

The Clouds of Aristophanes

An Excerpt from the Play

THE CHARACTERS IN THIS EXCERPT

Father Strepsiades, the bumpkin who wishes to escape his debts

Son Pheidippides, who is largely responsible for the debts

Disciple A student of Socrates at the Brain Factory

Socrates Presented as a teacher and investigator into arcane knowledge

FATHER

Go and be taught!

SON

Why, what will I learn?

FATHER

They say that in their school they have two Logics—the Right Logic, whichever that is, and the Wrong Logic. They say that one of these, the Wrong Logic, always wins, even though it speaks on the unjust side. So if you learn the Wrong Logic, I won't have to pay a single cent of the debts I owe because of you.

SON

I can't do it. I couldn't look the knights in the face again if I lost my tan.

FATHER

Then, you shall not eat any of my food! Neither you nor your horse! Get out of my house! The crows can have you for all I care!

SON

Uncle Megacles won't make me go without a horse! I'm leaving! Why should I care about you! [Exit]

FATHER

I'm down but not out! I will go myself to the Brain Factory and get taught. Oh, how will an old man learn the subtleties of refined disquisitions! But I have to go. What am I waiting for? I'll just knock at the door. [Knocks] Boy! Little boy!

DISCIPLE

[From within] Who is it knocking on the door?

FATHER

Strepsiades, the son of Phidon, of Cicyнна.

DISCIPLE

You buffoon! It is inconsiderate of you to kick the door that way. I had conceived an idea and was just giving birth to it, and you have made it miscarry.

FATHER

Pardon me! I'm not from around here. I'm just a plain old country farmer. But tell me, what was the idea I made miscarry?

DISCIPLE

It is not lawful to mention it, except to disciples.

FATHER

Oh you can tell it to me! I have come here to become a disciple in your Brain Factory.

DISCIPLE

I will tell you then. But you must remember that these are deep mysteries. Ahem. Socrates lately asked Chaerephon about a flea, how many feet it could jump—expressing the distance, of course, in flea-feet. For a flea had bit Chaerephon in one of his bushy eyebrows, and then it jumped onto Socrates' bald head.

FATHER

So how did he measure it?

DISCIPLE

Very cleverly. He melted some wax. Then he took the flea and dipped its feet in the wax, let the wax cool, and voila!—Persian slippers! He took the slippers off and used them to measure the distance.

FATHER

What subtlety of thought!

DISCIPLE

What then would you say if you heard another contrivance of Socrates?

FATHER

Do tell, I beg you!

DISCIPLE

Well, Chaerephon asked Socrates whether he thought gnats buzzed through their mouths or their backsides.

FATHER

And what did the Master say about the gnat?

DISCIPLE

He said the intestine of the gnat is narrow, and the wind rushes violently through it straight to the tail end. Then the rump, which is hollow where it is next to the narrow part, whistles to the blast.

FATHER

So the gnat has a rump trumpet! Oh, thrice happy is he for his sharp-sightedness into gnats' entrails! Surely a defendant could easily get acquitted who understands the intestine of the gnat.

DISCIPLE

But Socrates was lately deprived of a great idea by a lizard.

FATHER

How so? Tell me!

DISCIPLE

He was investigating the courses of the moon and her revolutions, and as he was gazing upward a lizard in the darkness pooped upon him from the roof.

FATHER

I am amused at a lizard's having pooped on Socrates . . . Quick, open the Brain Factory! I want to see Socrates as soon as I can. I want to be his disciple. Come on, open the door!

The door of the thinking-shop opens and the pupils of Socrates are seen all with their heads fixed on the ground, while Socrates himself is seen suspended in the air in a basket.

FATHER

O Hercules, what country do these wild beasts come from?

DISCIPLE

What do think? What do they look like?

FATHER

They look like the Spartans who were taken at Pylos. But why in the world are they looking at the ground?

DISCIPLE

They are in search of the things below the earth.

FATHER

Then they are searching for roots. Don't worry about it, fellows! I know where you can get some big, nice ones. And what are these fellows doing, the ones who are bent over like that?

DISCIPLE

They are diving into deep secrets.

FATHER

Why are their rumps aimed at the sky?

DISCIPLE

Their rumps are getting private lessons in astronomy. [Turning to the pupils] Go inside before he catches us.

FATHER

[Seeing a lot of mathematical instruments] What in the world is all this? Tell me.

DISCIPLE

This one is Astronomy.

FATHER

And this one?

DISCIPLE

Geometry.

FATHER

What is it used for?

DISCIPLE

To measure out the land.

FATHER

You mean our enemies' land that we are going to divide up?

DISCIPLE

No, the whole earth.

FATHER

What a good idea! And democratic, too! We can all just take our pick!

DISCIPLE

Pointing to a map. Look, here's a map of the whole earth. See? This is Athens.

FATHER

Huh? That's not Athens! I don't see any judges sitting in court.

DISCIPLE

Be assured that this is truly the Attic territory.

FATHER

Then where are my kinfolks from Cicyнна?

DISCIPLE

Here they are. And Euboea here, as you can see, is stretched out a long way by the side of it

FATHER

I know that. We and Pericles stretched it like that. But where is Sparta?

DISCIPLE

Let's see. Here it is.

FATHER

It surely is close to us! You better be careful about that and get it as far away from us as you can.

DISCIPLE

That's not possible.

FATHER

Then you'll be sorry! *Looking up and seeing Socrates*. Who is the man in the basket?

DISCIPLE

Himself.

FATHER

Who is "Himself"?

DISCIPLE

Socrates.

FATHER

Oh, Socrates! Come on, then, call him as loud as you can.

DISCIPLE

Call him yourself. I don't have the time. [Exit]

FATHER

Socrates! My little Socrates!

SOCRATES

Mortal! Why do you call me?

FATHER

First tell me, I beg you, what are you doing up yonder?

SOCRATES

I am walking in the air, and contemplating the sun.

FATHER

And so you look down upon the gods from your basket and not up at them from the earth?

SOCRATES

I should not have rightly discovered things celestial if I had not suspended the intellect and mixed the thought in a subtle form with its kindred air. But if, being on the ground, I speculated from below on things above, I would never have

discovered them. For the earth forcibly attracts to itself the meditative moisture.
Water-cresses also suffer the very same thing.

FATHER

What! Does meditation attract moisture to water-cresses? Come down, my little
Socrates, come down and teach me the things I came to learn.

Socrates lowers himself and gets out of the basket.

SOCRATES

And what did you come to learn?

FATHER

To learn to speak. For I am pillaged and plundered by high interest rates and ill-
natured creditors, and my goods get seized for debt.

SOCRATES

How did you get into debt without noticing it?

FATHER

A horse-disease ate up all my money. But teach me the Wrong Logic, the one that
never has to pay off any debts, and I swear, I will pay you whatever you ask.

SOCRATES

What gods will you swear by? For, in the first place, gods are not a current coin
with us.

FATHER

So what do you swear by? By iron money, like in Byzantium?

SOCRATES

Do you wish to know the truth about celestial matters?

FATHER

Yes, if it's possible to know the truth.

SOCRATES

And to converse with the Clouds, our divinities?

FATHER

By all means.

SOCRATES

With great solemnity. Seat yourself, then, upon the sacred couch.

FATHER

Well, I am seated!

SOCRATES

Take, then, this chaplet.

FATHER

A chaplet! Oh no, Socrates! Please don't sacrifice me!

FATHER

No, we do this to everyone who gets initiated.

FATHER

And what will I gain?

SOCRATES

You shall be the flower of oratory, a tricky knave, a thorough gossip, a subtle speaker.

Source:

The Andreas Center. "The Clouds of Aristophanes." [http://
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