Clouds

ARISTOPHANES

c. 446–386 BC

Clouds

Νεφέλαι

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



FORAGE
forage.com

Clouds · Aristophanes (c. 446–386 BC)

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited. Reading edition, Forage, October 2026. forage.com/aristophanes/clouds

Greek text: F. W. Hall and W. M. Geldart, *Aristophanis Comoediae*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906; Hall d. 1933, Geldart d. 1922), via the Perseus Digital Library (github.com/PerseusDL/canonical-greekLit), CC BY-SA 4.0. English: translated from the Greek with AI (Claude), then edited for accuracy and consistency. Not reviewed by a human specialist. Free to reuse under CC BY-SA 4.0. The small numbers set in the text are line numbers.

The original text is in the public domain. This translation is free to share and adapt under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International license (CC BY-SA 4.0): creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0

Set in Source Serif 4.

CONTENTS

Introduction vii

Clouds 1

Prologue 1
Parodos 11
First Choral Song 16
First Episode 20
First Parabasis 22
First Lyric Scene 26
First Agon 37
Second Episode 45
Second Parabasis 45
Second Lyric Scene 46
Second Choral Song 53
Third Episode 53
Second Agon 55
Fourth Episode 59
Exodos 61

INTRODUCTION

Strepsiades, an old farmer who married into a grand city family, is drowning in debts run up by his horse-mad son, Pheidippides. His way out: enroll at the Thinkery, the school next door, where Socrates and his pale students measure how far a flea can jump and teach how to make the weaker argument beat the stronger. With that skill, he reasons, he can talk his way out of paying anyone.

Aristophanes staged the play at the Dionysia of 423 BC, where it came third; the text we have is a partial revision that was never performed. Its Socrates—hanging in a basket to study the sky, worshiping the Clouds, denying Zeus—is a cartoon, but a lasting one. Twenty-four years later, in Plato's Apology, Socrates names this play as a source of the prejudice that brought him to trial.

At its center is a debate between the Stronger and the Weaker Argument: old-fashioned discipline against slick modern cleverness. The comedy is fast, filthy and sharp, and Strepsiades learns, too late, what such an education can do.

Clouds

Athens, outside Strepsiades' house and Socrates' Thinkery next door.

PROLOGUE

Strepsiades, sleepless over debts from his son's horses, decides to send him to Socrates' Thinkery.

STREPSIADES [1] Oh no, oh no! Zeus almighty, how long these nights are! Endless. Is it never going to be day? I heard the rooster ages ago, and the slaves are still snoring. They wouldn't have, in the old days. Damn you, war, for plenty of reasons, and not least because now I can't even punish my own slaves. And this fine young man here doesn't wake up during the night either. No, he lies there farting, rolled up in five blankets. Well, if that's how it is, let's cover our heads and snore. But I can't sleep, poor me. I'm being bitten by the expenses and the stable bills and the debts, all because of this son of mine.[1] [14] He wears his hair long, he rides, he drives a two-horse chariot, he dreams about horses. And I'm being ruined, watching the moon bring round the twentieth of the month, because the interest keeps mounting. Boy, light a lamp and bring out the ledger, so I can read through how many people I owe and work out the interest. Let's see, what do I owe? "Twelve minas to Pasias." Twelve minas to Pasias, what for? What did I spend it on? When I bought that

1 During the Peloponnesian War, slaves who were badly treated could run away to the Spartan forces in Attica, so masters were wary of punishing them.

koppa-branded horse. Oh, poor me! I wish I'd had my eye knocked out with a stone first![2]

PHEIDIPPIDES [25] Philon, you're cheating! Keep to your own lane!

STREPSIADES [26] That's it, that's the very trouble that's ruined me. Even in his sleep he dreams about horses.

PHEIDIPPIDES [28] How many laps will the war chariots run?

STREPSIADES [29] You're running your father plenty of laps! But what debt has come upon me next, after Pasias? "Three minas to Amynias, for a chariot board and a pair of wheels."[3]

PHEIDIPPIDES [32] Give the horse a roll in the dust and take him home.

STREPSIADES [33] My friend, it's me you've rolled—right out of house and home! I've already lost lawsuits, and other creditors say they'll seize my property for the interest.

PHEIDIPPIDES [35] Honestly, Father, why are you so grumpy, tossing and turning all night?

STREPSIADES [37] There's some bailiff biting me from the bedclothes.[4]

PHEIDIPPIDES [38] Good grief, man, let me get a little sleep.

STREPSIADES [39] All right, sleep then. But these debts, believe me, are all going to come down on your head. Ugh. I wish that matchmaker had come to a miserable end, the one who talked me into marrying your mother. I had the sweetest life in the country: unwashed, unswept, lying around any old way, swarming with bees and sheep and olive pressings. Then I married the niece of Megacles, son of Megacles. I was a farmer and she was from the city: haughty, pampered, a regular Coesyra. When I

2 A koppatias was a thoroughbred branded with the old letter koppa. Strepsiades puns on it with exekopēn, "I had (my eye) knocked out."
3 Amynias, a real Athenian whom Aristophanes mocks elsewhere, appears here as one of Strepsiades' creditors.
4 Literally "a demarch," the local official who could seize a debtor's property. Strepsiades means the bedbugs.

married her and climbed into bed with her, I smelled of new wine, drying figs, fleeces, plenty. She smelled of perfume, saffron, tongue-kissing, spending, gorging, Colias and Genetyllis. Mind you, I won't say she was lazy. Oh no, she really ran through the thread.[5] 54 And I'd show her this cloak here as my excuse and say, "Wife, you run through far too much."[6]

SERVANT 56 We've got no oil in the lamp.

STREPSIADES 57 Damn! Why did you light me the thirsty lamp? Come over here, I'll give you something to cry about.

SERVANT 58 Why should I cry?

STREPSIADES 59 Because you put in one of the fat wicks. After that, when this son here was born to us, to me and to my fine lady wife, we started squabbling about his name. She wanted to add "horse" to it, Xanthippus or Charippus or Callippides, and I wanted to give him his grandfather's name, Pheidonides. For a while we fought it out, and then eventually we came to an agreement and named him Pheidippides. She used to take this son of hers and coo over him: "When you're big and you drive your chariot to the city like Megacles, wearing your long robe..." And I'd say: "No, when you drive the goats home from the rocky hills like your father, wearing a leather jerkin."[7] 73 But he never listened to a word I said. He's poured a galloping horse fever all over my finances. So now, after spending the whole night thinking about a way out, I've found a single path, a miraculously brilliant one. If I can talk him into it, I'm saved. But first I want to wake him up. How could I wake him up most sweetly? How? Pheidippides. Pheidippidikins.

PHEIDIPPIDES 80 What is it, Father?

---

5 Megacles and Coesyra belong to the grand Alcmaeonid family, and Coesyra was proverbial for luxury. Colias and Genetyllis were goddesses of sex and childbirth worshipped by women.

6 The Greek verb spathan means to beat the weft tight on the loom (using up wool) and also, figuratively, to squander.

7 Greek hippos means "horse" (the aristocratic touch), while Pheidōn suggests pheidō, "thrift": Pheidippides is roughly "Spare-the-Horses."

STREPSIADES [81] Kiss me, and give me your right hand.

PHEIDIPPIDES [82] There. What is it?

STREPSIADES Tell me, do you love me?

PHEIDIPPIDES [83] Yes, by Poseidon here, the god of horses.

STREPSIADES [84] No, no, not him, please, not the horse god! That god's the cause of all my troubles. But if you really love me from the bottom of your heart, son, do as I say.

PHEIDIPPIDES [87] All right, so what am I supposed to do?

STREPSIADES [88] Turn your ways inside out, as fast as you can, and go and learn what I advise.

PHEIDIPPIDES [90] Go on then, tell me, what are your orders?

STREPSIADES And you'll do it?

PHEIDIPPIDES I'll do it, by Dionysus.

STREPSIADES [91] Look over here, then. See that little door, and the little house?

PHEIDIPPIDES [93] I see it. So what is it, really, Father?

STREPSIADES [94] That is the Thinkery of clever souls. Men live in there who argue that the sky is a baking lid, and it's all around us, and we're the charcoal, and they make people believe it. These men teach you, if you pay them, how to win any argument, just or unjust.

PHEIDIPPIDES [100] Who are they?

STREPSIADES I don't know exactly what they're called. Deep-pondering thinkers. Fine, upstanding gentlemen.

PHEIDIPPIDES [103] Ugh, scum, I know them. You mean those frauds, the pasty-faced, barefoot ones, like that miserable Socrates and Chaerephon.[8]

8 Chaerephon was Socrates' devoted, famously gaunt friend, who (according to Plato) asked the Delphic oracle whether anyone was wiser than Socrates.

STREPSIADES [105] Hey, hey, shut up! Don't talk like a baby. If you care at all about your father's bread, then join them, for my sake, and drop the horses.

PHEIDIPPIDES [108] No, by Dionysus, I won't, not even if you gave me the pheasants Leogoras breeds.[9]

STREPSIADES [110] Go on, I'm begging you, dearest boy in the world, go and be taught.

PHEIDIPPIDES [111] And what do you want me to learn?

STREPSIADES [112] They say they keep both Arguments in there, the Stronger, whatever that is, and the Weaker. And one of these two Arguments, the Weaker, wins, they say, even when it argues the more unjust case. So if you learn this unjust Argument for me, then of all the debts I owe now because of you, I wouldn't pay back a single obol to anybody.

PHEIDIPPIDES [119] I won't do it. I couldn't bear to face the cavalrymen with all the color scraped off my face.

STREPSIADES [121] Then by Demeter, you'll eat none of my food, not you, not your yoke horse, not your branded thoroughbred. I'll throw you out of the house. Go to hell!

PHEIDIPPIDES [124] Well, my uncle Megacles won't let me go horseless. I'm going in, and I won't give you a thought.

STREPSIADES [126] Well, I'm not going to just lie there where I've fallen, either. I'll pray to the gods and go to the Thinkery myself, and get taught. But how am I, old and forgetful and slow as I am, going to learn the hair-splitting slivers of precise arguments? I've got to go. Why am I dithering like this, instead of knocking on the door? Boy! Hey, boy!

STUDENT [133] Go to hell! Who's that knocking on the door?

STREPSIADES [134] Strepsiades, son of Pheidon, from Cicynna.

9 Leogoras, a rich Athenian known for high living, was the father of the orator Andocides.

STUDENT [135] Well, by Zeus, you're an ignoramus, whoever you are, kicking the door so hard, so utterly unthinkingly. You've made a freshly found thought miscarry!

STREPSIADES [138] Forgive me, I live way out in the country. But tell me, what was the thing that miscarried?

STUDENT [140] It's forbidden to tell anyone but the students.

STREPSIADES [141] Then you can tell me, don't worry. I'm here, as you see, to be a student at the Thinkery.

STUDENT [143] I'll tell you. But you must treat this as a sacred mystery. Socrates just asked Chaerephon how many of its own feet a flea can jump. You see, it had bitten Chaerephon on the eyebrow and jumped off onto Socrates' head.

STREPSIADES [148] So how did he measure it?

STUDENT Very ingeniously. He melted some wax, then picked up the flea and dipped its two feet in the wax, and when it cooled, a pair of little Persian slippers had formed around them. He took those off and used them to measure the distance.

STREPSIADES [153] Zeus almighty, what subtlety of mind!

STUDENT [154] Then what would you say if you heard another of Socrates' thoughts?

STREPSIADES [155] Which one? Please, tell me.

STUDENT [156] Chaerephon of Sphettus asked him which view he held: do gnats hum through the mouth, or through the rump?

STREPSIADES [159] So what did he say about the gnat?

STUDENT [160] He said the gnat's gut is narrow, and because it's so slender, the breath goes forcefully straight through to the rump. And then the asshole, being a hollow attached to a narrow passage, booms from the force of the wind.

STREPSIADES [165] So the gnat's asshole is a trumpet! Oh, what a lucky, lucky man, with his in-depth gut research! A man who knows the ins and outs of a gnat's gut would have no trouble getting off when he's sued.

STUDENT [169] And the other day he was robbed of a great idea by a gecko.

STREPSIADES [170] How? Tell me.

STUDENT [171] He was investigating the paths and orbits of the moon, and while he was gaping up at the sky at night, a gecko shat on him from the roof.

STREPSIADES [174] I like that. A gecko shitting on Socrates.

STUDENT [175] And yesterday evening we had no dinner.

STREPSIADES [176] Well, then? How did he scheme up some grub?

STUDENT [177] He sprinkled fine ash over the table, bent a skewer, and then, taking it as a compass, swiped a cloak from the wrestling school.[10]

STREPSIADES [180] Why do we still go on admiring that Thales? Open up, open up the Thinkery, quick, and show me Socrates as fast as you can. I've got student fever! Come on, open the door! Heracles! Where on earth do these creatures come from?[11]

STUDENT [185] Why so amazed? What do they look like to you?

STREPSIADES [186] Like the Spartans who were captured at Pylos. But why on earth are these ones staring at the ground?[12]

STUDENT [188] These are investigating what's under the earth.

STREPSIADES Oh, they're looking for bulbs, then. Well, don't give that another thought. I know where there are big, beautiful ones. And what are these ones doing, bent right over?

STUDENT [192] These are probing the darkness of Erebus, down beneath Tartarus.

STREPSIADES [193] Then why is their ass looking up at the sky?

---

10 The joke: the "geometry lesson" is a cover, and the bent skewer serves as a hook for fishing out the cloak.

11 Thales of Miletus, counted the first Greek philosopher, was proverbial for cleverness.

12 Spartan soldiers taken prisoner at Pylos in 425 BC were held in Athens, half-starved after their long siege.

STUDENT 194 It's taking a course in astronomy on its own. But get inside, you lot, so he doesn't catch you out here.

STREPSIADES 196 Not yet, not yet! Let them stay, so I can share a little problem of mine with them.

STUDENT 198 But they can't spend too long outside in the open air.

STREPSIADES 200 For gods' sake, what are these things? Tell me.

STUDENT 201 This is astronomy.

STREPSIADES And what's this?

STUDENT 202 Geometry.

STREPSIADES So what's that useful for?

STUDENT 203 Measuring land.

STREPSIADES What, land for settlers?[13]

STUDENT 204 No, all the land there is.

STREPSIADES That's smart! A democratic and useful bit of cleverness.

STUDENT 206 And here is a map of the whole earth. See? This here is Athens.

STREPSIADES 207 What are you talking about? I don't believe you. I don't see any jurors sitting.

STUDENT 209 I'm telling you, this area really is Attica.

STREPSIADES 210 And where are my fellow demesmen from Cicynna?

STUDENT 211 They're in here. And Euboea, as you see, is this, stretched out long and far.

STREPSIADES 213 I know. We stretched it out, all right, us and Pericles. But where's Sparta?[14]

---

13 Athens seized land from rebellious allies and shared it out by lot among its own citizens as settlers (cleruchs).
14 Pericles crushed a revolt of Euboea in 446 BC; the Greek verb for "stretch out" could also mean to put on the rack.

STUDENT [214] Where is it? Right here.

STREPSIADES [215] So close to us! Give this some really serious thought: move it a long, long way away from us.

STUDENT [217] But that can't be done.

STREPSIADES By Zeus, then you'll be sorry. Hey, who's that man up in the basket?

STUDENT [219] Himself.

STREPSIADES Who's himself?

STUDENT Socrates.

STREPSIADES Socrates! Go on, you, give him a good loud shout for me.

STUDENT [220] Call him yourself. I haven't got time.

STREPSIADES [221] Socrates! Socratikins!

SOCRATES [223] Why do you call me, creature of a day?[15]

STREPSIADES [224] First of all, please, tell me what you're doing.

SOCRATES [225] I walk on air and look down on the sun.

STREPSIADES [226] So you look down on the gods from a basket, and not from the ground, if that's what you're doing?

SOCRATES [227] Yes, because I could never have rightly discovered things aloft unless I'd suspended my mind and mingled my subtle thought with the air it resembles. If I'd stayed on the ground and examined from below what's up above, I'd never have found anything. You see, the earth forcibly draws the moisture of thought to itself. The very same thing happens to cress.

STREPSIADES [235] What are you saying? Thought draws the moisture into cress? Come on, come down to me, Socratikins, so you can teach me what I came for.

SOCRATES [239] And what did you come for?

---

15 Plato's *Apology* has Socrates blame this caricature for the prejudice against him: "a Socrates swinging about, claiming he walks on air."

STREPSIADES I want to learn to speak. I'm being plundered and pillaged by interest and the nastiest creditors, and my goods are being seized.

SOCRATES 242 How did you get into debt without noticing?

STREPSIADES 243 A horse disease ate me up—the kind with a terrible appetite. But teach me one of your two Arguments, the one that pays nothing back. Whatever fee you charge me, I swear by the gods I'll pay it.

SOCRATES 247 What gods are you going to swear by? For a start, gods aren't current coin with us.

STREPSIADES 248 Then what do you swear by? Iron bars, like in Byzantium?[16]

SOCRATES 250 Do you want to know divine matters clearly, what they truly are?

STREPSIADES 251 By Zeus, yes, if it can be done.

SOCRATES 252 And to meet the Clouds, our deities, and talk with them?

STREPSIADES 253 Very much so.

SOCRATES 254 Then sit down on the sacred cot.

STREPSIADES 255 There, I'm sitting.

SOCRATES Now take this wreath.

STREPSIADES 256 What's the wreath for? Oh no, Socrates, please don't sacrifice me, like Athamas![17]

SOCRATES 258 No, no. We do all this to everyone being initiated.

STREPSIADES 259 And what do I get out of it?

SOCRATES 260 You'll become a slick talker, a rattle, the finest of fine flour. Now hold still.

---

16 Socrates' word nomisma means both "custom" and "currency"; Byzantium was known for using iron coins.

17 In a lost play by Sophocles, King Athamas was crowned with a wreath and led to the altar to be sacrificed.

PARODOS

Socrates initiates Strepsiades and calls on the Clouds, who arrive singing.

STREPSIADES 261 By Zeus, you're not lying to me. With all this sprinkling, I'll turn into fine flour.[18]

SOCRATES 263 The old man must keep holy silence and listen to the prayer. Lord and master, measureless Air, who hold the earth aloft, and shining Aether, and you, august goddesses, Clouds of thunder and lightning: arise, appear, my ladies, aloft to your thinker!

STREPSIADES 267 Not yet, not yet, not until I've wrapped this around me, so I don't get soaked. To think I came out of the house without even a cap, worse luck!

SOCRATES 269 Come, then, most honored Clouds, show yourselves to this man, whether you sit on the holy snow-beaten peaks of Olympus, or set up a holy dance for the Nymphs in the gardens of father Ocean, or draw the waters at the mouths of the Nile in golden pitchers, or dwell by Lake Maeotis or on the snowy crag of Mimas. Hear me, accept the sacrifice, and take delight in the rites.[19]

18 Socrates is sprinkling him with flour, as initiates were sprinkled in some rites; "fine flour" was slang for a smooth, slippery talker.

19 Lake Maeotis is the Sea of Azov; Mimas is a mountain on the coast of Asia Minor.

CHORUS

275 Ever-flowing Clouds,
let us rise, our dewy nature shining clear,
from father Ocean, deep-roaring,
to the peaks of lofty mountains
crowned with trees, so that
we may gaze on far-seen lookouts,
and on the crops and the holy earth we water,
and on the rushing of sacred rivers,
and on the sea, resounding, deep-thundering.
For the tireless eye of the Aether blazes
with gleaming rays.
Come, let us shake off the rainy haze
from our immortal form and look upon
the earth with far-seeing eye.

SOCRATES 291 Most august Clouds, you've clearly heard my call. Did you hear their voice, and the thunder bellowing with it, awe-inspiring?

STREPSIADES 293 Yes, and I revere you, most honored ones, and I want to fart back in answer to the thunder, that's how much it makes me shake and quake. And whether it's allowed or not, I need to shit right now.

SOCRATES 296 Stop your clowning, and don't act like those wretched comedians. Keep holy silence. A great swarm of goddesses is on the move, singing.

CHORUS

298 Rain-bearing maidens,
let us go to the gleaming land of Pallas, land of brave men,
Cecrops' land, much beloved, to behold it,
where there is awe for unspeakable rites, where
the hall that receives the initiates
is thrown open in holy mysteries;
and gifts for the gods of heaven,
high-roofed temples and statues,
most holy processions for the blessed ones,
garlanded sacrifices and feasts for the gods
in every season;
and with spring's coming, the joy of Bromius,
the rousing rivalry of sweet-voiced choruses,
and the deep-thundering music of the pipes.[20]

STREPSIADES 314 By Zeus, I beg you, tell me, Socrates, who are these women who sang out that solemn song? They aren't some sort of heroines, are they?

SOCRATES 316 Not in the least. They are the heavenly Clouds, great goddesses for idle men. They're the ones who give us judgment and dialectic and intellect, and marvel-mongering and circumlocution, and the knockout blow and the clinch.

STREPSIADES 319 So that's why, when I heard their voice, my soul took wing. Now it's eager to split hairs and quibble narrowly about smoke, and to puncture an opinion with a little opinion and counter one argument with another. So if it's at all possible, I want to see them clearly, right now.

SOCRATES 323 Look over here, then, toward Parnes. I can see them coming down now, quietly.[21]

STREPSIADES 324 Where? Show me!

20 Cecrops was the legendary first king of Athens, and the hall of initiates is the one at Eleusis. Bromius is Dionysus, whose spring festival featured choral contests.
21 Parnes is the mountain range north of Athens.

SOCRATES Here they come, lots and lots of them, through the hollows and the thickets, there, off to the side.

STREPSIADES 325 What's going on? I can't see them.

SOCRATES 326 By the entrance.

STREPSIADES Now I do. Just barely.

SOCRATES 327 Well, now you certainly see them, unless you've got sleep in your eyes the size of pumpkins.

STREPSIADES 328 By Zeus, I do, most honored ones! They're filling up the whole place.

SOCRATES 329 And you didn't know they were goddesses? You didn't believe in them?

STREPSIADES 330 No, by Zeus. I thought they were mist and dew and smoke.

SOCRATES 331 Because, by Zeus, you didn't know that they feed a whole host of sophists: Thurian seers, medical artisans, signet-ringed, nail-buffed, long-haired layabouts, song-twisters for the circular choruses, sky-swindlers. They feed these idle do-nothings because they write poetry about them.[22]

STREPSIADES 335 So that's why they wrote about "the moist Clouds' dread onrush, twister of light," and "the tresses of hundred-headed Typhon," and "the blasting gales," and then "airy, liquid," and "crook-taloned birds that swim the air," and "the rains of waters of the dewy Clouds." And in return they gulped down slices of great, fine mullets and the bird-flesh of thrushes.

SOCRATES 340 And isn't that only fair, since it's thanks to them?

STREPSIADES So tell me, what's happened to them, if they really are clouds, that they look like mortal women? The ones up there aren't like that.

SOCRATES 342 Well, what are they like?

22 Thurii, a new Athenian-led colony in southern Italy, was founded under the seer Lampon. The "circular choruses" sang dithyrambs, whose poets loved airy cloud imagery.

STREPSIADES 343 I don't know exactly. They look like fluffed-out wool, anyway, and not like women, by Zeus, not one bit. And these ones have noses.

SOCRATES 345 Now answer whatever I ask you.

STREPSIADES Go on then, quick, ask whatever you like.

SOCRATES 346 Have you ever looked up and seen a cloud that looked like a centaur, or a leopard, or a wolf, or a bull?

STREPSIADES 347 By Zeus, I have. So what?

SOCRATES 348 They turn into anything they like. So if they see some long-haired savage, one of these shaggy types, like Xenophantus' son, they mock his madness by making themselves look like centaurs.[23]

STREPSIADES 351 And what if they spot Simon, the embezzler of public funds? What do they do?[24]

SOCRATES 352 They expose his true nature: all of a sudden they turn into wolves.

STREPSIADES 353 So that's why, when they saw Cleonymus the shield-thrower yesterday, because they could see what a total coward he was, they turned into deer.[25]

SOCRATES 355 And now, you see, because they've seen Cleisthenes, they've turned into women.[26]

23 Xenophantus' son Hieronymus was a long-haired poet who wrote dithyrambs and tragedy.
24 Simon, an Athenian politician, is accused here of plundering public money.
25 Cleonymus, a politician mocked for throwing away his shield in battle.
26 Cleisthenes, an Athenian Aristophanes constantly mocks for being beardless and soft.

FIRST CHORAL SONG

The Clouds greet the pair; Socrates denies that Zeus exists and explains rain, thunder and lightning.

STREPSIADES [356] Greetings, then, my ladies! And now, if you ever did it for anyone, burst out with a sky-high voice for me too, you queens of all.

CHORUS [358] Greetings, old-timer, born in ages past, hunter of Muse-loving words! And you, priest of the subtlest drivel, tell us what you want. We wouldn't listen to any other of today's sky-sophists except Prodicus: to him for his cleverness and judgment, and to you because you swagger through the streets rolling your eyes from side to side, go barefoot, put up with plenty of hardship, and put on a solemn face for our sake.[27]

STREPSIADES [364] Earth, what a sound! How holy, how solemn, how prodigious!

SOCRATES [365] That's because these are the only goddesses. All the rest is rubbish.

STREPSIADES [366] But come on, by Earth, isn't Zeus on Olympus a god to us?

SOCRATES [367] Zeus? What Zeus? Stop talking nonsense. There's no such thing as Zeus.

STREPSIADES What are you saying? Then who makes it rain? Explain that to me before anything else.

SOCRATES [369] These do, obviously. And I'll prove it to you with strong evidence. Come on, then: where have you ever seen it rain without Clouds? Yet if it were him, he ought to make it rain from a clear sky while these are away from home.

STREPSIADES [372] By Apollo, you've grafted that neatly onto what you were just saying! And to think I used to believe it really was

27 Prodicus of Ceos, a famous sophist known for his fine distinctions between words.

Zeus pissing through a sieve. But tell me who does the thundering. That's what gives me the shakes.

SOCRATES [375] These do the thundering, as they roll about.

STREPSIADES How, you man who'll stop at nothing?

SOCRATES [376] When they're filled up with lots of water and forced to drift along, hanging low, full of rain, by necessity, then they get heavy, crash into one another, burst, and boom.

STREPSIADES [379] And who's doing the forcing, to make them drift? Isn't that Zeus?

SOCRATES [380] Not at all. It's the ethereal Whirl.

STREPSIADES Whirl? I hadn't realized that: Zeus doesn't exist, and now Whirl is king in his place. But you still haven't taught me anything about the crashing and the thunder.

SOCRATES [383] Didn't you hear me? I said that the Clouds, full of water, crash into one another and boom because of their density.

STREPSIADES [385] Come on, why should anyone believe that?

SOCRATES I'll teach you from your own body. Have you ever stuffed yourself with stew at the Panathenaea, then had an upset stomach, and suddenly a commotion went gurgling right through it?[28]

STREPSIADES [388] By Apollo, yes! It gives me hell right away, it gets all churned up, and that little bit of stew booms like thunder and makes a terrible racket. Softly at first, pappax pappax, then it builds up, papapappax, and when I shit it really thunders, papapappax, just like they do.

SOCRATES [392] Well, then, think what farts you've let off from a little tummy this size. Isn't it only natural that this Air here, which is boundless, should thunder mightily?

STREPSIADES [394] So that's why the words for thunder and fart sound so alike! But now teach me this: where does the thunder-

bolt come from, blazing with fire, that strikes us and burns us to a crisp, and singes the ones it leaves alive? Because it's obvious Zeus hurls it at perjurers.[29]

SOCRATES 398 And how, you idiot, you reeking relic of Cronus, you fossil older than the moon, if he strikes perjurers, has he never burned up Simon, or Cleonymus, or Theorus? And they're perjurers, all right, through and through. No, he strikes his own temple, and "Sunium, headland of Athens," and the great oak trees. What's the idea? An oak tree certainly doesn't commit perjury.[30]

STREPSIADES 403 I don't know. But you seem to have a point. So what is the thunderbolt, then?

SOCRATES 404 When a dry wind rises up and gets shut inside these, it blows them up from within like a bladder, and then by necessity it bursts them and rushes out violently because of the density, and with the whoosh and the force of it, it sets itself on fire.

STREPSIADES 408 By Zeus, that's exactly what happened to me once at the Diasia. I was roasting a stuffed sausage for my relatives and forgot to slit it. So it swelled up, and then suddenly it burst, splattered right into my eyes, and scorched my face.[31]

CHORUS 412 You who have longed for great cleverness from us, how happy you will be among the Athenians and the Greeks, if you have a good memory and are a thinker, with endurance in your soul; if you don't get tired standing or walking, aren't too bothered by the cold, and have no craving for breakfast; if you keep away from wine and the gymnasium and all the other foolishness; and if you consider best what a clever man naturally

28 The Panathenaea was Athens' great festival of Athena, with public sacrifices that fed the whole city.
29 In Greek, brontē, "thunder," and pordē, "fart."
30 Simon and Theorus, Athenian politicians accused of embezzlement and false oaths. "Sunium, headland of Athens" is a quotation from Homer's *Odyssey*.
31 The Diasia was a festival of Zeus celebrated with family feasts.

does: to win by action and by counsel and by waging war with your tongue.

STREPSIADES 420 Well, if it's a tough soul you need, and worry that keeps a man tossing in bed, and a stomach that's stingy and penny-pinching and makes do with herbs for supper, don't worry, have no fear: for all that, I'd offer myself up to be hammered on the anvil.

SOCRATES 423 So from now on you won't believe in any god but ours, will you? This Chaos, the Clouds, and the Tongue, these three?

STREPSIADES 425 I wouldn't even speak to the others, not if I bumped into them. I wouldn't sacrifice to them, or pour them libations, or offer them incense.

CHORUS 427 Then tell us boldly what we can do for you. You won't be disappointed, as long as you honor and admire us and try to be clever.

STREPSIADES 429 My ladies, I ask just this one tiny thing of you: that I be the best speaker in Greece by a hundred furlongs.

CHORUS 431 Well, you'll have that from us. From now on, no one in the Assembly will carry more motions than you.

STREPSIADES 433 Don't give me big motions! That's not what I want. Just enough to twist the law my way and slip past my creditors.[32]

CHORUS 435 Then you'll get what you long for, since it's nothing great you want. Just hand yourself over boldly to our ministers.

STREPSIADES 437 I'll do it, I'm trusting you. Necessity is squeezing me, thanks to the horses with the koppa brand and the marriage that wrecked me. 439 So now I simply hand over this body of mine for them to do with as they like: beat it, starve it, parch it with thirst, leave it filthy and frozen, flay it into a wineskin, if only I escape my debts and get people to think I'm brazen, smooth-tongued, shameless, pushy, disgusting, a stitcher-

32 The verb, "twist justice," puns on Strepsiades' name, which suggests "Twister."

together of lies, an inventor of phrases, a courtroom veteran, a walking statute book, a rattle, a fox, a drill, a slippery strap, a con man, a greaseball, a braggart, a jailbird, a scumbag, a weasel, a pain in the neck, a pot-licker. If that's what people call me when they meet me, they can do absolutely whatever they want with me, and if they want, by Demeter, let them make sausage out of me and serve it to the thinkers.

CHORUS

457 This man has a spirit
not timid but ready. And know this:
learn these things from me, and you'll have fame sky-high
among mortals.

STREPSIADES 461 What will happen to me?

CHORUS 462 For all time, with me, / you will lead the most envied life of all mankind.

STREPSIADES 465 Will I really ever / get to see that?

CHORUS

467 Yes, so that crowds will always be sitting at your doors,
wanting to consult you and talk things over,
suits and counter-pleas worth many talents,
matters worthy of your mind, to plan with you.

476 Now go to work on the old man with whatever you mean to teach him first. Stir up his mind and test out his wits.

FIRST EPISODE

Socrates questions Strepsiades about his memory and character, then takes him inside.

SOCRATES 478 Come on, then, describe your own character to me, so that once I know what sort you are, I can bring my newest siege engines to bear on you.

STREPSIADES 481 What? Are you planning to besiege me, for the gods' sake?

SOCRATES [482] No, I just want to ask you a few short questions. Do you have a good memory?

STREPSIADES [483] Two kinds, by Zeus. If somebody owes me something, a terrific memory. If I owe, poor me, a terrible one.

SOCRATES [486] Well, do you have a natural gift for learning?

STREPSIADES [487] For speaking, no. For swindling, yes.

SOCRATES [488] Then how will you be able to learn?

STREPSIADES Just fine, don't worry.

SOCRATES [489] Come on, then: whenever I toss you some clever point about the heavens, make sure you snap it up right away.

STREPSIADES [491] What? Am I supposed to gobble up my cleverness like a dog?

SOCRATES [492] This fellow's an ignoramus, a regular foreigner. I'm afraid, old man, you're going to need a beating. Come on, let me see what you do if someone hits you.

STREPSIADES [494] I take the hit. Then I wait a little and call witnesses. Then, after a split second, I sue.

SOCRATES [497] Go on, then, take off your cloak.

STREPSIADES Have I done something wrong?

SOCRATES [498] No, it's the custom to go in naked.

STREPSIADES [499] But I'm not going in to search for stolen goods! [33]

SOCRATES [500] Take it off. What's this nonsense?

STREPSIADES Now just tell me this—

SOCRATES What?

STREPSIADES [501] If I work hard and learn eagerly, which of your students will I turn out like?

SOCRATES [503] You'll turn out exactly like Chaerephon.

---

33 Under Athenian law, a man searching another's house for stolen property had to go in stripped, so that he couldn't plant anything.

STREPSIADES [504] Oh no, poor me! I'll be half dead!

SOCRATES [505] Stop your chatter and follow me in here, quickly, won't you?

STREPSIADES [506] Then put a honey cake in my hands first. I'm scared, going down in there, like going down into Trophonius' cave.[34]

SOCRATES [509] Get moving! Why are you dithering around the door?

FIRST PARABASIS

The chorus speaks for the poet about the play's defeat, then scolds Athens over Cleon and the calendar.

CHORUS

[510] Go, then, and good luck to you
for this courage of yours.
May good fortune come to the man,
because, though he has come
deep into his years,
he dyes his nature
in newer matters
and works at cleverness.

[518] Spectators, I'll tell you the truth, freely, by Dionysus who raised me. As surely as I hope to win and be thought clever: it was because I believed you were sharp spectators, and that this was the cleverest of my comedies, that I thought you deserved to be the first to taste it, the play that cost me the most work. And then I withdrew, beaten by vulgar men, which I didn't deserve. So this is what I hold against you clever ones, for whose sake I took all that trouble. But even so, I'll never willingly betray the sharp ones among you.[35] [528] Because ever since, here in this

34 The oracle of Trophonius in Boeotia was consulted by descending into an underground chamber, carrying honey cakes for the snakes.

35 This parabasis belongs to Aristophanes' revised version; the original *Clouds* came third at the Dionysia of 423 BC.

place, my Moderate Man and my Degenerate were praised to the skies by men it's a pleasure even to mention, and I (still a maiden then, not yet allowed to give birth) exposed my child, and another girl picked it up and took it in, and you raised it and educated it nobly—ever since then I've had firm pledges of your good judgment. So now this comedy has come, like Electra in the old play, searching to see if she can somewhere find spectators as clever as that. She'll recognize her brother's lock of hair if she sees it.[36] 537 Just look how decent she is by nature. First of all, she hasn't come with a leather dick stitched on and dangling, red at the tip and thick, to make the boys laugh. She hasn't made fun of bald men or danced the lewd cordax. There's no old man speaking the lines who whacks whoever's nearby with his stick to cover up lousy jokes. She hasn't rushed in with torches or yelled "iou, iou!" No, she's come trusting in herself and her lines. 545 And I, being that kind of man as a poet, don't put on airs, and I don't try to fool you by bringing on the same stuff two and three times. I always show my cleverness by introducing new ideas, not at all like one another and every one of them smart. I'm the one who punched Cleon in the belly when he was at his most powerful, and I didn't have the nerve to jump on him again once he was down. But these others, once Hyperbolus gave them a handhold, keep trampling the poor wretch, and his mother too. Eupolis, first of all, dragged on his *Maricas*, a lousy hack job, our *Knights* turned inside out, and added a drunken old woman for the sake of the cordax, the very one Phrynichus created long ago, the one the sea monster was eating.[37] 557 Then Hermippus did a play on Hyperbolus too, and now all the rest are laying into Hyperbolus, copying my eel similes. So whoever laughs at those people, I hope he gets no pleasure from my

36 He means his first play, *Banqueters* (427 BC), staged under another man's name, which contrasted a decent son and a depraved one. In Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* Electra recognizes her brother Orestes by a lock of his hair.

37 Cleon, the leading popular politician, was Aristophanes' target in *Knights* (424 BC); Hyperbolus, a lamp-maker turned popular politician, took his place after his death in 422 BC. Eupolis and Phrynichus were rival comic poets.

work. But if you enjoy me and my inventions, you'll be thought wise in seasons to come.[38]

563 High ruler of the gods,
Zeus, great monarch, to our dance
I call first;
and the mighty steward of the trident,
fierce heaver of earth and salty sea;
and our father of great name,
most holy Aether, who nourishes the life of all;
and the driver of horses, who with his dazzling
rays fills
the plain of earth, great among gods
and among mortals a power.

575 You cleverest of spectators, pay attention here. We've been wronged, and we're going to tell you so to your faces. We help the city more than all the other gods, and yet we're the only deities you don't sacrifice to or pour libations for, we who watch over you. Whenever there's some expedition that makes no sense at all, we either thunder or drizzle. And then, when you were electing that god-hated Paphlagonian tanner as general, we knit our brows and raged, and thunder broke out with lightning; the moon left her course, and the sun drew his wick straight back into himself and said he wouldn't shine for you if Cleon was going to be general. But you elected him all the same.[39] 587 They say bad decisions are native to this city, but that the gods turn whatever mistakes you make to the good. And we'll easily show you how this one, too, will turn out well. If you convict that greedy gull Cleon of bribery and theft and then clamp his neck in the stocks, things will go back to how they used to be, and even if you did make a mistake, the business will turn out for the city's good.

38 Hermippus was another comic poet; in *Knights* Cleon is compared to eel fishermen, who catch more by stirring up the mud.

39 Cleon's family owned a tannery, and in *Knights* he appears as a slave called "the Paphlagonian"; he was elected general in 424 BC, the year of an eclipse.

595 Be near me again, Lord Phoebus,
Delian, who hold the Cynthian
rock with its high peak;
and you, blessed lady, who hold Ephesus' house all of gold,
where Lydian girls give you great worship;
and our own goddess of this land,
driver of the aegis, guardian of the city, Athena;
and you who hold the Parnassian
rock and blaze with pine torches,
standing out among the Delphic Bacchants,
reveler Dionysus.

607 When we were getting ready to set out for this place, the Moon happened to meet us and told us to say, first, that she sends greetings to the Athenians and their allies. Then she said she's furious, because she's been treated terribly, though she helps every one of you, not with words but plainly to see. First of all, she saves you no less than a drachma a month on torches, so that everyone going out in the evening says, "Don't buy a torch, boy, the moonlight's lovely." 615 She says she does you other good turns too, but you don't keep the days properly at all; you jumble them up, up and down. So she says the gods threaten her every time they're cheated of a dinner and have to go home, having missed the festival the count of days entitled them to. 620 And then, when you ought to be sacrificing, you're torturing witnesses and judging cases. And often, when we gods are keeping a fast, mourning Memnon or Sarpedon, you're pouring libations and laughing. That's why Hyperbolus, chosen by lot this year as sacred delegate, had his garland taken away by us gods: that way he'll understand better that the days of one's life should be kept by the moon.[40]

40 Memnon and Sarpedon were sons of gods killed at Troy. The sacred delegate represented Athens on the religious council at Delphi; how Hyperbolus lost his garland is unknown.

FIRST LYRIC SCENE

Strepsiades fails Socrates' lessons and is dismissed, so he brings his reluctant son instead.

SOCRATES 627 By Respiration, by Chaos, by Air, I've never seen such a yokel anywhere, so helpless, so dim, so forgetful. He learns a few little scraps of trivia and forgets them before he's even learned them. Still, I'll call him out here into the light. Where's Strepsiades? Come out, and bring your cot!

STREPSIADES 634 But the bedbugs won't let me carry it out.

SOCRATES 635 Hurry up, put it down and pay attention.

STREPSIADES There.

SOCRATES 636 Come on, then, what do you want to learn first, of the things you've never been taught? Tell me. Measures, or verses, or rhythms?

STREPSIADES 639 Measures, for me. Just the other day a barley dealer cheated me out of two quarts.

SOCRATES 641 That's not what I'm asking you. Which measure do you think is finest: the trimeter or the tetrameter?

STREPSIADES 643 As far as I'm concerned, nothing beats the four-quart measure.

SOCRATES 644 You're talking nonsense, man.

STREPSIADES Then bet me the four-quart measure isn't a tetrameter.

SOCRATES 646 Go to hell! What a bumpkin you are, and how slow to learn! I suppose you'd be quick to learn about rhythms.

STREPSIADES 648 And how will rhythms help me with my barley?

SOCRATES 649 First of all, they'll make you sophisticated in company, able to tell which rhythm is enoplian, and which in turn goes by the dactyl, by the finger.

STREPSIADES 652 By the finger? By Zeus, I know that one!

SOCRATES Tell me, then.

STREPSIADES 653 What else but this finger here? Though before, when I was still a boy, it was this one.[41]

SOCRATES 655 You're a boor and a dolt.

STREPSIADES Well, you miserable man, I don't want to learn any of this.

SOCRATES 656 Then what?

STREPSIADES 657 That one, that one: the most unjust argument.

SOCRATES 658 But you have to learn other things before that: which four-footed animals are properly masculine.

STREPSIADES 660 But I know the masculine ones, unless I'm crazy: ram, billy goat, bull, dog, rooster.

SOCRATES 662 See what's happening to you? You call the hen "rooster," just the same as the male.

STREPSIADES 664 How's that, then?

SOCRATES How? "Rooster" and "rooster."

STREPSIADES 665 By Poseidon, you're right. So what am I supposed to call them now?

SOCRATES 666 A "roostress," and the other one a "cock."[42]

STREPSIADES 667 A "roostress"? Bravo, by Air! For that lesson alone I'll fill your kneading-trough with barley right to the brim, every inch of him.

SOCRATES 670 There, you've done it again, another one. You call the kneading-trough "him" when it's a "her."

STREPSIADES 671 How do I call the kneading-trough "him"?

SOCRATES 672 You certainly do, just as you do Cleonymus.

STREPSIADES 673 How so? Explain.

---

41 "Dactyl" means "finger" in Greek. Strepsiades gives the obscene middle-finger gesture, then points to his penis.

42 In Greek one word, alektryōn, served for both cock and hen; Socrates coins alektryaina. Next he "corrects" kardopos, "kneading-trough," a feminine noun with a masculine-looking ending, to kardopē.

SOCRATES [674] For you, "kneading-trough" works exactly like "Cleonymus."

STREPSIADES [675] But my good man, Cleonymus didn't even have a kneading-trough. He did his kneading in a round mortar. Anyway, what should I call it from now on?[43]

SOCRATES [677] What? A "kneading-troughette," the way you say "Sostrate."

STREPSIADES [679] "Kneading-troughette," feminine?

SOCRATES Now you've got it right.

STREPSIADES [680] So that would make it "troughette," "Cleonymette."

SOCRATES [681] You still have to learn about names: which of them are masculine and which are feminine.

STREPSIADES [683] But I know which ones are feminine.

SOCRATES Tell me, then.

STREPSIADES [684] Lysilla, Philinna, Clitagora, Demetria.

SOCRATES [685] And which names are masculine?

STREPSIADES Thousands. Philoxenus, Melesias, Amynias.

SOCRATES [687] But you rogue, those aren't masculine.

STREPSIADES [688] They're not masculine to you people?

SOCRATES Not in the least. How would you call out if you ran into Amynias?

STREPSIADES [690] How? Like this: "Over here, over here, Amynia!"

SOCRATES [691] See? You're calling Amynias a woman.

STREPSIADES [692] Well, isn't that only fair, since she doesn't do military service? But why am I learning things we all know?[44]

SOCRATES [694] Nothing, by Zeus. But lie down here—

43 "Kneading in a mortar" was slang for masturbating.
44 Addressed directly, Amynias becomes "Amynia," which sounds like a woman's name; Amynias was mocked as a draft dodger.

STREPSIADES And do what?

SOCRATES 695 Think out something about your own affairs.

STREPSIADES 696 Please, I beg you, not there! If I have to, let me think them out right here on the ground.

SOCRATES 698 There's no other way.

STREPSIADES Poor me! What a price I'll pay the bedbugs today!

CHORUS

700 Think now, and scrutinize, and spin yourself every which way,
packing yourself tight.
And quick, when you fall into a dead end,
jump to another
thought of the mind; and let sweet-hearted sleep stay far from your eyes.
...

STREPSIADES 707 Ouch, ouch! Ouch, ouch!

CHORUS 708 What's the matter? What's hurting you?

STREPSIADES

709 I'm dying, poor me! Out of the cot
the Corinthians come crawling and biting me,
and they're gobbling up my ribs,
and sucking out my soul,
and dragging out my balls,
and digging through my asshole,
and they'll be the death of me![45]

CHORUS 716 Now, don't take it too hard.

45 A pun on koreis, "bedbugs," and Korinthioi, the Corinthians, Athens' enemies in the war.

STREPSIADES

717 How can I not, when
my money's gone, my color's gone,
my soul's gone, my shoe's gone,
and on top of all these troubles,
singing the sentry's song,
I'm very nearly gone myself?

SOCRATES 723 Hey, you, what are you doing? Aren't you thinking?

STREPSIADES Me? By Poseidon, yes.

SOCRATES 724 And what have you thought?

STREPSIADES 725 Whether the bedbugs are going to leave anything of me.

SOCRATES 726 Drop dead, damn you!

STREPSIADES But my good man, I just did.

SOCRATES 727 No going soft: get under the covers. You've got to come up with an idea for swindling, a real con.

STREPSIADES 729 Oh no! Who's going to throw a swindling notion over me, out of these sheepskins?

SOCRATES 731 Come on, let me first take a look at what this fellow's doing. Hey, you, are you asleep?

STREPSIADES 732 No, by Apollo, not me.

SOCRATES 733 Got hold of anything?

STREPSIADES No, by Zeus, I don't.

SOCRATES Nothing at all?

STREPSIADES 734 Nothing, except my cock in my right hand.

SOCRATES 735 Won't you cover yourself up, quick, and think something?

STREPSIADES 736 About what? You tell me that, Socrates.

SOCRATES 737 Find whatever you want for yourself first, and then say it.

STREPSIADES [738] You've heard ten thousand times what I want: the interest, how I can get out of paying it back to anybody.

SOCRATES [740] Go on, then, cover up, let your subtle thought off the leash, and think your way around your affairs little by little, dividing and examining them correctly.

STREPSIADES [742] Oh, poor me.

SOCRATES [743] Keep still. And if you get stuck on one of your ideas, let it go and walk away; then set it moving in your mind again and weigh it up.

STREPSIADES [746] Socrates, my dearest little Socrates!

SOCRATES What is it, old man?

STREPSIADES [747] I've got an idea for swindling my way out of the interest.

SOCRATES [748] Let's see it.

STREPSIADES Tell me, then—

SOCRATES Tell you what?

STREPSIADES [749] What if I bought a Thessalian witch and had her pull the moon down one night, and then shut it up in a round case, like a mirror, and kept it under guard—[46]

SOCRATES [753] And what good would that do you?

STREPSIADES What good? If the moon never rose again anywhere, I wouldn't pay my interest.

SOCRATES [755] Why on earth not?

STREPSIADES [756] Because money's lent by the month.

SOCRATES [757] Good. Now I'll set you another tricky one. Suppose someone filed a lawsuit against you for five talents. Tell me how you'd make it vanish.

STREPSIADES [761] How? How? I don't know. But I'll have to look into it.

---

46 Thessaly was notorious for its witches, who were said to be able to draw down the moon.

SOCRATES 762 Then don't keep your mind wound up around yourself all the time. Let your thought out into the air on a string, like a beetle tied by the foot.

STREPSIADES 765 I've found a really clever way to make the lawsuit vanish. You'll admit it yourself!

SOCRATES 766 What sort of way?

STREPSIADES 767 You've seen that stone at the drug-sellers', haven't you? The pretty one, the see-through one, that they light fires with?

SOCRATES 769 You mean the glass?

STREPSIADES 770 That's the one. Well, what if I took it, and while the clerk was writing up my case, I stood off a bit, like this, facing the sun, and melted away the letters of my case?[47]

SOCRATES 773 Clever, by the Graces!

STREPSIADES Oh, how happy I am to have a five-talent lawsuit crossed out!

SOCRATES 775 Come on now, quick, snatch up this one.

STREPSIADES What?

SOCRATES 776 How you'd fend off a lawsuit when you're in court, about to lose, and you've got no witnesses.

STREPSIADES 778 Nothing to it. Easiest thing in the world.

SOCRATES Tell me, then.

STREPSIADES All right, I'm telling you. If there was still one case to be heard ahead of mine, I'd run off and hang myself before mine got called.

SOCRATES 781 That's nonsense.

STREPSIADES It is not, by the gods! Nobody's going to bring a case against me when I'm dead.

SOCRATES 783 Drivel. Get lost. I won't teach you any more.

STREPSIADES 784 Why not? Oh please, by the gods, Socrates!

47 Charges were written on wax-coated tablets, which a burning-glass could melt.

SOCRATES 785 Because you forget whatever you learn the moment you've learned it. Look: what was the first thing you were taught just now? Tell me.

STREPSIADES 787 Let me see, what *was* the first thing? What was the first thing? What was that thing we knead our barley in? Oh no, what was it?

SOCRATES 789 Go to hell and rot, you forgetful, moronic little old man!

STREPSIADES 791 Oh no, what's going to become of me now, poor devil? I'm ruined if I don't learn tongue-twisting. Clouds, please, give me some good advice.

CHORUS 794 Our advice, old man, is this: if you've got a grown-up son, send him to study in your place.

STREPSIADES 797 Well, I do have a son, a fine young gentleman. But he doesn't want to learn. What am I supposed to do?

CHORUS 799 And you let him get away with it?

STREPSIADES Well, he's big and strapping, and he comes from fine-feathered women, Coesyra's lot. But I'll go and get him, and if he won't come, there's no way I'm not throwing him out of the house. Go inside and wait for me a little while.

CHORUS

804 Do you see what blessings you'll soon have
thanks to us alone of the gods?
Here he is, ready to do
anything you tell him.
And you, seeing the man's dazzled and plainly carried away,
will lap up all you can from him,
and fast: things like this have a way of turning around.

STREPSIADES 814 No, by Mist, you are not staying here a moment longer! Go and eat Megacles' columns![48]

48 Megacles: his mother's rich, aristocratic uncle. Strepsiades tells his son to go and eat him out of house and home, pillars and all.

PHEIDIPPIDES 816 Father, what on earth's got into you? You're not in your right mind, by Olympian Zeus!

STREPSIADES 818 Listen to that, just listen! "Olympian Zeus"! How stupid, believing in Zeus at your age!

PHEIDIPPIDES 820 Seriously, what are you laughing at?

STREPSIADES At the thought that you're a little kid with antiquated ideas. Still, come over here so you can know more, and I'll tell you something that'll make a man of you once you've learned it. But make sure you don't teach it to anyone.

PHEIDIPPIDES 825 Here I am. What is it?

STREPSIADES You swore by Zeus just now.

PHEIDIPPIDES 826 I did.

STREPSIADES So you see what a good thing learning is? There is no Zeus, Pheidippides.

PHEIDIPPIDES 827 Then who is there?

STREPSIADES 828 Whirl is king. He's driven Zeus out.

PHEIDIPPIDES 829 Ugh! What drivel is this?

STREPSIADES Take it from me, that's how it is.

PHEIDIPPIDES 830 Who says so?

STREPSIADES Socrates the Melian, and Chaerephon, who knows the footprints of fleas.[49]

PHEIDIPPIDES 832 And you've gone so far round the bend that you believe a pack of lunatics?

STREPSIADES 833 Watch your tongue! Don't say a bad word about clever men with good sense. They're so thrifty that not one of them has ever had a haircut or oiled himself or gone to the baths for a wash. But you're washing my livelihood down the drain as if I were already a corpse. Now go as fast as you can and learn in my place.

49 Calling Socrates "the Melian" links him with Diagoras of Melos, the notorious atheist.

PHEIDIPPIDES [840] And what could anyone learn from those people that's any use?

STREPSIADES [841] Really? Everything clever there is in the world! You'll find out how ignorant and thick you are. But wait here for me a little while.

PHEIDIPPIDES [844] Oh no, what do I do? My father's out of his mind. Do I take him to court and have him convicted of insanity, or tell the coffin-makers he's gone mad?

STREPSIADES [847] Let's see, now. What do you call this? Tell me.

PHEIDIPPIDES [848] A rooster.

STREPSIADES Good. And what about this one?

PHEIDIPPIDES [849] A rooster.

STREPSIADES Both the same? You're a joke. Don't do that from now on: call this one a "roostress" and this one a "cock."

PHEIDIPPIDES [852] "Roostress"? Is that the clever stuff you learned just now, when you went in there among those Earth-born giants?

STREPSIADES [854] That and lots more. But whatever I learned, I'd forget it straight away, every time, because I'm so old.

PHEIDIPPIDES [856] Is that why you lost your cloak too?

STREPSIADES [857] I haven't lost it. I've thought it away.

PHEIDIPPIDES [858] And where have you put your shoes, you idiot?

STREPSIADES [859] Like Pericles, I lost them "for necessary purposes." Come on now, walk, let's go. Do what your father tells you, and go wrong. I did what you wanted once, you know, when you were six and lisping: the very first juror's obol I got, I spent on a little toy cart for you at the Diasia.[50]

PHEIDIPPIDES [865] I swear, you'll be sorry for all this someday.

---

50 In 445 BC Pericles accounted for a large sum, reputedly a bribe to the Spartans, simply as spent "for necessary purposes."

STREPSIADES 866 Good, you did as you were told. Here, Socrates, over here, come out! I've brought you my son here. I talked him into it against his will.

SOCRATES 868 Yes, he's still a baby, and not yet seasoned in our hanging baskets here.

PHEIDIPPIDES 870 You'd be well seasoned yourself, if you were strung up.

STREPSIADES 871 Go to hell! Are you cursing your teacher?

SOCRATES 872 Listen to him: "strung up"! What a dim way to say it, and with his lips hanging open! How could this one ever learn to get off in a lawsuit, or serve a summons, or puff up a persuasive case? And yet Hyperbolus learned it, for a talent.

STREPSIADES 877 Don't worry, teach him. He's clever by nature. Why, when he was just a little boy this big, he was building houses indoors, and carving boats, and making little carts out of leather, and making frogs out of pomegranate peel—you wouldn't believe how well. Just make sure he learns those two Arguments: the Stronger, whatever that is, and the Weaker, the one that argues the unjust side and overturns the Stronger. If not both, then at least the unjust one, by every trick there is.

SOCRATES 886 He'll learn it himself, from the two Arguments in person. I'll be off.

STREPSIADES 887 Now remember this: he's got to be able to argue against everything that's just.

CHORUS 888 ...[51]

51 A choral song seems to have stood here, but it is lost from the text.

FIRST AGON

The Stronger and Weaker Arguments debate the old education against the new, and the Weaker wins.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 889 Come out here, show yourself to the audience, brazen as you are.[52]

WEAKER ARGUMENT 891 Go wherever you like. I'll destroy you all the more easily with a crowd listening.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 893 You'll destroy me? Who do you think you are?

WEAKER ARGUMENT An Argument.

STRONGER ARGUMENT The Weaker one.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 894 But I'll beat you, for all your claims to be stronger than me.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 895 With what clever trick?

WEAKER ARGUMENT 896 By inventing new ideas.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 897 Yes, that stuff's all the rage, thanks to these idiots here.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 899 No, these clever people.

STRONGER ARGUMENT I'll destroy you, and nastily.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 900 Tell me how.

STRONGER ARGUMENT By saying what's just.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 901 Then I'll argue back and overturn it. I say justice doesn't even exist.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 903 You say it doesn't exist?

WEAKER ARGUMENT Well, where is it, then?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 904 With the gods.

52 The manuscripts label the two characters the Just and the Unjust Argument; the play calls them the Stronger and the Weaker, after the sophists' boast of "making the weaker argument the stronger."

WEAKER ARGUMENT Then if justice exists, how come Zeus wasn't destroyed for tying up his own father?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 906 Ugh! Now the sickness is spreading. Get me a bowl to puke in.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 908 You're a senile old fogey, and out of tune.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 909 You're a degenerate, and shameless.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 910 You're showering me with roses.

STRONGER ARGUMENT And a cheap clown.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 911 You're crowning me with lilies.

STRONGER ARGUMENT And a father-beater.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 912 You don't realize you're sprinkling me with gold.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 913 Not in the old days. Then it was lead.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 914 Well, now it's an ornament to me.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 915 You're far too brazen.

WEAKER ARGUMENT And you're an antique.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 916 It's thanks to you that none of the boys wants to go to school. One day the Athenians will find out what sort of things you teach the fools.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 920 You're disgustingly filthy.

STRONGER ARGUMENT And you're doing very nicely. Yet once you were a beggar, claiming to be Telephus the Mysian, munching Pandeletus-style maxims out of your little pouch.[53]

WEAKER ARGUMENT 925 Oh, what cleverness—

STRONGER ARGUMENT Oh, what madness—

WEAKER ARGUMENT 926 you've mentioned—

53 Telephus: the Mysian king whom Euripides brought on stage disguised as a beggar. Pandeletus: a notorious litigant.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 927 Yours, and the city's, for feeding you while you corrupt the boys.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 929 You're not going to teach this one, you old Cronus.[54]

STRONGER ARGUMENT 930 I am, if he's to be saved and not just practice chatter.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 932 Come over here, and let him rave.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 933 Lay a hand on him and you'll be sorry.

CHORUS 934 Stop your fighting and name-calling. Instead, you show us what you used to teach the men of the past, and you, the new education, so that he can hear the two of you argue it out, and decide, and go to school.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 939 I'm willing to do that.

WEAKER ARGUMENT So am I.

CHORUS 940 Come on, then: which of you will speak first?

WEAKER ARGUMENT 941 I'll let him. Then, out of whatever he says, I'll shoot him full of newfangled little phrases and notions. And in the end, if he so much as grunts, he'll be stung all over his face and both his eyes by my maxims, as if by hornets, and die.

CHORUS

949 Now these two, relying on their nimble
words and thoughts and maxim-minting musings, will
show
which of them will prove the better speaker.
For now the whole gamble of cleverness is let loose here,
and over it my friends face their greatest contest.

54 Cronus, Zeus' deposed father, was a byword for anything hopelessly old-fashioned.

959 Come, you who crowned the older generation with so many good habits: burst out in whatever voice you like, and tell us what you are.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 961 Then I'll describe the old education as it used to be, back when I flourished, speaking what's just, and self-control was the custom. First, you weren't to hear a boy make so much as a peep. Then the boys from each neighborhood had to walk through the streets to the music teacher's, in good order and all together, without cloaks, even if the snow came down thick as barley meal. Then he'd teach them to learn a song by heart, with their thighs kept apart: "Pallas, dread sacker of cities" or "A cry that carries far," pitched in the mode their fathers handed down. And if any of them played the clown or put in some twiddle, like those hard-to-bend twists in the style of Phrynis that they do nowadays, he got a sound thrashing for wiping out the Muses.[55] 972 At the trainer's, when the boys sat down they had to keep a thigh forward, so as to show the people outside nothing to torment them. Then, when they stood up again, they had to smooth the sand over and take care not to leave an imprint of their youth behind for their lovers. And in those days no boy would oil himself below the navel, so the dew and down bloomed on his privates like on quinces. Nor would he soften his voice to go simpering up to his lover, pimping himself with his eyes. Nor was he allowed at dinner to grab even a radish head, or snatch dill or celery from his elders, or gorge on fancy food, or giggle, or sit with his legs crossed.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 984 Antiquated stuff, smacking of the Dipolieia, crawling with cicadas, Cecides and the Ox-Slaying![56]

STRONGER ARGUMENT 985 But this is exactly how my education raised the men who fought at Marathon. You, though, teach today's boys to go wrapped up in cloaks from the start. It makes

55 Phrynis: a musician of the later fifth century BC, famous for elaborate innovations.

56 The Dipolieia and its ox-sacrifice were archaic Athenian festivals; cicada brooches were an old-time hair ornament; Cecides was an old-time poet.

me want to hang myself when they have to dance in armor at the Panathenaea, and one of them holds his shield in front of his ham and doesn't give a damn for Trito-born Athena. [990] So, young man, take heart and choose me, the Stronger Argument. You'll learn to hate the marketplace and stay away from the baths; to be ashamed of what's shameful, and to blush if anyone mocks you; to get up from your seat for your elders when they come along; not to be boorish toward your own parents, or do anything else shameful, since you're to fashion in yourself the image of Modesty; not to dash into a dancing girl's house, in case, while you're gaping in there, some little prostitute hits you with an apple and your good name is smashed; not to talk back to your father at all, or call him Iapetus and throw his age in his face, the age that nursed you as a nestling.[57]

WEAKER ARGUMENT [1000] If you take his advice on this, young man, by Dionysus, you'll turn out like Hippocrates' sons, and they'll call you a mama's little turnip.[58]

STRONGER ARGUMENT [1002] Not at all: you'll spend your days in the gymnasiums, sleek and blooming, not chattering in the agora with thorny-witty wisecracks like boys today, or getting dragged into court over some petty, sticky-picky, quibble-squabble-damnable little case. No, you'll go down to the Academy and run under the sacred olives, crowned with white reed, with a modest friend your own age, smelling of bindweed and leisure and the white poplar shedding its leaves, delighting in the spring, when the plane tree whispers to the elm.[59]

[1009] If you do what I tell you and keep your mind on it, you'll always have a gleaming chest, a glowing complexion, big shoulders, a small tongue, a big butt, and a small prick. But if you take up what boys do today, first of all you'll have a pale complexion, small shoulders, a skinny chest, a big tongue, a small butt, a big dick, and long-winded decrees. And he'll talk

57 Iapetus: a Titan, brother of Cronus, and so a byword for an old dodderer.
58 Hippocrates' sons, nephews of Pericles, were mocked as dim and boorish.
59 The Academy: a park and gymnasium outside Athens with sacred olive trees, later the site of Plato's school.

you into thinking everything shameful is fine, and the fine shameful; and on top of that he'll stuff you full of Antimachus' degeneracy.[60]

CHORUS

1024 You who practice a glorious cleverness, towering and fair,
how sweet the bloom of self-control upon your words!
How happy, then, were those who lived back then,
in the days of old! Against this, you with your elegant,
pretty Muse,
must say something new, since the man has won such
praise.

1034 It looks as if you'll need some formidable schemes against him, if you're going to beat the man and not get laughed off the stage.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 1036 Well, I've been choking in my guts for ages, itching to throw all this into confusion with counter-arguments. That's exactly why the thinkers call me the Weaker Argument: because I was the very first to think of arguing the opposite of the laws and the lawsuits. And that's worth more than ten thousand staters: to take up the weaker arguments and still win. Now watch how I'll refute this education he trusts in. First, he says he won't let you wash in hot water. Tell me, what's your thinking when you condemn hot baths?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1046 That they're thoroughly bad, and make a man a coward.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 1047 Hold it! I've got you round the waist already, no escape. Tell me: of the sons of Zeus, which man do you consider the bravest soul? Which one labored the most labors?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1050 As far as I'm concerned, no man was ever better than Heracles.

60 Antimachus: an Athenian otherwise little known, evidently notorious for his sexual habits.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 1051 Well, where have you ever seen cold Baths of Heracles? And who was braver than he was?[61]

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1052 That's it, that's exactly the kind of thing that fills the bathhouse with young men chattering all day long, and empties the wrestling schools.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 1055 Next, you condemn spending time in the agora; I recommend it. If it were bad, Homer would never have called Nestor and all his wise men speakers in the agora. From there I'll move on to the tongue, which this fellow says the young shouldn't train, and I say they should. And he says they should be self-controlled: two of the greatest evils there are. Tell me, have you ever seen anyone get any good out of self-control? Name him, and refute me.

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1063 Plenty of people. Peleus, for one, got his knife because of it.[62]

WEAKER ARGUMENT 1064 His knife? What a charming bit of profit the poor devil got! Hyperbolus from the lamp market has made more talents than you can count through sheer wickedness—but no, by Zeus, not a knife!

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1067 And it was because of his self-control that Peleus married Thetis.

WEAKER ARGUMENT 1068 Yes, and then she walked out on him, because he wasn't rough, or any fun spending the whole night between the sheets. A woman likes being handled roughly. But you're an old Cronus-nag. Just think, young man, of everything self-control involves, and all the pleasures you're going to miss out on: boys, women, cottabus, fancy food, drinking, laughing. And what's life worth to you if you're robbed of all that? Well then. From there I'll move on to the necessities of nature. You've slipped, fallen in love, had a bit of an affair, and then got caught. You're done for, because you can't argue. But stick with me, and

61 Hot springs were known as "Baths of Heracles."
62 Peleus refused the advances of his host's wife, and the gods rewarded him with a magic knife.

indulge your nature, kick up your heels, laugh, think nothing shameful.[63] 1079 If you happen to get caught as an adulterer, here's what you'll say back to the husband: that you've done nothing wrong. Then pass the blame to Zeus: how he too was weaker than love and women. And how could you, a mere mortal, be stronger than a god?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1083 But what if he takes your advice and gets a radish shoved up him and his hair plucked out with hot ash? What argument will he have to show he isn't a wide-ass?[64]

WEAKER ARGUMENT 1085 And if he is a wide-ass, what harm will it do him?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1086 What could ever happen to him that's worse than that?

WEAKER ARGUMENT 1087 So what will you say if I beat you on this point?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1088 I'll shut up. What else?

WEAKER ARGUMENT Come on, then, tell me: what are our advocates in court?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1090 Wide-asses.

WEAKER ARGUMENT I believe you. And what about tragic poets? What are they?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1092 Wide-asses.

WEAKER ARGUMENT Well said. And the politicians who address the people?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1094 Wide-asses.

WEAKER ARGUMENT So now do you see you're talking nonsense? And look at the audience: which kind is there more of?

STRONGER ARGUMENT 1097 All right, I'm looking.

63 Cottabus: a drinking-party game of flicking the last drops of wine at a target.
64 An adulterer caught in the act could be punished by having a radish rammed up his anus and his pubic hair singed off with hot ash.

WEAKER ARGUMENT [1098] So what do you see?

STRONGER ARGUMENT By the gods, the wide-asses, by a mile! That one there, I know for a fact, and that one, and that long-haired one there.

WEAKER ARGUMENT [1101] So what do you say?

STRONGER ARGUMENT [1102] We're beaten! You who get fucked, for the gods' sake, take my cloak: I'm deserting to your side!

SECOND EPISODE

Strepsiades leaves Pheidippides with Socrates to be taught.

SOCRATES [1105] Well then? Do you want to take your son here away with you, or shall I teach him to speak for you?

STREPSIADES [1107] Teach him and discipline him, and remember to give him a good sharp edge: whet one side of his jaw for petty lawsuits, and hone the other side for the bigger business.

SOCRATES [1111] Don't worry, you'll get him back a clever sophist.

PHEIDIPPIDES [1112] A pale wretch, more like, I think.

SECOND PARABASIS

The Clouds tell the judges what rewards or punishments a vote will bring them.

CHORUS [1113] Off you go, then. But I think you're going to regret this.

[1115] We want to tell the judges what they'll gain if they help this chorus, as they justly should. First, if you want to plow your fallow fields in season, we'll rain on you first, and on everyone else later. Then we'll guard your vines once they've set fruit, so they're neither parched by drought nor drowned by too much rain. But if any mortal dishonors us, who are goddesses, let him mark what misery he'll suffer at our hands: he'll get neither wine nor anything else from his land. For whenever his olives and his vines are sprouting, they'll be beaten down: that's the kind of slingshot we'll pelt them with. [1126] And if we see him

making bricks, we'll rain, and smash the tiles of his roof with round hailstones. And if he ever gets married himself, or any of his relatives or friends, we'll rain all night long. He'll probably wish he were even in Egypt, rather than have judged badly.

SECOND LYRIC SCENE

Strepsiades collects his transformed son and drives off two creditors with clever quibbles.

STREPSIADES 1131 The fifth, the fourth, the third, then after that the second, and then the day I fear and dread and loathe more than any other day: right after that comes the Old-and-New. Every last one of the people I happen to owe money to swears he'll put down his court deposit against me and ruin me and wipe me out. And when I ask for something modest and fair ("My dear fellow, don't take this part of it just now," "put this part off for me," "let this part go"), they say they'll never get their money back that way. They call me a crook and say they'll take me to court. Well, let them sue! I don't much care, if Pheidippides really has learned to speak well.[65] 1144 I'll find out soon enough by knocking at the Thinkery. Boy! Hey, boy! Boy, boy!

SOCRATES 1145 Strepsiades, I bid you welcome.

STREPSIADES 1146 Same to you. But first take this. A man ought to show his son's teacher a little appreciation. And tell me whether my son has learned that argument, the one you brought onstage just now.

SOCRATES 1150 He has.

STREPSIADES Bravo, Fraud, almighty queen!

SOCRATES 1151 So you can get off in any lawsuit you like.

STREPSIADES 1152 Even if there were witnesses there when I borrowed the money?

65 The Old-and-New Day was the last day of the month, when debts fell due and creditors filed lawsuits, paying a deposit to the court.

SOCRATES 1153 All the more so, even if there are a thousand of them.

STREPSIADES

1154 Then I'll shout out
a shout at the top of my lungs. Weep and wail, you money-grubbers,
you, your principal, and your interest on interest!
You can't do me any harm now,
such a son is being raised for me
here in these halls,
gleaming with a two-edged tongue,
my bulwark, savior of my house, bane of my foes,
releaser from his father's mighty woes!
Run inside and call him out to me.

SOCRATES

1165 My child, my boy, come out of the house,
hear your father.
Here's the man.

STREPSIADES 1168 My dear, my dear!

SOCRATES 1169 Take him and go.

STREPSIADES 1170 Oh, oh, my child! Hurray, hurray! How happy I am, first of all, just to see your complexion! Now, for a start, you look like a denier and a contradicter. That local Athenian bloom is all over you: the "What do you mean?", and the look of being the injured party when you're the one doing wrong and up to no good, I'm sure of it. You've got that Attic look on your face. So now see that you save me, since you're the one who ruined me.

PHEIDIPPIDES 1178 So what is it you're afraid of?

STREPSIADES The Old-and-New Day.

PHEIDIPPIDES 1179 You mean there's a day that's old and new?

STREPSIADES 1180 Yes, the day they say they'll lodge their deposits against me.

PHEIDIPPIDES 1181 Then the people who lodge them will lose them. There's no way one day could turn into two days.

STREPSIADES 1183 It couldn't?

PHEIDIPPIDES How could it? Not unless the same woman could be old and new at the same time.

STREPSIADES 1185 But that's the law.

PHEIDIPPIDES That's because, I think, they don't properly understand what the law means.

STREPSIADES 1186 And what does it mean?

PHEIDIPPIDES 1187 Solon of old was by nature a friend of the people.[66]

STREPSIADES 1188 That has nothing to do with the Old-and-New, not yet.

PHEIDIPPIDES 1189 So he set the summons for two days, the Old and the New, so that the deposits would be lodged on the first of the month.

STREPSIADES 1192 So why did he tack on the Old day?

PHEIDIPPIDES So that, my dear fellow, the defendants could turn up a day early and settle out of court of their own accord. And if they didn't, they could squirm first thing on the morning of the first.

STREPSIADES 1196 Then why don't the magistrates accept the deposits on the first of the month, instead of on the Old-and-New?

PHEIDIPPIDES 1198 They seem to me to be doing what the Foretasters do. They want to snatch up the deposits as fast as they can, and so they do their tasting a day early.[67]

STREPSIADES 1201 Bravo! You poor fools, why do you sit there like idiots, easy pickings for us clever men? You're stones, a

66 Solon was the Athenian statesman and lawgiver of the early sixth century BC.
67 The Foretasters (*protenthai*) were officials who sampled the festival food a day before a feast.

headcount, sheep and nothing more, a stack of wine jars! So I must sing a song in praise of myself and my son here, for our good luck.

1206 "Lucky Strepsiades!
How clever you were born,
and what a son you're raising!"
my friends will say
and my fellow demesmen,
envying me when you win your cases by talking.
But first I want to take you inside and give you a feast.

PASIAS 1214 So a man ought to throw away any of his own property? Never! But it would have been better back then to put a brazen face on it and refuse, rather than have this trouble now, when for the sake of my own money I'm dragging you along as a witness to the summons, and on top of that I'll make an enemy of a fellow demesman. Still, as long as I live I'll never disgrace my country. I summon Strepsiades—

STREPSIADES 1221 Who's this?

PASIAS 1222 —for the Old-and-New Day.

STREPSIADES I call you to witness: he said two days! And what's it for?

PASIAS 1224 The twelve minas you got when you were buying the dapple-gray horse.

STREPSIADES 1225 A horse? Do you hear that? You all know how I hate everything to do with horses.

PASIAS 1227 And by Zeus, you swore by the gods you'd pay it back.

STREPSIADES 1228 No, by Zeus, because back then my Pheidippides didn't yet know the unbeatable argument.

PASIAS 1230 And now, because of that, you mean to deny the debt?

STREPSIADES 1231 Well, what else would I get out of his lessons?

PASIAS [1232] And you'll be willing to swear to me by the gods that you don't owe it, at whatever place I tell you to?

STREPSIADES [1233] Which gods?

PASIAS [1234] Zeus, Hermes, Poseidon.

STREPSIADES By Zeus, I'd even pay three obols on top for the chance to swear.

PASIAS [1236] Then damn you, for your shamelessness on top of everything else!

STREPSIADES [1237] This one would come in handy with a good scrub of salt.[68]

PASIAS [1238] Ugh, how you mock me!

STREPSIADES He'll hold a good six jugs.

PASIAS [1239] By great Zeus and the gods, you won't get away with this at my expense!

STREPSIADES [1240] The gods! What a kick I got out of that! And Zeus, sworn by, is a joke to those of us in the know.

PASIAS [1242] Believe me, you'll pay for this in time. But whether you'll give me my money back or not, give me an answer and send me on my way.

STREPSIADES [1244] Just wait quietly, then. I'll give you a clear answer in a moment.

PASIAS [1246] What do you think he'll do?

WITNESS I think he'll pay you.

STREPSIADES [1247] Where's this man who's demanding money from me? Tell me, what's this?

PASIAS [1248] What it is? A kneading-trough.

STREPSIADES [1249] And you, a man like that, demand money? I wouldn't pay a single obol to anybody who called a kneading-troughette a kneading-trough.

68 Strepsiades sizes up the paunchy creditor like a hide to be salted and cured into a wineskin.

PASIAS 1252 So you won't pay?

STREPSIADES Not as far as I know. Now hurry up and scram from my door, double-quick, won't you?

PASIAS 1254 I'm going. And know this: I'll lodge my deposit against you, or may I not live another day.

STREPSIADES 1256 Then you'll lose that too, on top of the twelve. And yet I don't want that to happen to you, just because you foolishly called her a kneading-trough.

AMYNIAS 1259 Oh, misery, misery!

STREPSIADES 1260 Hey! Who's this wailing? Surely that wasn't one of Carcinus' gods speaking?[69]

AMYNIAS 1262 Why do you want to know who I am? An unhappy man.

STREPSIADES 1263 Then go be unhappy by yourself.

AMYNIAS 1264 Cruel fate! Chance that smashed the rails of my horses' chariot! Pallas, how you have destroyed me!

STREPSIADES 1266 Why, what harm has Tlepolemus ever done you?[70]

AMYNIAS 1267 Don't make fun of me, sir. Just tell your son to pay me back the money he got, especially since I've fared so badly.

STREPSIADES 1270 What money's this?

AMYNIAS The money he borrowed.

STREPSIADES 1271 Then you really are in a bad way, by the look of you.

AMYNIAS 1272 I was driving my horses and fell out of the chariot, by the gods.

---

69 Carcinus was a tragic poet mocked for his laments; the gods may be the divine characters of his plays, or his sons, who danced in them.

70 Amynias is quoting a tragedy, Xenocles' *Licymnius*, in which Tlepolemus killed Licymnius; Strepsiades pretends to take the lament as a scene from the play.

STREPSIADES 1273 Then why are you talking such rot, like a man who's fallen off his rocker?[71]

AMYNIAS 1274 Talking rot, am I, if I want my money back?

STREPSIADES 1275 There's no way you're in your right mind.

AMYNIAS Why's that?

STREPSIADES 1276 You look to me like you've had your brain shaken loose.

AMYNIAS 1277 And you, by Hermes, look to me like a man I'm going to summons, if you don't pay back the money.

STREPSIADES 1278 Tell me, then: do you think Zeus rains fresh new water every time, or that the sun draws the same water back up from below?

AMYNIAS 1282 I don't know which, and I don't care.

STREPSIADES 1283 Then how have you got any right to get your money back, if you know nothing about the things up in the sky?

AMYNIAS 1285 Well, if you're short, pay me back the interest on the money, at least.

STREPSIADES 1286 This interest, what sort of beast is that?

AMYNIAS 1287 What else but the money getting bigger and bigger, month by month and day by day, as time flows on?

STREPSIADES 1289 Well said. Now then: do you think the sea is any bigger now than it was before?

AMYNIAS 1291 No, by Zeus, it's the same size. It wouldn't be right for it to be bigger.

STREPSIADES 1292 Then how come, you poor wretch, the sea gets no bigger with all the rivers flowing into it, while you're out to make your money bigger? Chase yourself off my property, won't you? Bring me the goad!

AMYNIAS 1297 I call witnesses to this!

---

71 The Greek pun: *ap' onou,* "off a donkey," sounds like *apo nou,* "out of one's mind."

STREPSIADES [1298] Get moving! What are you waiting for? Giddy-up, you branded nag!

AMYNIAS [1299] Isn't this outright assault?

STREPSIADES Will you get going? I'll jab you with the goad right up the ass, you trace-horse! Running away, are you? I knew I'd get you moving, you and your wheels and your chariot-pairs.

SECOND CHORAL SONG

The Clouds predict that Strepsiades' scheming will soon turn against him.

CHORUS

What a thing it is, to love shady dealings!
This old man, smitten with them,
wants to cheat his lenders
of the money he borrowed.
And there's no way that today
something won't hit him
that will make this sophist,
for the villainy he's begun, suddenly come to grief.

For I think he'll soon find what he's
long been looking for:
that his son is clever
at arguing views opposed
to justice, so as to beat
everyone he comes up against,
even when what he says is utterly rotten.
But maybe, maybe he'll wish his son were mute as well.

THIRD EPISODE

Pheidippides beats his father and offers to prove that it was just.

STREPSIADES [1321] Ow! Ow! Neighbors, kinsmen, demesmen, help me any way you can, I'm being beaten! Oh no, my poor head! My jaw! You scum, you hit your father?

PHEIDIPPIDES [1325] I do, Father.

STREPSIADES [1326] You see? He admits he hits me.

PHEIDIPPIDES Absolutely.

STREPSIADES [1327] You scum! You father-beater! You house-breaker!

PHEIDIPPIDES [1328] Call me all that again, and more. Don't you know I love being called lots of nasty names?

STREPSIADES [1330] You gaping asshole!

PHEIDIPPIDES Shower me with roses, plenty of them!

STREPSIADES [1331] You hit your father?

PHEIDIPPIDES Yes, and by Zeus I'll show I was right to hit you.

STREPSIADES [1332] You utter scum, how can it ever be right to hit your father?

PHEIDIPPIDES [1334] I'll prove it, and I'll win the argument against you.

STREPSIADES [1335] You'll win on this?

PHEIDIPPIDES By a mile, and easily. Choose which of the two Arguments you want.

STREPSIADES [1337] What two Arguments?

PHEIDIPPIDES The Stronger or the Weaker.

STREPSIADES [1338] Well, by Zeus, my friend, I really did get you taught to argue against what's just, if you're going to persuade me of this: that it's just and fine for a father to be beaten by his sons.

PHEIDIPPIDES [1342] Oh, I do think I'll persuade you, so that once you've heard me out even you won't have a word to say against it.

STREPSIADES [1344] All right, I'd like to hear what you could possibly say.

SECOND AGON

Father and son argue over the beating, and Pheidippides threatens to beat his mother too.

CHORUS

1345 Your job, old man, is to think
how you'll get the better of him,
since if he weren't relying on something
he wouldn't be so unruly.
He's got something to make him bold; the fellow's nerve
is plain to see.

1351 But now you must tell the chorus how the fight first got started. You'll have to do it one way or another.

STREPSIADES 1353 All right, I'll tell you how we first started quarreling. We were having dinner, as you know, and first I told him to take his lyre and sing a song of Simonides, the one about how the Ram got shorn. And right away he said playing the lyre and singing over the wine was old-fashioned, like a woman singing while she grinds barley.[72]

PHEIDIPPIDES 1359 Well, shouldn't you have been beaten and trampled right then and there, ordering me to sing as if you were throwing a dinner for cicadas?

STREPSIADES 1361 That's exactly the kind of thing he was saying in there then, just like now. He said Simonides was a bad poet. I could barely stand it, but at first I put up with it all the same. Then I told him to take a sprig of myrtle, at least, and recite me something from Aeschylus. And right away he says, "Oh sure, Aeschylus. I rate him first among poets: so full of noise, incoherent, a windbag, a maker of crags!" And how do you think my heart heaved at that? Still, I bit back my temper and said, "Well then, recite something by these newer poets, whatever those

72 Simonides was a great lyric poet (c. 556–468 BC); the song mocked a wrestler named Krios ("Ram") for being "shorn," that is, beaten.

clever things of theirs are."[73] 1371 And right away he sang some speech of Euripides, about how a brother (Heracles save us!) was screwing his sister, from the same mother! And I couldn't stand it anymore. I laid into him right away with plenty of foul abuse. And then, naturally, we went at it, word for word, until he jumps up and starts thrashing me and pounding me and choking me and crushing me.[74]

PHEIDIPPIDES 1377 Well, wasn't I right to, when you won't praise Euripides, the cleverest of them all?

STREPSIADES 1379 Cleverest, him! You— what should I call you? But I'll just get beaten again.

PHEIDIPPIDES By Zeus, and rightly so.

STREPSIADES 1380 Rightly how? I brought you up, you shameless thing! I understood everything you meant when you were still lisping. If you said "wawa," I'd know what you meant and give you a drink. When you asked for "num-num," I'd come bringing you bread. And you'd hardly have said "caca" before I'd pick you up, carry you outdoors, and hold you out. But now you, when you were strangling me

1386 and I was hollering and shouting that I needed to shit, you didn't have the heart, you scum, to carry me outdoors. No, I was choking, and I made caca right there.

CHORUS

1391 I think the young men's hearts
are leaping to hear what he'll say.
For if he's done things like this
and talks his way round us,
we wouldn't give a single chickpea
for the hides of old men.

73 At drinking parties, a guest who recited without the lyre held a sprig of myrtle.
74 The speech came from Euripides' *Aeolus*, in which Macareus sleeps with his sister Canace; Athenian law allowed marriage to a half-sister by the same father, but not by the same mother.

1397 Your job, you heaver and lever of newfangled words, is to find some way of persuading, so that you'll seem to be saying what's just.

PHEIDIPPIDES 1399 How sweet it is to keep company with new and clever things, and to be able to look down on the established laws! When I had my mind on horses alone, I couldn't say three words without slipping up. But now that this man himself has put a stop to all that, and I spend my time with subtle ideas and arguments and deep thoughts, I think I'll show that it's just to punish one's father.

STREPSIADES 1406 Then by Zeus, go back to your horses! For me it's better to keep a four-horse team than to be beaten to a pulp.

PHEIDIPPIDES 1408 I'll go back to the point in my argument where you cut me off. And first I'll ask you this: did you hit me when I was a boy?

STREPSIADES 1410 I did, because I loved you and cared about you.

PHEIDIPPIDES Then tell me: isn't it just for me, too, to love you the same way and hit you, since loving means hitting? Why should your body be exempt from blows, and mine not? I was born free too, after all. "The children howl; you think the father shouldn't howl?" You'll say the custom is that this is a child's lot. But I'd reply that old men are children twice over. And it's more fitting for old men to howl than young ones, since there's less excuse for them when they do wrong.[75]

STREPSIADES 1420 But nowhere is it the custom for a father to be treated like that.

PHEIDIPPIDES 1421 Well, wasn't the man who first made that law a man just like you and me, who persuaded the people of old by talking? So am I any less entitled to make a new law in my turn for sons in the future, that they hit their fathers back? All the blows we took before the law was made, we write off. We'll let

75 A parody of Euripides' *Alcestis* (691): "You love the daylight; do you think your father doesn't?"

them have the beatings they gave us for free. Look at roosters and other animals like that, how they fight back against their fathers. And yet how are they any different from us, except that they don't draft decrees?

STREPSIADES [1430] Then since you imitate roosters in everything, why don't you eat shit and sleep on a perch?

PHEIDIPPIDES [1432] It's not the same thing, my dear sir, and Socrates wouldn't think so either.

STREPSIADES [1433] Then don't hit me. Otherwise you'll have only yourself to blame someday.

PHEIDIPPIDES [1434] How so?

STREPSIADES Because I'm entitled to punish you, and you're entitled to punish your son, if you have one.

PHEIDIPPIDES [1435] And if I don't have one, I'll have howled for nothing, and you'll die with the last laugh on me.

STREPSIADES [1437] Gentlemen of my own age, I think he's saying what's just. And I think we ought to grant these youngsters what's fair. It's only right that we should howl if we don't do what's just.

PHEIDIPPIDES [1440] Now consider yet another point.

STREPSIADES No, because it'll finish me—

PHEIDIPPIDES [1441] And yet maybe you won't mind what you've just been through.

STREPSIADES [1442] How so? Go on, teach me what good you'll do me out of all this.

PHEIDIPPIDES [1443] I'll beat my mother, just like you.

STREPSIADES What's that? What are you saying? That's another evil, and even worse!

PHEIDIPPIDES [1444] And what if I take the Weaker
[1445] Argument and win against you, proving that one ought to beat one's mother?

STREPSIADES 1447 What then? If you do that, nothing will stop you from throwing yourself into the Pit along with Socrates and the Weaker Argument.[76]

FOURTH EPISODE

The Clouds reveal their purpose, and Strepsiades sets fire to the Thinkery.

STREPSIADES 1452 This is what I've suffered because of you, Clouds, after I put all my affairs in your hands.

CHORUS 1454 No, you're to blame for this yourself, for twisting yourself into shady dealings.

STREPSIADES 1456 Then why didn't you tell me this back then, instead of egging on an old man from the country?

CHORUS 1458 This is what we do every time we see someone in love with shady dealings: we drop him into trouble, so that he'll learn to fear the gods.

STREPSIADES 1462 Ugh, Clouds, that's harsh, but it's just. I shouldn't have tried to cheat on the money I borrowed. So now, my dearest boy, come with me and destroy that scum Chaerephon, and Socrates, the men who deceived you and me.

PHEIDIPPIDES 1467 No, I wouldn't do my teachers wrong.

STREPSIADES 1468 Yes, yes! Respect Zeus, the god of our fathers!

PHEIDIPPIDES 1469 Listen to him: "Zeus, the god of our fathers"! How old-fashioned you are. Is there any such thing as Zeus?

STREPSIADES 1470 There is.

PHEIDIPPIDES There isn't, no, because Whirl is king now. He's driven Zeus out.

76 The Pit (*barathron*) was a ravine outside Athens into which the bodies of executed criminals were thrown.

STREPSIADES 1472 He hasn't driven him out. I only thought so because of this whirl-pot here. Oh, poor me, to think I took even you, a bit of pottery, for a god![77]

PHEIDIPPIDES 1475 Stay here and rave and babble to yourself.

STREPSIADES 1476 Oh, what madness! How out of my mind I was, throwing out the gods because of Socrates! But dear Hermes, please don't be angry with me, and don't crush me. Forgive me for losing my wits over all their hot-air talk. And be my adviser: should I bring a lawsuit against them and prosecute, or do whatever you think best? ... You're right to advise me not to stitch together a lawsuit, but to burn down the windbags' house as fast as I can. 1485 Here, here, Xanthias! Come out and bring a ladder and a mattock. Then climb up onto the Thinkery and dig away the roof, if you love your master, until you bring the house down on top of them. And somebody bring me a lit torch. I'll make one of them pay me back today, however big frauds they are.

FIRST STUDENT 1493 Oh no! Oh no!

STREPSIADES 1494 Your job, torch, is to send up lots of flame.

FIRST STUDENT 1495 You there, what are you doing?

STREPSIADES What am I doing? What else but chopping logic with the rafters of your house?

SECOND STUDENT 1497 Oh no, who's setting fire to our house?

STREPSIADES 1498 The man whose cloak you took.

THIRD STUDENT 1499 You'll kill us! You'll kill us!

STREPSIADES That's exactly what I want, provided my mattock doesn't betray my hopes, or I don't somehow fall first and break my neck.

SOCRATES 1502 You there, what on earth are you doing up on the roof?

77 Greek *dinos* means both "whirl" (Socrates' cosmic vortex) and a kind of large pot; Strepsiades points to one standing outside the Thinkery.

STREPSIADES 1503 I walk on air and look down on the sun.[78]

SOCRATES 1504 Oh no, poor wretched me, I'll suffocate!

CHAEREPHON 1505 And poor miserable me, I'll burn to death!

STREPSIADES 1506 What possessed you to insult the gods and peer up at the moon's seat?

HERMES 1508 Chase them, pelt them, hit them! They've earned it many times over, but above all because I know how they wronged the gods.

EXODOS

The chorus leaves the stage.

CHORUS 1510 Lead the way out. We've danced enough for today.

78 Strepsiades throws back the words Socrates spoke at his first entrance; *periphronō* means both "think about" and "look down on".