

## BOOK REVIEW

*Comédie et Philosophie. Socrate et les "Présocratiques" dans les Nuées d'Aristophane.*  
Edited by ANDRÉ LAKS et ROSSELLA SAETTA COTTONE. Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2013. Pp. 259. Paper, €20.00. ISBN 978-2-7288-0495-5.

The essays in this admirable collection fall into three parts, "In the air," "On earth," and "Afterwards". They are preceded by a careful translation of *Clouds* 110–517, the principal section to be discussed, by Myrto Gondicas and followed by summary comments of the co-organizer, André Laks. (In what follows, my translations approximate or paraphrase the always lucid French.)

In his opening essay (translated into French from English), Alexander Mourelatos bypasses the usual suspect, Diogenes of Apollonia, taking a surprise turn to Xenophanes, who explained celestial phenomena (*ta meteōra*) as differing cloud formations. More speculatively, he finds a reference at line 349 to "the comet of which Xenophanes spoke" (taking *Xenophantous* as the original reading), a reference which Socrates would intend but which ordinary people like Strepsiades would not grasp. Rosella Saetta Cottone, the second co-organizer, finds reflections of Empedocles especially in the *parodos* of the *Clouds*: his "new solar Apollo," the workings of light, reflection, and mimesis, and the development of new kinds of knowledge and awareness (*connaissance*), both philosophical and poetic. Gods are not lowered, but men raised up by an act of divine thought "in a quasi-initiatory exercise that imitates the refractions of cosmic light." After discussing the shifting role played by the chorus, she concludes that Aristophanes' poetry "functions as a daimonic element of mediation between a philosophical culture normally reserved for the elite and a popular culture belonging to all the spectators."

Gabor Betegh, questioning Diogenes' relevance, brings us instead to Archelaus, Anaxagoras' student but also a well-established Athenian and Socrates' teacher, whose remains suggest the important continuity from cosmogony and cosmology to anthropogony and anthropology, including the evolution of social institutions and laws. Socrates' figure in the *Clouds* is a mish-mash of many different components, including "natural philosophers, sophists, Hippocratic doctors, and all sorts of intellectuals"; we should now add Archelaus as an important

“piece of the puzzle” (and perhaps a more lasting influence on Socrates than Plato wishes us to realize?)

Diogenes stocks continue to fall as Silvia Fazzo finds no evidence that he and his teachings were well known at Athens. There is a contradiction, too, at lines 232–34 between “Socrates” fearing a loss of humidity from the earth’s drawing to itself the sap or vigor (*ikmas*) of thought and Diogenes’ doctrine of pure, dry air, or “what people call air,” as the principle of life and thought. Empedocles stocks, however, may continue to rise with Jean-Claude Picot’s essay on the *pnigeus*, or baking-oven, at *Clouds* 95–7, an image of sky-cover derived from the philosopher Hippon and made ridiculous earlier by Cratinus. For Socrates, as for Empedocles, the clouds are divine. Would Socrates’ quasi-Empedoclean religious initiation enable humans to escape from the *pnigeus*? Or will they be burnt up like coals (Strepsiades’ contribution), as implied in the play’s finale?

Leopoldo Iribarren’s pivotal essay on “Sophistic vs. Cosmology” brings us from the heavens down to earth, from the Pre-Socratics (notably Parmenides, with his Two Ways), who use language in the search for external reality, to the sophists, like Protagoras and Gorgias, for whom language creates reality. Debts to specific thinkers, he argues, matter less than the types of reasoning used in the Thinkery – and what Strepsiades, in his wild, fantastic misconstructions, makes of these. Similarly, Emilino Buis traces in Pheidippides’ arguments “sophistic reflections on the nature of law and the ways of manipulating them.” Aristophanes, in his view, warns Athens against the risks of sophistic argument and “the rhetorical manipulation of public spaces”.

Pierre Judet De La Combe reminds us, very helpfully, that cosmology and dialectic, which we (as scholars) distinguish, are confused in the popular mind: it is all “science,” all strange, hence well represented by the strange figure of “Socrates”. Far from merely rehearsing old prejudices and clichés about science as greedy, or corrupting, or hostile to ethical and religious traditions, comedy observes the learned world from an unexpected, troubling, and strangely comprehensive point of view. Its theatrical autonomy transcends “other existing forms of discourse and the constraining social realities that they represent.”

Retrospectively, Fernando Santoro argues that the passages about Aristophanes in Plato’s *Apology* 18b-c are taken from Socrates’ actual defense: “Alongside Apollo, Aristophanes is one of the principal witnesses for the defense.” Socrates uses comic devices to mock his accuser, Meletus; behind the scenes; Plato develops his own playful, philosophical dialogue in rivalry with Aristophanes. Massimo Stella takes a new look at Leo Strauss’s difficult, much neglected, yet provocative

and often insightful book, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (1966). Strauss, he suggests, crossed Plato with Nietzsche, combining a Platonic reading of the *Clouds* with a Nietzschean critique of modern philosophy. As the *Clouds* demonstrates, philosophy, whether at Athens or in latter-day Europe, dangerously disregards the realities of human nature; yet theater, in its way, succeeds where philosophy fails.

As André Laks's summation suggests, this collection of essays succeeds in enlarging the range of possible references in the *Clouds* to Pre-Socratic philosophers and explores widespread connections between philosophical theory, human behavior, and comic dramaturgy. Let me add that, being exceptionally well organized, it repays reading from beginning to end. Personally, I feel gratitude (*reconnaissance*) for this enjoyable learning experience, and for having been provoked into revising long-entertained opinions about Socrates and Strepsiades, philosophy and comedy, in my beloved, ever-fluctuating *Clouds*.

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