

**TWO ESSAYS ON "THE
CLOUDS" AND
ON "THE GERAS"
OF ARISTOPHANES**

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Two Essays on "The Clouds" and on "The Geras" of Aristophanes by J. W. Süvern & W. R. Hamilton

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J. W. SÜVERN & W. R. HAMILTON

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ON
"THE CLOUDS"
AND ON
"THE ΓΗΡΑΣ" OF ARISTOPHANES,
BY
J. W. SÜVERN.
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W. R. HAMILTON, F. R. S.

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The Essay of which the following is a translation, was read to the Royal Academy of Sciences at Berlin in 1825, and was published in the following year. The drama of Aristophanes, the main purport and tendency of which, particularly in reference to the characters of Sokrates, Alkibiades and Perikles, are explained by the author of the Essay, is so well known to the majority of the readers into whose hands the translation is likely to fall, that it is unnecessary to preface it with any preliminary matter.

PROFESSOR SÜVERN

ON

"THE CLOUDS" OF ARISTOPHANES.

SOME observations which have lately been published on the play of "The Clouds," and particularly on the character of Sokrates, as exhibited to us by Aristophanes, appear to me to invite another attempt to unravel this enigma by a systematic analysis of the whole drama. These observations will be more distinctly adverted to in the course of the following essay.

The question which first presents itself, in this as in other inquiries of the same nature, must be confined to the principal story of the piece. A plain, simple citizen of Athens, engaged in husbandry, having married into a family of distinction, and having contracted debts through the extravagance of his wife (v. 49. sq. 437. sq. ed. Dindorf) and his son's fashionable love of horses, in order to defeat the impending suits of his creditors, wishes to place his son in a school of philosophy and rhetoric, where he may learn the arts of oratory, and of turning right into wrong, in order thereby to repair the ills which he had chiefly brought upon himself. On the son's refusal, the father applies in person to the master of the school, who is named Sokrates: by him he is so-

lemnly initiated, instructed, and examined, but being found too old and stupid to learn, he is dismissed; upon which, after he has given his son some samples of the new philosophy, he forces him much against his will into the school: here the young man makes such great and rapid progress in learning, that he is able to teach his father, who exults at his brilliant success, the most extraordinary tricks for the attainment of his object; but as he is now himself enlightened, and has raised himself above considerations of right and duty, he denies and scorns in the coarsest manner the relation in which he stands both to his father and mother; he defends his new opinions with the refinements of sophistry, and retorting upon his father the good lessons he had before received from him, pays him in the same coin. Upon this the father cured of his error, in wishing to get rid of his embarrassments by dishonesty and sophistical chicanery, returns to take revenge upon the school of that pernicious science and upon its master, who is obliged to receive back all the subtle arguments and high-flown words, which he had himself made use of, and the old man levels the establishment to the ground.

From this connected view of the story, we see that it is throughout directed against that propensity of the Athenians to controversies and law-suits, which was eminently promoted by their practice of getting into debt; and against the pernicious, sophistical and wrangling oratory, which was ever at the service of this disposition, in the courts of justice, and particularly in the discussion of all public transactions; and Aristophanes never loses an opportunity of combating these two vices.

Moreover as the story is set in action by the per-

verse purpose awakened in Strepsiades, as it comes to an end when he is cured; and as this change arises from the unexpected and extravagant result of the experiment upon Pheidippides, who is to be the instrument of the father's design; the school of sophistry in which the youth is to be formed, is clearly the hinge on which the whole action turns; for its influence on Pheidippides decides the success or failure of the views of Strepsiades, and consequently the issue of the story of the drama.

This, therefore, is the view which we must take of the relation of the several parts to each other; namely, that the principal character to which the whole refers, is not Sokrates, who has generally been considered to be so, in consequence of the story lingering so long at his shop, and of his being the sufferer at the conclusion, but Strepsiades himself; whereas Sokrates is the intermediate party who is to instruct Pheidippides for the vicious purposes of the father; and this he executes so perfectly, that the old gentleman is at first deceived; but he soon reaps fruits, the nature of which opens his eyes to his own folly, and to the destructive tendency of this system of education.

It is only by keeping well in mind the relative situation of the characters, that we can rightly comprehend and appreciate the manner in which they act together in their real import; and this import can only be ascertained from the object of the poem, from which they, as well as the whole external form and fashion of the work, have taken their rise. In this view we may at once observe, that although all three, Strepsiades, Pheidippides, and Sokrates, in conformity with the historical and political tendency of all the comedies of Aristophanes, must have an

historical signification corresponding to the especial object of "The Clouds," yet are all three, not the less fictitious characters of poetry; consequently the dramatic master of the school of chicanery, although he bear the name of a real person, stands exactly in the same position in this respect, as the other two. But whilst in this view we may conclude that it was the principal object of the poet, so to fashion his dramatic personages, that their poetical form should perfectly express their meaning, by which he was at liberty, by extravagantly caricaturing their traits, to show what he intended by them, so clearly, that they could not be mistaken; yet, on the other hand, we cannot fail to recognise a greater external resemblance of those characters, whose names are borrowed from certain definite individuals. And if we examine more accurately the character of the Sokrates of the comedy, we shall find that the real Sokrates was decidedly the root and origin of the other; and that more leading characteristics than appear at the first blush, are interwoven into the Sokrates of Aristophanes, partly by literally copying them from real life, partly by a formal resemblance at least, and partly by expanding them in the spirit of caricature.

In the first place it admits of no doubt whatever, that according to the practice of the ancient comedy, in the designation of certain characters by particular individuals, the only known exception to the rule being that of the demagogue Kleon in "The Knights," the mask of the president of the school of sophistry did, in fact, present upon the stage the portrait of the real Sokrates.

Moreover, the habits of life, and the characteristic traits of outward conduct, which in v. 104, 362 sq. 415 sq. 835 sq. are attributed to Sokrates personally, or to

his school, are so combined in this portrait, that we clearly perceive how much strictly corresponds to real life, and how much is overcharged by burlesque and drollery. These passages announce in general terms the hardy and rugged habits of the master and scholars of the Phrontisterion; and these habits, we know, from Xenophon, as well as from Plato,¹ to have been peculiar to Sokrates. His well known habit of going bare-footed² is faithfully, and to the letter, transferred from the real to the fictitious Sokrates. If then, on the other hand, it be said (v. 837) of him and of his scholars, that none of them ever shaved, or anointed themselves for the games, or bathed for cleanliness, we are obliged, as Sokrates did sometimes, though seldom, bathe,³ and anoint himself for the games, to consider these expressions merely as the caricature of a neglect of outward appearances. Alkibiades himself tells him to his face, in the Symposium of Plato⁴ (and therein he confirms what Aristophanes says in v. 362), that he used to go strutting and stalking along the streets, and throwing about his eyes to the right and left. His fits of absence also must have been very striking, as Plato says⁵ that he often remained standing on the spot where they found him, lost in meditation; and once, at the siege of Potidaia, he stood fixed in thought⁶ from an early hour of one day till the next sunrise, when he had at last found out what he had

¹ Xen. mem. Socr. l. 6, 2 sq. Plato Sympos. Opp. P. 11, vol. 2, p. 464, ed. Bekker.

² Besides the above cited passages, see Plato Phædr. c. 5, ed. Heindorf.; and Voss' Mythological Letters, Part I. p. 110, 131 sq.

³ Sympos. p. 372.

⁴ Sympos. p. 464.

⁵ Sympos. p. 374, ἴθως γὰρ τι τοῦτ' ἔχει, ἐνίοτε ἀποστάς ὅπη αὐτόν ἴσθηκεν.

⁶ Sympos. p. 462 sq.