place,
chattering filth, as boys do nowadays.
You won't keep on being hauled away to court
over some damned sticky fierce dispute
about some triviality. No, no.
Instead you'll go to the Academy,[2]
to race under the sacred olive trees,
with a decent friend the same age as you,
wearing a white reed garland, with no cares.
You'll smell yew trees, quivering poplar leaves,
as plane trees whisper softly to the elms,
rejoicing in the spring. I tell you this—
if you carry out these things I mention,
if you concentrate your mind on them, [1010]
you'll always have a gleaming chest, bright skin,
broad shoulders, tiny tongue, strong buttocks,
and a little prick. But if you take up
what's in fashion nowadays, you'll have,
for starters, feeble shoulders, a pale skin,
a narrow chest, huge tongue, a tiny bum,
and a huge skill in framing long decrees.[3]
And that man there will have you believing
what's bad is good and what's good is bad. [1020]
Then he'll give you Antimachos' disease—

[1] *Hippocrates* was an Athenian, a relative of Pericles. He had three sons who had a reputation for childishness.

[2] *Academy*: this word refers, not to Plato's school (which was not in existence yet) but to a public park and gymnasium in Athens.

[3] *long decrees*: The Greek says "and a long decree," which makes little sense in English. The point of the joke is to set the audience up to expect "and a long prick" (which was considered a characteristic of barbarians).

you'll be infected with his buggery.[1]

CHORUS

O you whose wisdom stands so tall,
the most illustrious of all.
The odour of your words is sweet,
the flowering bloom of modest ways—
happy who lived in olden days!

[to the Worse Argument]

Your rival's made his case extremely well, 1310
so you who have such nice artistic skill.
must in reply give some new frill. [1030]

CHORUS LEADER

If you want to overcome this man
it looks as if you'll need to bring at him
some clever stratagems —unless you want
to look ridiculous.

WORSE ARGUMENT

It's about time!
My guts have long been churning with desire
to rip in fragments all those things he said,
with counter-arguments. That's why I'm called
Worse Argument among all thinking men, 1320
because I was the very first of them
to think of coming up with reasoning
against our normal ways and just decrees. [1040]
And it's worth lots of money—more, in fact,
than drachmas in six figures[2]—to select
the weaker argument and yet still win.
Now just see how I'll pull his system down,
that style of education which he trusts.

[1] *Antimachos* was satirized in comedy as a particularly effeminate man.

[2] *drachmas*: The Greek has "more than ten thousand staters." A stater was a general term for non-Athenian coins, usually of high value. The idea, of course, is equivalent to "a ton of money."

First, he says he won't let you have hot water
when you take a bath. What's the idea here?
Why object to having a warm bath?

BETTER ARGUMENT
The effect they have is very harmful—
they turn men into cowards.

WORSE ARGUMENT
Wait a minute!
The first thing you say I've caught you out.
I've got you round the waist. You can't escape.
Tell me this—of all of Zeus' children
which man, in your view, had the greatest heart
and carried out the hardest tasks? Tell me.

BETTER ARGUMENT
In my view, no one was a better man [1050]
than Hercules.

WORSE ARGUMENT
And where'd you ever see
cold water in a bath of Hercules? But who
was a more manly man than he was? [1]

BETTER ARGUMENT
That's it, the very things which our young men
are always babbling on about these days—
crowding in the bath house, leaving empty
all the wrestling schools.

WORSE ARGUMENT
Next, you're not happy
when they hang around the market place—
but I think that's good. If it were shameful,
Homer would not have labelled Nestor—
and all his clever men—great public speakers.
Now, I'll move on to their tongues, which this man
says young lads should not train. I say they should.

[1]The term *bath of Hercules* was commonly applied to thermal hot springs.

He also claims they should be self-restrained.
These two things injure them in major ways. [1060]
Where have you ever witnessed self-restraint
bring any benefit to anyone?
Tell me. Speak up. Refute my reasoning.

BETTER ARGUMENT
There are lots of people. For example,
Peleus won a sword for his restraint.

WORSE ARGUMENT
A sword! What a magnificent reward 1360
the poor wretch received! While Hyperbolos,
who sells lamps in the market, is corrupt
and brings in lots of money, but, god knows,
he's never won a sword.[1]

BETTER ARGUMENT
But his virtue
enabled Peleus to marry Thetis.[2]

WORSE ARGUMENT
Then she ran off, abandoning the man,
because he didn't want to spend all night
having hard sweet sex between the sheets—
that rough-and-tumble love that women like.
You're just a crude old-fashioned Cronos. 1370 [1070]
Now, my boy, just think off all those things
that self-restraint requires—you'll go without
all sorts of pleasures—boys and women,
drunken games and tasty delicacies,
drink and riotous laughter. What's life worth

[1]Peleus once refused the sexual advances of the wife of his host. She accused him of immoral activity, and her husband set Peleus unarmed on a mountain. The gods admired Peleus' chastity and provided him a sword so he could defend himself against the wild animals.

[2]Peleus, a mortal king, married Thetis, a sea goddess, with the blessing of the gods. Their child was the hero Achilles. She later left him to return to her father (but not for the reason given in the lines following).

if you're deprived of these? So much for that.
I'll now move on to physical desires.
You've strayed and fallen in love—had an affair
with someone else's wife. And then you're caught.
You're dead, because you don't know how to speak.
But if you hang around with those like me,
you can follow what your nature urges.
You can leap and laugh and never think
of anything as shameful. If, by chance,
you're discovered screwing a man's wife,
just tell the husband you've done nothing wrong.
Blame Zeus—alleging even he's someone [1080]
who can't resist his urge for sex and women.
And how can you be stronger than a god?
You're just a mortal man.

BETTER ARGUMENT

All right—but suppose
he trusts in your advice and gets a radish
rammed right up his arse, and his pubic hairs
are burned with red-hot cinders. Will he have
some reasoned argument to demonstrate
he's not a loose-arsed bugger? [1]

WORSE ARGUMENT

So his asshole's large—
why should that in any way upset him?

BETTER ARGUMENT

Can one suffer any greater damage
than having a loose asshole?

[1] *loose-arsed bugger*: Someone caught in the act of adultery was punished by having a radish shoved up his anus and his pubic hair singed with hot ash. The various insults here ("loose-arsed bugger," "gigantic asshole," and so on) stand for the Greek pejorative phrase "wide arsed," which, in addition to meaning "lewd" or "disgusting," also carries the connotation of passive homosexuality, something considered ridiculous in mature men. Terms like "bum fucker" are too active to capture this sense of the insult.

WORSE ARGUMENT

What will you say
if I defeat you on this point?

BETTER ARGUMENT

I'll shut up.
What more could a man say?

WORSE ARGUMENT

Come on, then—
Tell me about our legal advocates.
Where are they from?

BETTER ARGUMENT

They come from loose-arsed buggers.

WORSE ARGUMENT

I grant you that. What's next? Our tragic poets,
where they from?

BETTER ARGUMENT

They come from major assholes.

WORSE ARGUMENT

That's right. What about our politicians—
where do they come from?

BETTER ARGUMENT

From gigantic assholes!

WORSE ARGUMENT

All right then—surely you can recognize
how you've been spouting rubbish? Look out there—
at this audience—what sort of people
are most of them?

BETTER ARGUMENT

All right, I'm looking at them.

WORSE ARGUMENT

Well, what do you see?

BETTER ARGUMENT

By all the gods,
almost all of them are men who spread their cheeks.
It's true of that one there, I know for sure . . .
and that one . . . and the one there with long hair.

WORSE ARGUMENT

So what do you say now?

BETTER ARGUMENT

We've been defeated.
Oh you fuckers, for gods' sake take my cloak—
I'm defecting to your ranks.

[The Better Argument takes off his cloak and exits into the Thinkery]

WORSE ARGUMENT: *[to Strepsiades]*

What now?
Do you want to take your son away?
Or, to help you out, am I to teach him
how to argue?

STREPSIADES

Teach him—whip him into shape.
Don't forget to sharpen him for me,
one side ready to tackle legal quibbles.
On the other side, give his jaw an edge
for more important matters.

WORSE ARGUMENT

Don't worry.
You'll get back a person skilled in sophistry.

PHEIDIPPIDES

Someone miserably pale, I figure.

CHORUS LEADER

All right. Go in.
I think you may regret this later on.

[Worse Argument and Pheidippides go into the Thinkery, while

Strepsiades returns into his own house]

CHORUS LEADER

We'd like to tell the judges here the benefits,
if they help this chorus, as by right they should.
First, if you want to plough your lands in season,
we'll rain first on you and on the others later.
Then we'll protect your fruit, your growing vines,
so neither drought nor too much rain will damage them. [1120]
But any mortal who dishonours us as gods
should bear in mind the evils we will bring him.
From his land he'll get no wine or other harvest.
When his olive trees and fresh young vines are budding,
we'll let fire with our sling shots, to smash and break them.
If we see him making bricks, we'll send down rain,
we'll shatter roofing tiles with our round hailstones.
If ever there's a wedding for his relatives,
or friends, or for himself, we'll rain all through the night,
so he'd rather live in Egypt than judge this wrong. [1130]

[Strepsiades comes out of his house, with a small sack in his hand]

STREPSIADES

Five more days, then four, three, two—and then
the day comes I dread more than all the rest.
It makes me shake with fear—the day that stands
between the Old Moon and the New—the day
when any man I happen to owe money to
swears on oath he'll put down his deposit,
take me to court.[1] He says he'll finish me,
do me in. When I make a modest plea
for something fair, "My dear man, don't demand
this payment now, postpone this one for me,
discharge that one," they say the way things are
they'll never be repaid—then they go at me, [1140]
abuse me as unfair and say they'll sue.

[1]The person making the charge in court had to make a cash deposit which was forfeit if he lost the case.

Well, let them go to court. I just don't care,
not if Pheidippides has learned to argue.
I'll find out soon enough. Let's knock here,
at the thinking school.

[Strepsiades knocks on the door of the Thinkery]

Boy . . . Hey, boy . . . boy!

[Socrates comes to the door]

SOCRATES

Hello there, Strepsiades.

STREPSIADES

Hello to you.
First of all, you must accept this present.

[Strepsiades hands Socrates the small sack]

It's proper for a man to show respect
to his son's teacher in some way. Tell me—
has the boy learned that style of argument
you brought out here just now?

SOCRATES

Yes, he has. [1150]

STREPSIADES

In the name of Fraud, queen of everything,
that's splendid news!

SOCRATES

You can defend yourself
in any suit you like—and win.

STREPSIADES

I can?
Even if there were witnesses around
when I took out the loan?

SOCRATES

The more the better—
even if they number in the thousands.

STREPSIADES *[in a parody of tragic style]*

Then I will roar aloud a mighty shout—
Ah ha, weep now you petty money men,
wail for yourselves, wail for your principal,
wail for your compound interest. No more
will you afflict me with your evil ways.
On my behalf there's growing in these halls
a son who's got a gleaming two-edged tongue— [1160]
he's my protector, saviour of my home, 1480
a menace to my foes. He will remove
the mighty tribulations of his sire.
Run off inside and summon him to me.

[Socrates goes back into the Thinkery]

My son, my boy, now issue from the house—
and hearken to your father's words.

[Socrates and Pheidippides come out of the Thinkery. Pheidippides has been transformed in appearance, so that he now looks, moves, and talks like the other students in the Thinkery]

SOCRATES

Here's your young man.

STREPSIADES

Ah, my dear, dear boy.

SOCRATES

Take him and go away.

[Socrates exits back into the Thinkery]

STREPSIADES

Ah ha, my lad—
what joy. What sheer delight for me to gaze, [1170]
first, upon your colourless complexion,
to see how right away you're well prepared 1490
to deny and contradict—with that look
which indicates our national character
so clearly planted on your countenance—

the look which says, "What do you mean?"—the look
which makes you seem a victim, even though
you're the one at fault, the criminal.
I know that Attic stare stamped on your face.
Now you must rescue me—since you're the one
who's done me in.

PHEIDIPPIDES

What are you scared about?

STREPSIADES

The day of the Old Moon and the New. 1500

PHEIDIPPIDES

You mean there's a day that's old and new?

STREPSIADES

The day they say they'll make deposits
to charge me in the courts! [1180]

PHEIDIPPIDES

Then those who do that
will lose their cash. There's simply no way
one day can be two days.

STREPSIADES

It can't?

PHEIDIPPIDES

How?
Unless it's possible a single woman
can at the same time be both old and young.

STREPSIADES

Yet that seems to be what our laws dictate.

PHEIDIPPIDES

In my view they just don't know the law—
not what it really means.

STREPSIADES

What does it mean? 1510

PHEIDIPPIDES
Old Solon by his nature loved the people.[1]

STREPSIADES
But that's got no bearing on the Old Day—
or the New.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Well, Solon set up two days [1190]
for summonses—the Old Day and the New,
so deposits could be made with the New Moon.[2]

STREPSIADES
Then why did he include Old Day as well?

PHEIDIPPIDES
So the defendants, my dear fellow,
could show up one day early, to settle
by mutual agreement, and, if not,
they should be very worried the next day 1520
was the start of a New Moon.

STREPSIADES
In that case,
why do judges not accept deposits
once the New Moon comes but only on the day
between the Old and New?

PHEIDIPPIDES
It seems to me
they have to act like those who check the food— [1200]

[1]Solon was a very famous Athenian law maker. In the early sixth century he laid down the basis for Athenian laws.

[2]Pheidippides' hair-splitting argument which follows supposedly establishes that the lawsuits against Strepsiades are illegal and should be tossed out because (in brief) the court had taken the deposit, which the creditor made to launch the suit, on the wrong day (the last day of the month instead of the first day of the new month). The case rests on a misinterpretation of the meaning of the term Old and New Day—which was single day between the old and the new moon. The passage is, of course, a satire on sophistic reasoning and legal quibbling for self-interest.

they want to grab as fast as possible
at those deposits, so they can nibble them
a day ahead of time.

STREPSIADES

That's wonderful!

[to the audience]

You helpless fools! Why do you sit there—
so idiotically, for us wise types
to take advantage of? Are you just stones,
ciphers, merely sheep or stacked-up pots?
This calls for a song to me and my son here,
to celebrate good luck and victory.

[He sings]

O Strepsiades is truly blessed
for cleverness the very best,
what a brainy son he's raised.
So friends and townsfolk sing his praise.
Each time you win they'll envy me— [1210]
you'll plead my case to victory.
So let's go in—I want to treat,
and first give you something to eat.

[Strepsiades and Pheidippides go together into their house. Enter one of Strepsiades' creditors, Pasias, with a friend as his witness]

PASIAS

Should a man throw away his money?
Never! But it would have been much better,
back then at the start, to forget the loan
and the embarrassment than go through this—
to drag you as a witness here today
in this matter of my money. I'll make
this man from my own deme my enemy.
But I'll not let my country down—never— [1220]

not as long as I'm alive. And so . . .[1]

[raising his voice]

I'm summoning Strepsiades . . .

[Enter Stepeiades]

STREPSIADES

Who is it?

PASIAS

. . . on this Old Day and the New.

STREPSIADES

I ask you here
to witness that he's called me for two days.
What's the matter?

PASIAS

The loan you got, twelve minai,
when you bought that horse—the dapple grey.

STREPSIADES

A horse? Don't listen to him. You all know
how I hate horses.

PASIAS

What's more, by Zeus,
you swore on all the gods you'd pay me back. 1560

STREPSIADES

Yes, by god, but Pheidippides back then
did not yet know the iron-clad argument
on my behalf.

PASIAS

So now, because of that,
you're intending to deny the debt? [1230]

[1] *my own deme*: The deme was the basic political unit in Athens. Membership in it passed down from one's father. This line suggests that it was considered inappropriate to sue members of one's own deme. On the other hand, Pasias is not going to let his country down, i.e., he's going to be true to the litigious character of the Athenians.

STREPSIADES
If I don't, what advantage do I gain
from everything he's learned?

PASIAS
Are you prepared
to swear you owe me nothing—by the gods—
in any place I tell you?

STREPSIADES
Which gods?

PASIAS
By Zeus, by Hermes, by Poseidon.

STREPSIADES
Yes, indeed, by Zeus—and to take that oath 1570
I'd even pay three extra obols.[1]

PASIAS
You're shameless—may that ruin you some day!

STREPSIADES *[patting Pasias on the belly]*
This wine skin here would much better off
if you rubbed it down with salt.[2]

PASIAS
Damn you—
you're ridiculing me!

STREPSIADES *[still patting Pasias' paunch]*
About four gallons,
that's what it should hold.

PASIAS
By mighty Zeus,
by all the gods, you'll not make fun of me
and get away with it!

[1] *three extra obols*: Strepsiades means here that swearing the oath will be such fun he's prepared to pay for the pleasure—an obvious insult to Pasias.

[2] *salt*: Leather was rubbed down with salt as part of the tanning process. The phrase "wine skin" has been added to clarify the sense.

STREPSIADES

Ah, you and your gods— [1240]
that's so incredibly funny. And Zeus—
to swear on him is quite ridiculous 1580
to those who understand.

PASIAS

Some day, I swear,
you're going to have to pay for all of this.
Will you or will you not pay me my money?
Give me an answer, and I'll leave.

STREPSIADES

Calm down—
I'll give you a clear answer right away.

[Strepsiades goes into his house, leaving Pasias and the Witness by themselves]

PASIAS

Well, what do you think he's going to do?
Does it strike you he's going to pay?

[Enter Strepsiades carrying a kneading basin]

STREPSIADES

Where's the man who's asking me for money?
Tell me—what's this?

PASIAS

What's that? A kneading basin.

STREPSIADES

You're demanding money when you're such a fool? 1590
I wouldn't pay an obol back to anyone [1250]
who called a basinette a basin.

PASIAS

So you won't repay me?

STREPSIADES

As far as I know,
I won't. So why don't you just hurry up

and quickly scuttle from my door.

PASIAS

I'm off.
Let me tell you—I'll be making my deposit.
If not, may I not live another day!

[Pasias exits with the Witness]

STREPSIADES *[calling after them]*

That'll be more money thrown away—
on top of the twelve minai. I don't want
you going thorough that just because you're stupid 1600
and talk about a kneading basin.

[Enter Amynias, another creditor, limping He has obviously been hurt in some way]

AMYNIAS

Oh, it's bad. Poor me!

STREPSIADES

Hold on. Who's this
who's chanting a lament? Is that the cry [1260]
of some god perhaps—one from Carcinus? [1]

AMYNIAS

What's that? You wish to know who I am?
I'm a man with a miserable fate!

STREPSIADES

Then go off on your own.

AMYNIAS *[in a grand tragic manner]*

"O cruel god,
O fortune fracturing my chariot wheels,
O Pallas, how you've annihilated me!"

STREPSIADES

How's Tlepolemos done nasty things to you? [2] 1610

[1]Carcinus was an Athenian writer of tragic drama.

[2]Tlepolemos is a character in the tragedy quoted in the previous speech.

AMYNIAS
Don't laugh at me, my man—but tell your son
to pay me back the money he received,
especially when I'm going through all this pain.

STREPSIADES
What money are you talking about?

AMYNIAS
The loan he got from me. [1270]

STREPSIADES
It seems to me
you're having a bad time.

AMYNIAS
By god, that's true—
I was driving in my chariot and fell out.

STREPSIADES
Why then babble on such utter nonsense,
as if you'd just fallen off a donkey?

AMYNIAS
If I want him to pay back my money 1620
am I talking nonsense?

STREPSIADES
I think it's clear
your mind's not thinking straight.

AMYNIAS
Why's that?

STREPSIADES
From your behaviour here, it looks to me
as if your brain's been shaken up.

AMYNIAS
Well, as for you,
by Hermes, I'll be suing you in court,
if you don't pay the money.

STREPSIADES

Tell me this—
do you think Zeus always sends fresh water
each time the rain comes down, or does the sun [1280]
suck the same water up from down below
for when it rains again?

AMYNIAS

I don't know which— 1630
and I don't care.

STREPSIADES

Then how can it be just
for you to get your money reimbursed,
when you know nothing of celestial things?

AMYNIAS

Look, if you haven't got the money now,
at least repay the interest.

STREPSIADES

This "interest"—
What sort of creature is it?

AMYNIAS

Don't you know?
It's nothing but the way that money grows,
always getting larger day by day
month by month, as time goes by.

STREPSIADES

That's right.
What about the sea? In your opinion, 1640 [1290]
is it more full of water than before?

AMYNIAS

No, by Zeus— it's still the same. If it grew,
that would violate all natural order.

STREPSIADES

In that case then, you miserable rascal,

if the sea shows no increase in volume
with so many rivers flowing into it,
why are you so keen to have your money grow?
Now, why not chase yourself away from here?

[calling inside the house]

Bring me the cattle prod!

AMYNIAS

I have witnesses!

[The slave comes out of the house and gives Strepsiades a cattle prod. Strepsiades starts poking Amynias with it]

STREPSIADES

Come on! What you waiting for? Move it,
you pedigree nag!

AMYNIAS

This is outrageous!

STREPSIADES *[continuing to poke Amynias away]*

Get a move on—or I'll shove this prod [1300]
all the way up your horse-racing rectum!

[Amynias runs off stage]

You running off? That's what I meant to do,
get the wheels on that chariot of yours
really moving fast.

[Strepsiades goes back into his house]

CHORUS

Oh, it's so nice
to worship vice.
This old man here
adores it so
he will not clear
the debts he owes.
But there's no way
he will not fall

some time today,
done in by all
his trickeries,
he'll quickly fear
depravities
he's started here. 1670 [1310]

It seems to me
he'll soon will see
his clever son
put on the show
he wanted done
so long ago—
present a case
against what's true
and beat all those
he runs into 1680
with sophistry.
He'll want his son
(it may well be)
to be struck dumb. [1320]

[Enter Strepsiades running out of his house with Pheidippides close behind him hitting him over the head]

STREPSIADES
Help! Help! You neighbours, relatives,
fellow citizens, help me—I'm begging you!
I'm being beaten up! Owww, I'm in such pain—
my head . . . my jaw.

[To Pheidippides]

You good for nothing,
are you hitting your own father?

PHEIDIPPIDES
Yes, dad, I am.

STREPSIADES
See that! He admits he's beating me. 1690

PHEIDIPPIDES
I do indeed.

STREPSIADES
You scoundrel, criminal—
a man who abuses his own father!

PHEIDIPPIDES
Go on—keep calling me those very names—
the same ones many times. Don't you realize
I just love hearing streams of such abuse?

STREPSIADES
You perverted asshole!

PHEIDIPPIDES
Ah, some roses! [1330]
Keep pelting me with roses!

STREPSIADES
You'd hit your father?

PHEIDIPPIDES
Yes, and by the gods I'll now demonstrate
how I was right to hit you.

STREPSIADES
You total wretch,
how can it be right to strike one's father? 1700

PHEIDIPPIDES
I'll prove that to you—and win the argument.

STREPSIADES
You'll beat me on this point?

PHEIDIPPIDES
Indeed, I will.
It's easy. So of the two arguments
choose which one you want.

STREPSIADES
What two arguments?

PHEIDIPPIDES
The Better or the Worse.

STREPSIADES
By god, my lad,
I really did have you taught to argue
against what's just, if you succeed in this—
and make the case it's fine and justified
for a father to be beaten by his son.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Well, I think I'll manage to convince you,
so that once you've heard my arguments,
you won't say a word.

STREPSIADES
Well, to tell the truth,
I do want to hear what you have to say.

CHORUS
You've some work to do, old man.
Think how to get the upper hand.
He's got something he thinks will work,
or he'd not act like such a jerk.
There's something makes him confident—
his arrogance is evident.

CHORUS LEADER *[addressing Strepsiades]*
But first you need to tell the Chorus here
how your fight originally began.
That's something you should do in any case.

STREPSIADES
Yes, I'll tell you how our quarrel first began.
As you know, we were having a fine meal.
I first asked him to take up his lyre
and sing a lyric by Simonides[1]—
the one about the ram being shorn.
But he immediately refused—saying

[1] *Simonides* was a well-known lyric poet of the previous century.

that playing the lyre while we were drinking
was out of date, like some woman singing
while grinding barley.

PHEIDIPPIDES

Well, at that point,
you should have been ground up and trampled on—
asking for a song, as if you were feasting
with cicadas.

STREPSIADES

The way he's talking now—
that's just how he was talking there before.
He said Simonides was a bad poet.
I could hardly stand it, but at first I did.
Then I asked him to pick up a myrtle branch
and at least recite some Aeschylus for me.[1]
He replied at once, "In my opinion,
Aeschylus is first among the poets
for lots of noise, unevenness, and bombast—
he piles up words like mountains." Do you know
how hard my heart was pounding after that?
But I clenched my teeth and kept my rage inside,
and said, "Then recite me something recent,
from the newer poets, some witty verse."
So he then right off started to declaim
some passage from Euripides in which,
spare me this, a brother was enjoying sex
with his own sister— from a common mother.
I couldn't keep my temper any more—
so on the spot I verbally attacked
with all sorts of nasty, shameful language.
Then, as one might predict, we went at it—
hurling insults at each other back and forth.
But then he jumped up, pushed me, thumped me,
choked me, and started murdering me.

[1] *myrtle branch*: Traditionally a person singing at a drinking party held a myrtle branch unless he was playing a musical instrument.

PHEIDIPPIDES

Surely I was entitled to do that
to a man who will not praise Euripides,
the cleverest of all.

STREPSIADES

Him? The cleverest? Ha!
What do I call you? No, I won't say—
I'd just get beaten one more time.

PHEIDIPPIDES

Yes, by Zeus,
you would—and with justice, too.

STREPSIADES

How would that be just? You shameless man,
I brought you up. When you lisped your words,
I listened till I recognized each one.
If you said "waa," I understood the word
and brought a drink. If you asked for "foo foo,"
I'd bring you bread. And if you said "poo poo"
I'd pick you up and carry you outside
and hold you up. But when you strangled me
just now, I screamed and yelled I had to shit—
but you didn't dare to carry me outside,
you nasty brute, you kept on throttling me,
until I crapped myself right where I was.

CHORUS

I think the hearts of younger spry
are pounding now for his reply—
for if he acts in just this way
and yet his logic wins the day
I'll not value at a pin
any older person's skin.

CHORUS LEADER

Now down to work, you spinner of words,
you explorer of brand new expressions.
Seek some way to persuade us, so it will appear

that what you've been saying is correct.

PHEIDIPPIDES

How sweet it is to be conversant with
things which are new and clever, capable [1400]
of treating with contempt established ways.
When I was only focused on my horses, 1790
I couldn't say three words without going wrong.
But now this man has made me stop all that,
I'm well acquainted with the subtlest views,
and arguments and frames of mind. And so,
I do believe I'll show how just it is
to punish one's own father.

STREPSIADES

By the gods,
keep on with your horses then—for me
caring for a four-horse team is better
than being beaten to a pulp.

PHEIDIPPIDES

I'll go back
to where I was in my argument, 1800
when you interrupted me. First, tell me this—
Did you hit me when I was a child?

STREPSIADES

Yes.
But I was doing it out of care for you. [1410]

PHEIDIPPIDES

Then tell me this: Is it not right for me
to care for you in the same way—to beat you—
since that's what caring means—a beating?
Why must your body be except from blows,
while mine is not? I was born a free man, too.
"The children howl—you think the father
should not howl as well?" You're going to claim 1810
the laws permit this practice on our children.
To that I would reply that older men

are in their second childhood. More than that—
it makes sense that older men should howl
before the young, because there's far less chance
their natures lead them into errors.

STREPSIADES

There's no law that fathers have to suffer this. [1420]

PHEIDIPPIDES

But surely some man first brought in the law,
someone like you and me? And way back then
people found his arguments convincing.
Why should I have less right to make new laws
for future sons, so they can take their turn
and beat their fathers? All the blows we got
before the law was brought in we'll erase,
and we'll demand no payback for our beatings.
Consider cocks and other animals—
they avenge themselves against their fathers.
And yet how are we different from them,
except they don't propose decrees?

STREPSIADES

Well then, [1430]
since you want to be like cocks in all you do,
why not sleep on a perch and feed on shit?

PHEIDIPPIDES

My dear man, that's not the same at all—
not according to what Socrates would think.

STREPSIADES

Even so, don't beat me. For if you do,
you'll have yourself to blame.

PHEIDIPPIDES

Why's that?

STREPSIADES

Because I have the right to chastise you,
if you've a son, you'll have that right with him.

PHEIDIPPIDES
If I don't have one, I'll have cried for nothing,
and you'll be laughing in your grave.

STREPSIADES *[addressing the audience]*
All you men out there my age, it seems to me
he's arguing what's right. And in my view,
we should concede to these young sons what's fair.
It's only right that we should cry in pain
when we do something wrong.

PHEIDIPPIDES
Consider now another point.

STREPSIADES
No, no!
It'll finish me!

PHEIDIPPIDES
But then again
perhaps you won't feel so miserable
at going through what you've suffered.

STREPSIADES
What's that?
Explain to me how I benefit from this.

PHEIDIPPIDES
I'll thump my mother, just as I hit you.

STREPSIADES
What's did you just say? What are you claiming?
This second point is even more disgraceful.

PHEIDIPPIDES
But what if, using the Worse Argument,
I beat you arguing this proposition—
that it's only right to hit one's mother?

STREPSIADES
What else but this—if you do a thing like that,
then why stop there? Why not throw yourself

and Socrates and the Worse Argument [1450]
into the execution pit?

[Strepsiades turns towards the Chorus]

It's your fault,
you Clouds, that I have to endure all this. 1860
I entrusted my affairs to you.

CHORUS LEADER

No.
You're the one responsible for this.
You turned yourself toward these felonies.

STREPSIADES

Why didn't you inform me at the time,
instead of tempting an old country man?

CHORUS

That's what we do each time we see someone
who falls in love with evil strategies,
until we hurl him into misery, [1460]
so he may learn to fear the gods.

STREPSIADES

Oh dear. That's harsh, you Clouds, but fair enough. 1870
I shouldn't have kept trying not to pay
that cash I borrowed. Now, my dearest lad,
come with me—let's exterminate those men,
the scoundrel Chaerephon and Socrates,
the ones who played their tricks on you and me.

PHEIDIPPIDES

But I couldn't harm the ones who taught me.

STREPSIADES

Yes, you must. Revere Paternal Zeus.[1]

PHEIDIPPIDES

[1] *Paternal Zeus*: This seems to be an appeal to Zeus as the guardian of the father's rights and thus a way or urging Pheidippides to go along with what his father wants.

Just listen to that—Paternal Zeus.
How out of date you are! Does Zeus exist?

STREPSIADES
He does.

PHEIDIPPIDES
No, no, he doesn't—there's no way,
for Vortex has now done away with Zeus
and rules in everything.

STREPSIADES
He hasn't killed him.

[Strepsiades points to a small statue of a round goblet which stands outside Thinkery]

I thought he had because that statue there,
the cup, is called a vortex.[1] What a fool
to think this piece of clay could be a god!

PHEIDIPPIDES
Stay here and babble nonsense to yourself.

[Pheidippides exits][2]

STREPSIADES
My god, what lunacy. I was insane
to cast aside the gods for Socrates.

[Strepsiades goes up and talks to the small statue of Hermes outside his house]

But, dear Hermes, don't vent your rage on me,
don't grind me down. Be merciful to me.

[1] *Vortex*: The Greek word dinos, meaning "whirl," "eddy," or "vortex," also means a round goblet. The statue of such a goblet outside the Thinkery represents the presiding deity of the house.

[2] It's not clear whether Pheidippides goes back into his house or back into the school. If he does the latter, then the comic violence at the end of the play takes on a much darker tone, since Strepsiades' murderous anger includes his son. In fact, the loss of his son might be the key event which triggers the intensity of the final destruction.

Their empty babbling made me lose my mind.
Give me your advice. Shall I lay a charge,
go after them in court. What seems right to you?

[He looks for a moment at the statue]

You counsel well. I won't launch a law suit.
I'll burn their house as quickly as I can,
these babbling fools.

[Strepsiades calls into his house]

Xanthias, come here.
Come outside—bring a ladder—a mattock, too.
then climb up on top of that Thinkery
and, if you love your master, smash the roof,
until the house collapses in on them.

[Xanthias comes out with ladder and mattock, climbs up onto the Thinkery and starts demolishing the roof]

Someone fetch me a flaming torch out here.
They may brag all they like, but here today
I'll make somebody pay the penalty
for what they did to me.

[Another slave comes out and hands Strepsiades a torch. He joins Xanthias on the roof and tries to burn down the inside of the Thinkery]

STUDENT *[from inside the Thinkery]*

Help! Help!

STREPSIADES

Come on, Torch, put your flames to work.

[Strepsiades sets fire to the roof of the Thinkery. A student rushes outside and looks at Strepsiades and Xanthias on the roof]

STUDENT

You there, what are you doing?

STREPSIADES

What am I doing?

What else but picking a good argument
with the roof beams of your house?

[A second student appears at a window as smoke starts coming out of the house]

STUDENT
Help! Who's setting fire to the house?

STREPSIADES
It's the man
whose cloak you stole.

STUDENT
We'll die. You'll kill us all! 1910

STREPSIADES
That's what I want—unless this mattock

disappoints my hopes or I fall through somehow [1500]
and break my neck.

[Socrates comes out of the house in a cloud of smoke. He is coughing badly]

SOCRATES
What are you doing on the roof?

STREPSIADES
I walk on air and contemplate the sun.

SOCRATES *[coughing]*
This is bad—I'm going to suffocate.

STUDENT *[still at the window]*
What about poor me? I'll be burned up.

[Strepsiades and Xanthias come down from the roof]

STREPSIADES *[to Socrates]*
Why were you so insolent with gods
in what you studied and when you explored
the moon's abode? Chase them off, hit them,
throw things at them—for all sorts of reasons,

but most of all for their impiety. 1920

[Strepsiades and Xanthias chase Socrates and the students off the stage and exit after them]

CHORUS LEADER

Lead us on out of here. Let's go away!
We've had enough of song and dance today.

[The Chorus exits]

Aristophanes

Clouds

Translated by Ian Johnston

The comic drama Clouds (423 BC) is one of the most famous and popular satires ever written. In it Aristophanes, the greatest comic dramatist of ancient times, takes issue with the intellectual and moral depravity of his fellow Athenians, particularly with their thirst for radical innovations in traditional ways of thinking and for their unscrupulous self-interest. The play is particularly famous for its portrayal of Socrates, the target of much of the very robust satire. Here, he is pictured as a caricature of the arch sophist, eager to earn money by training young Athenians so that they can successfully use corrupt notions of language, law, and just dealing to their own advantage. The portrait is clearly at considerable odds with what we know about Socrates from other sources; nonetheless his character here is very famous as an unforgettable picture of a sly intellectual rogue. The Athenians come in for their share of humorous satiric criticism as well, given how greedy they are to use people like Socrates to escape unwelcome obligations. Aristophanes obviously exaggerates considerably for comic effect, but the ominous tone in the play's ending reminds us that some years later these citizens turned against the historical Socrates and condemned him to death.

Ian Johnston's new verse translation of Aristophanes' Clouds stays close to the original text yet offers an accessible and fluent English version, which conveys the full range of Aristophanes' style - ribald humor, lyric expressiveness, and underlying ironic seriousness - in a text full of dramatic energy. The translation also offers explanatory footnotes to assist the reader with any potentially confusing references.

About the Translator

Ian Johnston was born in Valaparaiso, Chile, and educated in Canada and England. He has a BSc from McGill in Geology and Chemistry, a BA from Bristol in English and Greek, and an MA from Toronto in English. For many years he taught as a college and university-college instructor in British Columbia teaching English, Classics and Liberal Studies. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad.* His translation of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey have recently been published in both book and audiobook form. He is now retired and living in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

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