

Sōphrōn kōmōidia, katapugōn kōmōidia: Aristophanes' Clouds and the Nature of Comedy

The first performance of Aristophanes' *Clouds* was a spectacular failure. In the light of this, the parabasis of the revised *Clouds* (lines 518-562) is fertile ground for discussing Aristophanes' poetics because it questions the very nature of good comedy and a good audience. Aristophanes claims that a good comedy is "modest" (*sōphrōn* 537) and that an intelligent audience should prefer such a play, but that, with the failure of *Clouds* 1, his "lowbrow" (*phortikoi* 524) rivals have been victorious. On this reading he establishes an apparent dichotomy between his own highbrow, sophisticated, and modest comedy and the lowbrow, vulgar comedy of his rivals. Hubbard (1991, 105) has already persuasively argued for an ironic reading of Aristophanes' claim to *sōphrosynē* in *Clouds* 2 (although he suggests that it reflects a genuine claim in the original *Clouds*). In this paper, however, I will analyze how Aristophanes uses the irony of the claim to *sōphrosynē* to resolve the dichotomy between high and low comedy by suggesting a comic poetic aesthetic in which a good comedy is inherently "immodest". Consequently, the difference between Aristophanes' immodesty and that of his rivals lies in the sophistication of his deployment of those vulgar comic tropes which always raise a laugh.

Two recent works by Biles (2011) and Telò (2016), argue that *Clouds* represents a victory for Aristophanes' *sōphrosynē* over his lowbrow rivals. Together with Hubbard, all three of these scholars see something genuine about *sōphrosynē* in Aristophanes, but neither Biles nor Telò engages with Hubbard's ironic interpretation of the revised *Clouds*' *sōphrosynē*, and Telò even denies the importance of asking whether or not irony is present (Telò (2016) p.10). Wright (2012, 70-77) discusses the irony of Aristophanes' claim to novelty in the *Clouds*, but does not address the claim to *sōphrosynē*. I will build on Hubbard's observations about irony in the claim to *sōphrosynē* in the parabasis of the revised *Clouds*, but I will re-orient my interpretation away

from a connection with the original *Clouds*, and rather illustrate how Aristophanes used the revised parabasis and its connection with the rest of the play to make a statement about his view on the nature of comedy more generally.

The key passage for my argument is Aristophanes' characterization of *Clouds* as Electra (line 534), a daughter, seeking an intelligent foster-parent, whom she will recognize by the token of her brother's hair. She comes without the accoutrements of vulgar comedy – a phallus, an old man beating someone with a stick, or someone with torches yelling “ah ah!” (lines 535-544). This passage, as Hubbard has shown, is a key indicator of Aristophanes' ironic stance (1991, 101) since *Clouds* in fact contains all of these immodest tropes. The key to interpreting this passage, I will argue, lies in Telò's identification of the audience-as-father-figure with Strepsiades the father (2016, 126). I connect this with the fact that Strepsiades is responsible for all the lowbrow things Aristophanes claims his play doesn't have (Hubbard (1991, 98-9) indicates this but draws no conclusions from it). There is further significance in identifying the lock of brother's hair by which Electra (*Clouds*) will recognize her true father (audience). It is not, as Dover says in his commentary, “a sign of favourable reaction from the audience” (1968, 168). Instead, I approach the question by asking who the brother is. Several lines previously Aristophanes has made reference to an earlier play– the *Banqueters* (529), by referring to by the two principal characters, brothers, who are called *ho sōphrōn* and *ho katapugōn*. The latter term, I will argue, comes to stand in for immodest comedy. The parabasis of *Clouds*, in other words, suggests that the ideal audience for an Aristophanic play is one that enjoys immodest comedy. Such an audience has not been corrupted by the immodest comedies of Aristophanes' rivals, as Biles and Telò claim, but rather comedy demands an audience who can embrace her inherently lowbrow nature – the part of comedy which routinely elicits the loudest laughter.

Bibliography

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