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## **Thinking Through *The Clouds*: Comedy in Hegel and Strauss<sup>1</sup>**

### ***A laudatio temporis acti?***

Aristophanes's *The Clouds* (423 BCE) stages the story of the farmer Strepsiades and his fraught relationship with a profligate son, avaricious creditors, and a teacher from the nearby "Thinkery" ("Phrontisterion")—the great Socrates, who enters the play in a basket suspended above the earth. After relinquishing his hopes that his son Phidippides may learn from the wise Socrates how to outwit his father's creditors into forgiving his debts, Strepsiades himself becomes Socrates's student, proving to be hapless in all respects. His plan backfires: Phidippides eventually enrolls and learns the art of making the worse argument appear the better. He uses this technique to his advantage, beating his father and arguing that such actions can now be logically defended. Hovering over the action of the play are Socrates's invented deities, the eponymous Clouds, who function as a chorus and assume the shape of anyone or anything they desire. If the old gods do not exist, as Socrates proclaims, new ones can be created. Strepsiades is ultimately made a fool by everyone around him; even the Clouds chastise him for his impure intentions. Embarrassed and embittered, the farmer sets the Thinkery ablaze in the play's final scene, leaving a thoroughly confused Socrates in a state of total collapse.

Mark Roche has called *The Clouds* a "comedy of negation," in which the comic subject has "insubstantial goals and fails, but in failing demonstrates substantial means" (162). Strepsiades's intentions, in other words, are misguided from the outset, and thus the audience is not disappointed by his failure. But what of the drama's other comic subject, Socrates? Like most of Aristophanes's comedies, *The Clouds* ridicules the superstitions, corruption, and folly of

Athenian society. Yet unlike most of them, it does not end in merriment and reconciliation but, rather, in total destruction. Indeed, its treatment of Socrates has long been a subject of controversy among the poet's critics, some speculating that it may have even (indirectly) contributed to the philosopher's eventual trial and execution.<sup>2</sup> Summarizing the drama's standard reading, Kenneth Dover argues that Aristophanes treats Socrates as a "parasitic intellectual," admitting that to philosophers and intellectual historians, this is a "cruel injustice" (Dover xxii). This position would seem logical even upon a cursory reading of the play: Aristophanes's Socrates, for example, charges a fee for his instruction, a common practice among the Sophists but allegedly not implemented by Socrates himself. Yet insisting that Aristophanes was no philosopher, Dover justifies his oversight by conceding that the play can be appreciated even if it has nothing valuable to say about the historical Socrates.<sup>3</sup>

While there have been attempts to revise this reading of *The Clouds*—for example, by the contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum—Dover's reading has generally prevailed, contributing to a certain image of Aristophanean comedy. For if Aristophanes treated Socrates like a Sophist, and if he viewed Sophistry as having a purely negative effect on Athenian society, then his aim in this dark comedy—as in others—would simply have been to make vice and folly appear so laughable that they would no longer appear desirable. Such comedy would be reducible to the clearing away of error, often associated with the new, in order to preserve the good and the true already embodied in existing institutions. Indeed, a prominent strain in modern literary criticism treats comedy—along with the related categories of irony and satire—as a conservative or restorative genre. Admittedly writing under the bleakest of circumstances, Theodor Adorno, for example, declared a moratorium on comedy (which he conflates with irony and satire) as a legitimate form of critique. In a section titled "Juvenals Irrtum" (a reference to the Roman satirist)

from his exilic work *Minima Moralia*, Adorno insists on the necessary social consensus on which satire or irony relies, rendering independent, subjective reflection excessive. This social consensus over what constitutes a worthy object of persiflage (usually moral decay) evinces, for Adorno, satire's traditional alliance with the "strong" and with "authority"—namely, the authority of the past (Adorno 239). Tracing the historical origins of this structure, Adorno next identifies Aristophanes in particular as a culprit, whose comedy he considers a "modernistische laudatio temporis acti auf den Pöbel, den sie verleumdete" (240). Thus, despite its modernist bent, comedy for Adorno is essentially a backward-looking "medium" (239), seeking to preserve that which is under threat by new and unfamiliar forces. When we laugh, Adorno implies, we are laughing with authority and tradition on our side.

The significance of this perspective notwithstanding, it cannot, I suggest, serve as the final word on the "medium" of comedy. Indeed, in this essay I will argue that two philosophers widely considered conservative in their political orientations—G.W.F. Hegel and Leo Strauss—present, ironically, a radically different image of Aristophanes and comedy than the one adumbrated above. My argument proceeds accordingly: First, I will summarize Hegel's dialectics of comedy and explain why he privileges comic subjectivity over the distinct but related categories of satire and "subjective humor," or irony. Next, I will show how Hegel's defense of *The Clouds*—most thoroughly discussed in his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*—presents a convincing case not only for Aristophanes but also for why he and Socrates may be more fundamentally linked than antagonistic in their political-philosophical dispositions. Finally, I will turn to Strauss's late and oft-overlooked text *Aristophanes and Socrates* (1966) to suggest that his reading of *The Clouds* functions, indirectly, as a rereading of Hegel's position in different terms. Both Hegel and Strauss substantially complicate the relationship between the comic poet and the

philosopher, allowing us to think anew the function of comedy vis-à-vis the state or city it confronts: in antiquity and, to an extent, in modernity. What we are left with is anything but a traditionally conservative image of Aristophanes, Hegel, or Strauss, and a more robust image of comedy as a viable form of political critique.<sup>4</sup>

### **Comedy and its Aberrations**

Hegel considers Old Comedy (and Aristophanes in particular) not only the crowning achievement of the Greek “Kunstreligion”—indeed, the form that dissolves art as such (Hegel 15: 572)—but also the phenomenological shape that bears most responsibility for initiating the principle of modern subjectivity (15: 573), even more so than the tragic art it dialectically sublates. But if comedy is an apex of sorts, it also contains within it the possibility for the “aberrations” mentioned above (Law 120). These lesser forms of comedy never surpass the freedom of spirit embodied in the original, and this position is, in part, how Hegel’s theory of comedy has come to be understood as conservative. So how does Hegel arrive at these distinctions?

Tragedy for Hegel essentially stages the fate of a hero who, despite his best intentions, comes to ruin at the hands of forces beyond his control, inspiring fear and pity in the audience. While the tragic hero expresses a desire for freedom, he is ultimately bound by necessity, which appears in the shape of abstract divinities. The one-sidedness of the tragic hero suggests that the freedom he seeks has not been fully obtained, and its representation is manifested in the division between an acting subject and a knowing chorus. In comedy, the gods of necessity are swept off the stage, and the comic character’s self-consciousness is no longer disentangled from universal consciousness. Thus, while tragedy awakens the principle of individual autonomy, or at least “self-determination,” Hegel asserts in *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* that “in noch höherem Grade muß

für das Hervortreten der *Komödie* das freie Recht der *Subjektivität* und deren selbstgewisser Herrschaft sich hervorgetan haben” (Hegel 15: 534).<sup>5</sup> In comedy, this principle receives its full articulation—or, as Stephen Law phrases it, “The comic spirit declares that the objective world is really nothing but the subjective world we create for ourselves” (Law 116). Hence the self-assuredness of the comic character, who, despite often coming to ruin through bad intentions, faulty means, or infelicitous circumstances, remains essentially intact and reconciled with himself. This, for Hegel, is the world of Old Comedy. By revealing the contradiction between pretense and actuality, comedy negates the insubstantial and bodies forth the substantial, which has now revealed itself in the comic subject’s consciousness. However, what is insubstantial must be transparent to itself, which is why Hegel argues that the truly comic subject is ridiculous not only in the eyes of the audience but in his own eyes as well: his seriousness is, in a sense, always accompanied by its own “destruction” (15: 552–53). This is not an immediately self-evident claim; as I will discuss shortly, it is difficult to imagine how the Strepsiades and the Socrates of *The Clouds* are laughable to themselves and not merely laughable to us. And yet it is precisely this feature of genuine comedy that for Hegel distinguishes it from those aberrant iterations of the comic he finds distasteful: satire and irony or subjective humor.

Like comedy, satire emerges as a liminal form in Hegel’s aesthetics, in this case between classical and romantic art. Yet unlike the unrestrained and free subjectivity of comedy, satire is stuck between, on the one hand, an abstract, finite, and unsatisfied subjectivity (unsatisfied because the satirist’s vision of the good and true cannot be realized in the empirical world) and, on the other, “eine götterlose Wirklichkeit und ein verdorbenes Dasein” (14: 122). Despite its love for the substantive—which it shares with the comic—satire remains embittered, and it lacks the conciliatory moment necessary to rise above the material it negates: it is not “heiter” and “zornlos”

like Greek comedy and, more specifically, Aristophanean comedy (14: 120). Satire thus cannot bring about “die echte poetische Auflösung [...] des Falschen und Widerwärtigen und die echte Versöhnung im Wahren”; it remains what Hegel pejoratively calls “prosaic,” by which he means un-aesthetic (14: 125). Hegel argues that satire can indeed only become poetic “insofern sie uns die verderbte Gestalt der Wirklichkeit so vor Augen bringt, dass dieses Verderben durch seine eigene Torheit in sich zusammenfällt” (14: 124). In other words, satire can only become poetic if it becomes comic, if it presents the discord inherent within its object of representation as collapsing of its own folly, as Aristophanes was able to accomplish. As Law argues, Hegel seems to reveal his Hellenophilia and his bias against all things Latin when he argues that cold, abstract satire must have emerged on Roman soil, which was ruled by a cold, abstract law (Law 124).

If satire is defined by the satirist’s love for what is substantial—a love that drives him to embitterment because of the inability to realize this vision—then irony, which, in its aesthetic form, Hegel renders as “subjective humor,” is defined by the artist’s “disenchantment with the substantive,” such that he negates everything and raises only himself to the level of a divinity (Law 125). This artist enters the material of his own work, and his chief activity consists of “alles, was sich objektiv machen und eine feste Gestalt der Wirklichkeit gewinnen will oder in der Außenwelt zu haben scheint, durch die Macht subjektiver Einfälle, Gedankenblitze, frappanter Auffassungsweisen in sich zerfallen zu lassen und aufzulösen” (Hegel 14: 229). The subjective humorist, in other words—and Hegel names Jean Paul as exemplary, but he is probably thinking of the romantics more generally—destroys everything of substance, offering nothing in the form of a replacement. This over-inflated subject negates without restraint, which is what distinguishes him from the genuine comic artist. Subjective humor, as I will argue, also plays an implicit role in Hegel’s reading of *The Clouds*.

In all three cases discussed above, Hegel underscores the shared principle of subjectivity in its opposition to a corrupt universal. In satire, this subjectivity is unsatisfied but remains tethered to a notion of the substantive; in subjective humor, the subjectivity is so frustrated with the given that Hegel renounces any notion of the substantive altogether. Only comedy proper executes the type of determinate negation through which the insubstantial withers away and the substantial remains intact. This has driven some commentators—including Martin Holtermann, in his recent study of Aristophanes reception in nineteenth-century Germany—to argue that Hegel’s theory of comedy is essentially “conservative,” insofar as it seeks to stabilize notions of the “good” and the “rational” (Holtermann 116). What I want to stress, however, is that Hegel has not made any explicit claims about how the norms or values that are to be preserved in comedy are to be drawn exclusively from the past, or from any existing authority or state of affairs whatsoever, as Adorno argues in his polemic against the legitimacy of comic critique. Phrased interrogatively: What is inherently conservative about stabilizing the good and the rational if the content of these categories has yet to be determined—if they remain, that is, speculative rather than empirical? And how does Hegel’s theory of comedy play out, as it were, when applied to a specific text? A close reading of Hegel’s reflections on *The Clouds* in light of the theory discussed above may lead us to a different conclusion about the ideological implications of comedy.

### **Hegel’s Just Comedian**

Despite recent scholarly interest in the role of comedy for figures such as Hegel, Jean Paul, and Kierkegaard, less critical attention has been devoted to the specific legacy of Aristophanes in the German context.<sup>6</sup> Holtermann argues that Aristophanes’s reception in nineteenth-century Germany was bound to the nation’s burgeoning political consciousness. But because he does not consider *The Clouds* to be one of the poet’s salient political comedies, the work receives very little

attention. And indeed, more substantial than Holtermann's treatment of Hegel is his reading of the romantics, specifically the Schlegel brothers. Friedrich Schlegel, he suggests, praised Aristophanes as the "democratic" poet par excellence, whose aesthetic virtues consisted of what Schlegel called "freedom" and "gaiety"—not entirely unrelated to Hegel's own vision of the poet (Holtermann 92–101). But unlike Hegel, the Schlegels advocated that Aristophanes serve as a model for the contemporary German comic stage. Hegelian dialectics, by contrast, brooks no pure repetition: Aristophanes is very much a figure of the past, even if his comedy, as I will suggest, is future oriented.

In the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, we encounter our first allusion to *The Clouds*, which appears at the heel of the discussion of Greek tragedy. Hegel writes, "Indem die zufällige Bestimmung und oberflächliche Individualität, welche die Vorstellung den göttlichen Wesenheiten lieh, verschwindet, haben sie nach ihrer *natürlichen* Seite nur noch die Nacktheit ihres unmittelbaren Daseins, sie sind Wolken, ein verschwindender Dunst, wie jene Vorstellungen" (3: 543).<sup>7</sup> The once-feared divine beings of tragedy have been reduced in this comic spectacle to disappearing mist, to nothing more than the contingent shapes of their existence. Hence their comparison to clouds, which, as Socrates boasts to Strepsiades upon their initial encounter in the play, are able to become anything and everything they desire. For Hegel, *The Clouds* thus embodies comedy at its purest, insofar as what begins as content (the Clouds as Socrates's invented divinities) is later sedimented into form: comedy means the slaying of all gods, the reduction of all universals to particularities. Or, as Werner Hamacher writes in his reading of this passage, comedy entails "the completed depopulation of Heaven" (Hamacher 114). And, as Hegel continues, comedy stages how a nascent subjectivity emancipates itself from a corrupt universal order and shows contempt ("Spott") for that order (3: 543).

There is general scholarly consensus about these basic principles of Hegel's *Clouds*-based theory of comedy. William Desmond writes, for example, that Hegel establishes comedy's position as an intermediary between the ancient and modern worlds, marked by its turn toward "inwardness" (Desmond 320). Roche insists that Hegel's central insight is the association of comedy with subjectivity, and in his own reading of Aristophanes, Roche suggests that the most consistent feature of the poet's plays is an attack against all forms of contingent subjectivity, which include the "intellectual destroyers of the state" (Roche 160). Yet the ambiguous language of the passages above leaves open the question of whether Hegel has established a clear boundary between the author of *The Clouds* and its most memorable character, Socrates. He appears, in fact, to hint at an affinity between these two figures insofar as both perform an affront to the Greek pantheon: the playwright in having created a realm of possibility in which the gods can be mocked and do not exert ultimate power over individuals, and Socrates in his flippant renunciation of Zeus and subsequent invention of new gods. Without exploring the full implications of this ambiguity, Desmond raises the similar point that Aristophanes "must *already* be infected with the spirit of philosophical debunking in order to be able to both acknowledge its threat and fight against it." At another point, he calls the poet Socrates's "aesthetic twin" (Desmond 318, 320). In other words, Aristophanes is no naïve critic of Socrates; like the philosopher, he is beyond the immediacy of belief in the authority of divinities. In this way, Aristophanes and Socrates would be allied to an extent, as opposed to existing in a purely antagonistic relationship to one another. And in both *Phänomenologie des Geistes* and *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, Hegel implies that the triumph of subjectivity—through which a new and not yet fully understood principle was being articulated—was at the same time a cipher for the dissolution of the Ancient Greek world (15: 555). Both Aristophanes and Socrates were caught in the throes of this historical transition. What, then, in

Socrates does Aristophanes find worthy of ridicule? What makes this play not merely laughable but truly comical? For this we must turn to the *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, where Hegel most thoroughly unfolds the political-philosophical significance of this comedy.

Toward the beginning of his discussion of Socrates, Hegel creates an analogy between the Peloponnesian War and the philosopher by considering their respective relationships to Athens (18: 448). Socrates's presence, he argues, coincided with the foundering of Greek "Sittlichkeit," which he defines in the *Philosophie des Rechts* as "die [...] konkrete Identität des Guten und des subjektiven Willens, die Wahrheit derselben" (7: 286)<sup>8</sup>—morality as inscribed into the life of a people as opposed to being a function of individual choice. When Hegel moves on to discuss the Socratic method and the philosopher's renowned irony, he is careful to distinguish the Sophists from Socrates, who, he claims, went around telling people not only that they knew nothing, but that he himself knew nothing (18: 458). In contrast to the Sophists (represented by Gorgias and Protagoras), Socrates knew how to lead his interlocutors into a thoroughgoing confrontation with the presuppositions of their own "Vorstellungen" (18: 406–28). Thus, after singing the philosopher's praises, Hegel turns to what he calls the "negative side" of his philosophy: the aspect that created disorder and deprived the Athenians of their previous sense of security. This moment sets the stage, as it were, for the philosophical context in which Aristophanes emerges. It also marks the beginning of Hegel's own alliance with the comic poet, or of his position somewhere between Socrates and Aristophanes, between comedy and philosophy.

In a key passage, Hegel invokes both the disappearance of the existing laws and the cultivation of a reflecting consciousness, rendering what had previously been considered legitimate—"das im Bewußtsein Geltende, die Sitte, das Gesetzliche"—suddenly staggering: "Hierbei ist anzuführen, daß es Aristophanes ist, der die Sokratische Philosophie von dieser

negativen Seite aufgefaßt hat. Dies Bewußtsein des Aristophanes über die Einseitigkeit des Sokrates kann als ein Vorspiel davon angesehen werden, wie auch das athenische Volk seine negative Seite wohl erkannte und ihn zum Tode verurteilte” (18: 481–82). Two conclusions can be drawn from this passage: First, *The Clouds*, for Hegel, is to be read as an assault on Socrates himself and not on Sophistry as such; the philosopher appears to be the worthier object of ridicule. Second, Aristophanes’s attack was justified, despite Socrates’s generally moral, righteous character. But the true significance of this drama, Hegel suggests, is how it enacts a “preview” of the will of the Athenian people, who, as we know, later condemned Socrates to death. Aristophanes was thus able to drive the negative moment in Socrates to its bitter end, producing the comic effect by debunking precisely the dimension of his philosophy that the poet recognized as socially destructive: a negation of the negation. Hegel thus claims, “Das Prinzip der griechischen Welt konnte noch nicht das Prinzip der subjektiven Reflexion ertragen; so ist es als feindlich zerstörend aufgetreten” (18: 514). Worth emphasizing is the qualifier “noch nicht,” since it implies that Aristophanes/Hegel perceives Socrates’s principle of subjective reflection as untimely and thereby threatening, but not as simply immoral and impious.<sup>9</sup>

Turning to the plot of *The Clouds* and to the relationship between Socrates and Strepsiades, Hegel gets more specific: “Die Entscheidung wird beim Verfahren des Sokrates immer in das Subjekt, in das Gewissen gelegt werden; wo aber das schlecht ist, muß sich die Geschichte des Strepsiades wiederholen” (18: 485). For Hegel, Aristophanes ridicules Socrates not because he resolutely opposes the philosopher’s challenge to the gods and the moral and political authority they represent, not because he longs for the restoration of Greek ethical life (which would render his critique unambiguously conservative), and not because he simply opposes abstract thought and the mere “contingency of subjective reflection,” as Desmond would have it (324). Rather, it is

because Aristophanes views Strepsiades's greed, indolence, and unscrupulousness as within the realm of possibility in light of Socrates's presence in Athens. Socrates, for Hegel's Aristophanes, teaches the principle of subjectivity but does not prevent it from devolving into mere caprice: this is the case of Strepsiades, a truly comical figure, whose seriousness ultimately collapses on itself. His teacher is a more complicated figure, and perhaps Hegel has romanticism and/or subjective humor in mind with this critique (Desmond 324). The problem with Socrates would be, accordingly, that he takes himself—and only himself—too seriously. For seeing oneself as laughable means, structurally, refusing to absolutize one's own position. Socrates, by contrast, negates everything but himself and offers nothing in return—the ironist or subjective humorist par excellence. Embedded squarely within his history of philosophy, Hegel thus makes a claim about the comic as such, which he describes accordingly: “Mensch, Sache aufzuzeigen, wie es in sich selbst auflöst in seinem Aufspreizen. Ist die Sache nicht in ihr selbst ihr Widerspruch, so ist das Komische oberflächlich, grundlos” (18: 427–28). We could surmise that if *The Clouds* had targeted either Strepsiades or Socrates alone, it would be merely ridiculous and not genuinely comical. But instead, it isolates the contradiction at hand: that between the principle of subjectivity and the possibility for it to become aberrant, rogue, and, ultimately, destructive.

Regarding the official charges that Socrates was guilty of introducing new deities and corrupting the youth, Hegel does indeed affirm the view of the Athenian court, but not in the way that the court had initially intended it. According to Hegel, Socrates's elevation of individual conscience was, in a sense, tantamount to creating a new god: it arrogated moral authority to the individual and thus, at the very least, occupied the same function as the divinities Socrates was simultaneously debunking. This gesture necessarily came into conflict with the religious and political foundations of Athens. Aristophanes, we can surmise, understood this better than, and

prior to, the Athenian people, having invented the *Clouds* in order to represent this fundamental conflict in comic form. He comprehended both the threat that Socrates posed and the turning point he would signify in the collective consciousness of the Greek people. For as Hegel will finally suggest, Socrates's execution did not indicate the defeat of the principle of subjectivity he inaugurated; rather, it highlighted Socrates's role in the development of a more mature stage of consciousness. Socrates's comic death was a prelude to his actual death, and his actual death was a prelude to the death of classical Athenian culture, and, concomitantly, the birth of modern subjectivity. As a contingent individual, Socrates was seen as committing a crime against the state in articulating this principle; as a consequence, he was made to suffer the full force of the law. (This is why Hegel calls Socrates a tragic hero, implying that Aristophanes's comedy prefigured a historical tragedy as if it had already transpired.)<sup>10</sup> But as the representative of a new principle, he cemented (for posterity) his importance to a declining Athenian civilization by undergoing a comic execution. Hegel renders Aristophanes a more refined dialectician who had the best interests of the *demos* in mind, and thus the sole contemporary of Socrates capable of isolating his individual crime while celebrating the objective principle for which he stood. Aristophanes winks at Socrates—and his audience, then and now—precisely as he makes him out to be a fool. As the following will show, Leo Strauss arrives at similar conclusions a century later, if indeed operating within a distinct hermeneutic framework.

### **Strauss's Total Comedy**

Known predominantly as a political philosopher, the German Jewish émigré Leo Strauss was no literary critic by training, which makes his late and rather cryptic work *Aristophanes and Socrates* something of an oddity.<sup>11</sup> While not a traditional work of literary criticism, the text contains

familiar Straussian themes. Its explicit aim is to renew the ancient quarrel between the philosopher and the poet, and to do so by taking seriously the latter's perspective: what, Strauss asks, did Aristophanes truly think of Socrates? This question informs not only his reading of *The Clouds*—which constitutes the book's first and most substantial chapter—but also of the eleven other Aristophanean comedies, each of which receives its own chapter. By highlighting the details, paradoxes, and recurring motifs in the poet's dramas, Strauss draws conclusions about both the characters through whom Aristophanes may have been ventriloquizing his politics as well as the different ways in which Socrates functions as a foil to these politics.

Given Strauss's philosophical pedigree, his explicit concern is not with Socratic irony or the principle of subjectivity, as was the case with Hegel, but, rather, with the poet's depiction of Socrates's relationship to the traditional Greek pantheon and to his fellow citizens. Strauss is also concerned with how Aristophanes's own relationship to these entities can be derived from his position on Socrates. In his discussion of *The Clouds*, he suggests that Socrates's deities are actually more powerful than any that came before them—Zeus included—since they have no boundaries and no proper form. In a key passage, Strauss writes that the Clouds can “imitate everything they see; they reveal the nature of everything they see by taking its shape and hence, in particular, they mock laughable men by exaggerating their shape (i.e., they are in particular the models for comic poets)” (18). Because the Clouds assume the shape of everything they encounter in order to mock it through caricature (including both Socrates and Strepsiades), Strauss emphasizes how Aristophanes inserts himself into his own drama as a Cloud-like figure. And indeed, in the first (of two) *parabases* in the play, the playwright speaks to the audience directly in the guise of the lead Cloud, Koryphaios, who is also the leader of the chorus. This observation first likens the comic poet to the Clouds in their shared gesture of imitation and mockery:

Aristophanes also becomes the characters he mocks—including Socrates—and the effect of this imitation/exaggeration is that it relativizes the positions of these characters. Socrates might be a wise man, but his wisdom has limitations. But Strauss also reflects on the nature of Aristophanean mockery itself, which is performed within the confines of the comedy, thus pointing to two different forms of mockery at work: Socrates's highfalutin mockery of Zeus and the piety of his fellow citizens, which is without restraint and harmful, and Aristophanes's more concealed mockery, which is dispersed throughout various characters but more effective because it speaks directly to the audience in their language.

Insofar as Aristophanes's dispersed and chastened form of mockery allows him to say much more, the poet, Strauss concludes, is able to protect himself against persecution in a way that the philosopher cannot (313). With this Strauss appears to be invoking his notion of "esoteric" writing, upon which he elaborates more fully in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952). Such writing is inserted "between the lines" by authors who might otherwise be threatened by the surrounding political circumstances—but it can be all the more impactful because it reaches those who are intended to read it (*Persecution* 36). The more relevant passage, however, comes slightly later: "This is not to deny that some great writers might have stated certain important truths quite openly by using as mouthpiece some disreputable character: they would thus show how much they disapproved of pronouncing the truths in question" (36). In *Aristophanes*, Strauss provides an example of this phenomenon: disreputable characters—Socrates included—utter truths that the poet at least partially endorses. Aristophanes's criticism thus may not be leveled at impiety as such but, rather, at how the critique of impiety is articulated. Comic debunking, while more hidden, is more democratic, more sympathetic, more body-oriented than abstract, philosophical debunking, even if both pursue similar ends.

The Socrates of *The Clouds* is for Strauss “beyond the reach of the law” (Strauss 37), and this renders him a political threat. However, because Aristophanes speaks as a Cloud, and because Socrates both invented the Clouds and is, in turn, their favorite among mortals, we can also infer from Strauss that Aristophanes does not unequivocally condemn Socrates—which leads us back into Hegel’s territory. In his article on Strauss’s reading, Devin Stauffer argues that even more important than the political critique of Socrates is Aristophanes’s disguised respect for—or even tribute to—Socrates’s charm and guile, evidenced by the effect that the Socrates of *The Clouds* has on Phidippides (Stauffer 334–35). I would modify this claim by suggesting that these two dimensions to Strauss’s reading are not unrelated, that critique and admiration, in fact, go hand in hand. For again, if Socrates invented the Clouds and Aristophanes speaks as one of them, does not Socrates also, in a sense, invent Aristophanes? Formulated differently, might Socrates’s “extremism” (Strauss 47) establish the conditions of possibility for Aristophanes’s perspective to emerge, his ridicule for Socrates’s impudence as well as his sympathy for the larger cause? The Clouds forge a link between these two figures—created by Aristophanes’s Socrates and, in turn, occupied by Aristophanes (as his mouthpiece and model)—despite their irreconcilable differences. When even the Clouds abandon Socrates because of how “untenable” or “indefensible” he has become, we can identify the extent to which Aristophanes accompanies the philosopher, and where they part ways. For while the poet wants to expand, enlarge, or even replace the traditional pantheon, the philosopher wants to destroy it altogether (Strauss 47). Socrates, Strauss claims, is “the plaything of things—‘the Clouds’—that he has in a way created but that he does not comprehend” (49). What is incomprehensible to him is the potentially destructive effect that the Clouds might have on those who are not prepared to sever ties with traditional religion, the family, and the state—the binding forces of Greek life.

Aristophanes might indeed be affirming the need for these institutions, but not because he finds them in their current state desirable or worthy of preservation. He is after all willing to entertain the possibility of their complete destruction in the figure of Socrates. But he is concerned about the effects that the abrupt abandonment of such institutions could have on the demos, represented first by Strepsiades's bad conscience and then by Phidippides's obscene treatment of his parents, a product of having learned the art of unjust speech. As a father and citizen, Strepsiades cannot live without these institutional foundations, while Socrates—who, quite literally, lives in the clouds—comprehends none of these needs and desires, shows “contempt for all ephemerals,” and is ignorant of his “dependence on the city” (49). Unlike Aristophanes, Socrates, Strauss pithily asserts, was a “leader of souls” but not a “knower” of them (313).<sup>12</sup> Recalling Stauffer's claim once again, we can indeed identify Socrates's leadership and charm at work in Phidippides's story. Of this wayward son, Strauss writes, “His eventual conduct toward Socrates—his neither hurting nor helping Socrates—resembles that of the Clouds and, to a higher degree, that of Aristophanes. Is he a comic equivalent of Aristophanes who, perhaps also charmed or instructed by Socrates himself, also accepts only a part of the Socratic teaching?” (52). Aristophanes has inserted himself into the play once again as one of its most unsympathetic characters, but in so doing, he reveals his (partial) sympathy with Socratic teaching. Socrates has succeeded—and for this he is lauded by Aristophanes—in imparting a sense of self-governance to Phidippides, as well as in bringing Strepsiades to a higher level of self-awareness about his own intentions. However, for not anticipating the effect that such a teaching could have on the unprepared, he is equally condemned. Reading between the lines of Strauss's own text, we can begin to ascertain his—like Hegel's—sympathy with the comic poet.

Drawing attention to the distinction between the poet and the philosopher allows Strauss to come to larger conclusions about where the two figures stood vis-à-vis the polis at large. In the summative concluding chapter, Strauss compares the Socrates of *The Clouds* to the protagonist of Aristophanes's *Birds* (414 BCE), who eventually becomes god and ruler of the ethereal city he helps found, effectively replacing Zeus. This ambitious ruler, according to Strauss, nonetheless "acts in accordance with the fundamental requirements of the city," whereas Socrates denies such requirements altogether. In contrast to the "sophist-philosopher" (313), who is no proper citizen, the ruler of birds and humans alike aims to create a more perfect, utopian community: like Aristophanes, this ruler wants to "enlarge the pantheon," not simply destroy it. Socrates and Aristophanes appear equally concerned with comprehending the "whole," which underlies both the conflict and affinity between them (313). For while Socrates renounces his citizenship entirely, rendering himself an apolitical defector, Aristophanes is concerned with the political repercussions of his characters' actions, including the actions of Socrates, whose importance he clearly understood.<sup>10</sup> Aristophanes thus stands somewhere between the citizens of Athens and Socrates: he views the city, though from a distance, and concurs with Socrates in many respects, though he is bound to the city in a way that Socrates is not.

These reflections allow Strauss to draw certain conclusions about the play's comedy, and about comedy as such. He claims that Aristophanes presents as laughable "not only the unjust but the just as well," bringing "it about that his comedy is total: There is no Aristophanean character of any consequence who does not act laughably, let alone who is good sense incarnate" (312).<sup>14</sup> Aristophanean comedy is, in other words, unsparing toward everything that falls under its purview, and this is what makes it "total." In this way, Strauss's view of comedy coincides with Hegel's to the extent that both validate debunking when it is directed at all iterations of a subjective moment

being hypostatized into an absolute, regardless of each iteration's validity in and of itself. Hegel, to recall, viewed Aristophanes's comedies as symptoms of the decline of Athenian civilization in its entirety. If all characters can and do act laughably, then all are worthy of being debunked, since all of the vices on display are potentially harmful to the social good when carried out to their extremes. Also like Hegel, Strauss does not see Aristophanean debunking as restorative in any way. But Strauss goes even further when he offers what he believes to be the substance of the poet's comic vision: "Aristophanean comedy [...] is higher than tragedy. It conjures up for us [...] a simply pleasant falsehood: a life without war, law courts, terror caused by gods and death, poverty, and coercion or restraint or *nomos*" (312).<sup>15</sup> Again like Hegel, Strauss views comedy as subsequent to, or "higher" than tragedy in its representation of the essential conflicts befalling political life. And what should be furthermore noted is that on Strauss's reading, Aristophanes and total comedy emerge as anything but conservative. Rather, Strauss describes the poet as an idealist, even an anarchist, whose quasi-utopian vision entails a polis bereft of the constraints with which it is normally associated.

Buried within Strauss's reading of *The Peace*, however, lies perhaps the most salient affinity between the two modern philosophers with regard to their understanding of comedy in its Aristophanean origins, but also as abstracted from these origins. Strauss writes of the great "boaster," Zeus,

Now if Zeus, who claims, or on whose behalf men claim, that he is the father of gods and men, that he is most powerful and wise, and that he deserves the highest veneration, does not even exist, as Aristophanes's Socrates indeed asserts, he is the greatest example of boasting that can be imagined. His case is the most perfect case of contrast between claim and being; he is the absolute subject of comedy; the comedy par excellence is the comedy of the gods. (Strauss 143)

If we recall, Hegel invokes *The Clouds* as the ur-comedy, suggesting that comedy begins the moment the gods are essentially stripped of their godliness, paving the way for the inwardness of

individual subjectivity. While this is not exactly what Strauss is claiming, he insists above that the boasting of the gods, Zeus in particular, is the perfect subject for comedy, since there are innumerable ways to expose the disjunction between a god's self-understanding and his actuality, between "claim and being." The gods will never be what they say they are, and *The Clouds* gives shape to this phenomenon, even if Strauss implies that all of Aristophanes's comedies are comedies of the gods. Furthermore, if "pretense, affectation, or boasting" are comedy's primary themes (143), then Socrates would equally be the perfect subject of comedy: his renunciation of Zeus and implicit elevation of himself to the role of a divinity—an example of boasting if there ever were one—can rightfully be understood as an offensive act of impiety. Aristophanes, also a "boaster par excellence" (313)—but one who does not take himself too seriously—boasts in order to reveal the absurdity of boasting. He does not have to be pious to betray the range of possibilities unleashed by absolutizing any given position, in accordance with the Hegelian version of boasting. In the end, it seems that the comic poet's primary charge is to carry out every position or moment to its logical extreme: this is what makes us laugh.

### **Comedy Then and Now**

Hegel's Aristophanes may have served as a corrective against an immediate threat to the polis, but his comedy was not a purely reactive or restorative endeavor; by undermining Socrates, he was not fundamentally opposing Socratism. The ostensibly serious, conservative Hegel thus reveals a different side not only by sanctioning the poet's laughter at abstract thought but, indeed, by suggesting that this poetic laughter is more concrete, more attuned to the will of the people—more democratic—than the philosopher's rogue subjectivity and the danger that inheres in it. Strauss sees in Aristophanes's "total comedy" a tribute to the philosopher's guile, power, and charm, prompting him to argue for a certain proximity between the poet and the philosopher. Making a

strong case for the comic poet's perspective, Strauss describes Aristophanes as a "knower of souls" (Strauss 313). Strauss thus seems to suggest that for people to be ridiculed, they must first be understood, something that Socrates did not understand.

Both Hegel and Strauss circumscribe a function for the comedian within the boundaries of the city or the state of which they are invariably a part, but it would be too easy to identify in their readings a preference for the reformer (Aristophanes) over the revolutionary (Socrates). The boundaries of this political unit are in flux; they are not the boundaries that existed prior to either the comedian's or the philosopher's debunking. Hegel may describe Aristophanes as a "true patriot" (15: 554), but the content of this patriotism is never fleshed out in full, raising the question of whether one can be a patriot for a state that does not yet exist—or for another social formation altogether. Thus, unlike Adorno, neither Hegel nor Strauss employs the language of moral authority or social consensus to describe Aristophanean comedy. Rather, they read his comedy as the most effective medium for displaying contradictions that arise when we have all fundamentally renounced our belief in absolutes (i.e., in gods, the state included)—this could be one way of understanding comedy's modernity. In the case of *The Clouds*, it is the conflict that arises when a subjectivity gone wild imposes its will on a floundering but nonetheless established ethical code. Aristophanes partook, it seems, of a complicit laughing with and a derisive laughing at, a function of his unique position within and beyond the Athens he never tired of ridiculing.

It would be misguided and against their own intentions, however, to attribute a normative dimension to either Hegel's or Strauss's reading of *The Clouds*: neither, in its respective historical moment, suggests that Aristophanes is to be emulated. For Hegel in particular, Old Comedy is a figure of the past, signaling the end of art as a bearer of Spirit. Yet these figures' insights into the very structure of comedy—what makes it fail and what makes it succeed if it is to contribute in

any meaningful way to the development of thought or political life—may yet contain implications for the present. Both suggest that progressive, radical positions like Socrates’s contain internal blindnesses and contradictions, even if these positions are ultimately affirmed in their essential content. The comedian’s persistent check against aberrant forms of subjectivity, they imply, could even be mobilized as a serious form of political critique, a seriousness that is mediated comically.

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<sup>2</sup> If we take Plato’s *Apology* at its word, Socrates mentions Aristophanes during his trial, who he claims did not produce an accurate image of him (Cooper 19–20). Socrates allegedly stood up in the audience upon seeing his dramatic counterpart in *The Clouds*. The question remains, however, whether he stood up to suggest his likeness to the character on stage or to suggest the falsity of Aristophanes’s depiction.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Nussbaum similarly confirms that most “modern criticism of the *Clouds* is based on the assumption that if Aristophanes does in fact attack Socrates in a way which assimilates him to sophistic teaching, this attack is wrong and unfair to Socrates” and further suggests that critics have either opted to “malign Aristophanes, charging him with obtuseness,” or “to deny that he in fact does attack Socrates” (46).

<sup>4</sup> To limit the scope of this study, I have left out an important figure in this tradition of Aristophanes reception: Søren Kierkegaard. But it was not only philosophers in the nineteenth century who were interested in rehabilitating the Greek poet: both Goethe and Heine were influenced by the comic poet in different ways. Goethe produced an adaptation of Aristophanes’s most celebrated work, the *Birds*, and Heine wrote repeatedly about the “father” figure whose comedies he called “scherzende Tragödien,” imagining himself as a reincarnation of the Greek poet (178).

<sup>5</sup> Author’s emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> For recent scholarship on Hegel and comedy, see Desmond, Roche, and Zupančič.

<sup>7</sup> Author’s emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> Author’s emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> The parallels to Jesus are rather obvious in the way Hegel speaks of Socrates’s death as a sacrifice that eventually becomes inscribed, or incorporated, into the history of consciousness.

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Roche calls Aristophanes a paradoxically tragic figure because his comedy “presupposes what it endeavors to negate, subjectivity [...]. Recognition of the enemy as enemy presupposes defeat of the naïve ethos” (2002, 427).

<sup>11</sup> While very little has been written on this text, in a 1962 letter written to Alexander Kojève, Strauss referred to it as his “real work” (Stauffer 351).

<sup>12</sup> The early Nietzsche and Strauss’s Aristophanes would seem to agree on the idea of Socrates as “amusical,” but while Strauss couples with this the notion of an “anerotic” Socrates, who rejects both the family and the city, Nietzsche calls Socrates “the true eroticist” because of how enticing he was to the new generation of Greek youth. I believe this discrepancy can be explained by Strauss’s and Nietzsche’s different understandings of eroticism. See Strauss (173, 313) and Nietzsche (67, 71).

<sup>13</sup> This argument would be inconsistent with Strauss’s commentary in *Natural Right and History*, where he refers to Socrates as the founder of political philosophy (120–26). But in this case, he seems clearly to be drawing from the Platonic and/or Xenophontic versions of Socrates, not the (earlier) Aristophanic version.

<sup>14</sup> Jeremy Mhire has similarly concluded that “everything is laughable in *Clouds* because everything is foolish; only the play itself, or better yet, only the author himself, stands above foolishness as the author of foolishness” (51). Except that Strauss does not necessarily exempt the poet’s own foolishness.

<sup>15</sup> Author’s emphasis.

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