

Bryan LOCKETT

Aristophanes' *Clouds*: Self-Containment and Vulnerability

Of all the comedies of Aristophanes, none is more self-contained than the *Clouds*. The characters who inhabit its stage world have almost no interaction with characters from the "outside" (or, perhaps more appropriately, the "off-stage") world. Most plays of Aristophanes employ one or both of the two following methods to break the self-containment of the stage world: either characters make routine entrances and exits to and from off-stage (the world outside), or the world on-stage itself changes, as in the *Peace* or the *Frogs*, where the journey of the characters requires the audience to visualize an entirely new location. In the *Clouds*, however, only the creditors Pasion and Amynias enter from the world off-stage to demand the money they had lent to Strepsiades (lines 1213-1302).

Why, then, is the world of the play so shut off from that outside, and what in turn does the single break in this separation accomplish? This paper compares the use of stage space and space relations in the *Clouds* with that in the *Wasps*, *Birds*, and *Acharnians*. Such a comparison suggests that the self-contained isolation of the characters in the *Clouds* emphasizes an important thematic of the play, namely the threat to the integrity of the *oikos* by the Phrontisterion and its sophistic inhabitants.

All three of the other plays present themes very much related to the day-to-day operations of the Athenian state: peace in the *Acharnians*, the law and courts in the other two. In the *Clouds*, however, our hero seeks to escape his own personal debts through educating himself and his son in sophistry. The more personal, more "household"-directed, less state-oriented nature of this problem, then, encourages and allows the play's self-containment; it is, however, the break in this detachment that begins the process of revealing to Strepsiades (and, through him, the audience) the real danger inherent both in the problem and in the solution our hero seeks. When Strepsiades is reduced to quibbling over the gender of a kneading trough with his creditors, emphasizing the contrast between the imaginings of sophistry and the tangible reality of the objects, the props, of the play, he returns to his own simple, physical roots, beating his creditors into leaving and setting the stage for his own beating at the hands of his son. Only then can the audience see just how dangerous these teachings are, setting sons against fathers, young against old, the upper class against the common people, endangering the people of Athens at the personal, household level. The world of the stage is still essentially self-contained, however, and so while Strepsiades has been excluded from the "benefits" of sophistry, he is still imprisoned alongside the Phrontisterion and its denizens. Even if he did manage to leave the stage, his home is on-stage as well, and so he would eventually have to return to it. He is, therefore, left with only one way to escape this world of "Lesser Logic" and sophistry, for if he cannot leave the stage world behind, he must destroy it, which is, of course, precisely what he does.