

**SCENES FROM  
ARISTOPHANES, RUGBY  
EDITION, THE CLOUDS**

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Scenes from aristophanes, Rugby edition, The Clouds by A. Sidgwick

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**A. SIDGWICK**

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THE CLOUDS

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## PREFACE.

**T**HE *Clouds* is in its real aim a companion play to the *Frogs*. Like the latter, it is directed against what Aristophanes regarded as the curse of Athens, the growing spirit of subtle disquisition and innovating scepticism. This scepticism was not confined to philosophy, but invaded religion, politics, art, and the whole life of Athens. Men were growing discontented, as it seemed to Aristophanes, not merely with the barbarisms of the past, but with the whole framework of traditions and institutions, built up by the noble, simple, reverent wisdom of their ancestors. The new ideal was only subtlety and cleverness, which at the best was barren folly, and at the worst was ruin. To argue, to doubt, to disbelieve, to destroy, seemed the only aim of the rising generation. It was, therefore, the first and clearest duty of a patriot, by every effort in his power, to arrest the set of this disastrous current.

As this influence (in his view so pernicious) had penetrated many departments of life, so it offered many points of attack. In the *Frogs* it was the subtle philosophical poetry of Euripides, alike devoid of real inspiration and fatal to truth and virtue, which Aristophanes contrasted with the simple and pure sublimity of Aeschylus. In the *Clouds* he attacks no longer the poets, but the teachers.

The instruction of youth at Athens had fallen into the hands of a class of persons called Sophists, of whom Socrates was the greatest. By their fertile activity of mind, and their close analysis of existing ideas and opinions, they became, if not the founders, at least the most prominent and effective promoters, of philosophy; and to the stimulus which they gave to thought is partly due that era of intellectual exuberance which culminated in Plato and Aristotle.

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As may be conceived, this new state of things was not without its bad side. To frequent the schools of the Sophists became the rage among the young men of Athens; and while the sensible might become eager students, others too often imitated only the extravagances of their masters. The vain found a cheap satisfaction in deriding the received opinions of their elders; and the greater the reverence and tenacity with which those opinions were held, the easier and the more attractive was the amusement of attacking them. Further, of the teachers themselves, among many able and earnest enquirers, there were certainly, in so successful a calling, many superficial sciolists, and not a few impostors.

All this was the bitterest gall to Aristophanes. Conservative in every fibre, he might, in spite of his shrewdness, overlook the real intellectual impulse of the time. But it was enough to put him into a frenzy, to see his religious and political beliefs, and all the institutions which he held dear, attacked, with an ignorant self-confidence and a swagger of shallow logic, by youths in their teens whose intelligence was beneath contempt. In this play, accordingly, he brings all his unrivalled powers of ridicule to bear upon the whole profession of Sophists, with Socrates at their head.

Nor can it be doubted that, to a foe so able and determined, they offered many a handle for virulent and unscrupulous derision. Their uncouth dress, their awkward and abstracted demeanour, their extraordinary logical quibbles, were in themselves often ridiculous; while their strange beliefs and non-beliefs could be easily presented in a light no less absurd to a promiscuous and unsympathizing audience.

That the derision was unscrupulous is however equally certain. The picture here presented is a ludicrous travesty even of the ordinary kind of Sophist. As a portrait of the better sort, it is

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nothing short of a deliberate slander. Of Socrates himself, the noblest and most gifted man of all antiquity, it is clear that the poet had not the faintest shadow of an appreciation. On the occasion of the first production of the play, Aristophanes obtained only the third prize; and this fact, while partly an evidence of the great merit of Cratinus and Ameipsias, who defeated him, is doubtless partly to be accounted for by the resentment of the Athenians at the injustice of the *Clouds*.

An ancient tradition records that Socrates himself was present when this comedy was acted; and that he witnessed the whole representation with the utmost good humour and amusement. Whether this story be true or not, it shews at least how thoroughly those who related it believed the great philosopher to be superior to any feelings of private vanity or personal pique, at this laughable but scurrilous caricature of himself and his brother Sophists.

The play was acted at the great Dionysiac festival, in March, B.C. 423. It was the ninth year of the Peloponnesian War, one year after the battle of Delium, and two after the capture of Sphacteria.

The plot is as follows.

Strepsiades, an industrious Athenian farmer, has married a lady of high rank and expensive tastes. The son of this union, Pheidippides, inheriting his mother's disposition, has squandered his father's property on horses. Hearing of the logical skill displayed by the pupils of Socrates, Strepsiades desires his son to be taught by him, that he may be able to outwit his creditors. The son refuses. After some hesitation, the father resolves, old as he is, to go himself. Though not an apt scholar, he learns enough strange novelties to astonish his son, and with some difficulty induces him also to repair to the school. The result is as painful as it is unexpected. Phei-