

STREPSIADES' BEDROOM, WIFE, AND SUFFERINGS: THREE NOTES ON THE PROLOGUE OF ARISTOPHANES' *CLOUDS*

Strepsiades is one of Aristophanes' most sharply drawn characters. Although central to the entire play, his portrait is already clearly established in the prologue. To appreciate this, we must place it as fully as possible in its social and literary context. The three studies that follow contribute to this enterprise.

i. In the prologue, Strepsiades lies in one bed on stage (cf. line 37), while his son, Pheidippides, lies in another nearby. At least one male slave (the *παῖς* of 18) is also sleeping on stage – he will speak at 56-59. Line 5 suggests that other serving-men are also asleep on stage. Economic and perhaps also aesthetic considerations keep the stage-properties to a minimum: beds and blankets are represented, as are a lamp (18, 56-59), a ledger (19), and an image of Poseidon (83); other furnishings are left to our imagination. Although selective, the stage-properties are naturalistic and we are entitled to make logical deductions about the rest of the setting.

During the summer, men might sleep outside to stay cool, but they would not then be wrapped in five blankets (cf. 10)¹ like Pheidippides, so we must suppose that the season portrayed is that of the performance, March. This detail proves that we are witnessing that rarity in Old Comedy, an indoor scene². The men are lying in the same room³, since the father responds to the sleeptalking son (25-32) and then, waking him for a moment, converses with him (33-39). Strepsiades' soliloquy concentrates on his unfortunate marriage to the niece of Megacles, the boy's mother (41b-55, 60-77) who does not now or ever appear on stage. She is apparently at home, however, for Pheidippides will threaten to beat her in 1443-51.

Commenting on this *mise en scène*, K. J. Dover writes: "If we think of the two men as sleeping in the same room, we may wonder why the father

(1) And winter blankets, at that: σισύρα παχὺ περίβλημα, Schol. ad Ar. *Nub.* 10.

(2) Cf. K. J. Dover, *Aristophanes: Clouds*, Oxford, 1968, 92. There is a second indoor scene at 184-262 where we seem to enter the *φροντιστήριον*.

(3) So M. W. Humphreys, *Aristophanes: Clouds*, Boston 1885, 11; C. C. Felton, *The Clouds of Aristophanes*, Boston 1895, 99; and W. W. Merry, *Aristophanes: The Clouds*, Oxford 1899, 57. The two men are to be imagined as stepping outside at line 91 while Pheidippides goes into the skene (i.e. back into the house) at 125.

is not sleeping with his wife, and the son in a separate room". He then dismisses the problem, saying: "There is, in fact, no point in speculating what spatial relation between father's bed and son's bed in the dramatic situation is represented by the relation of the two beds in the theatre"⁴. Dover reiterates this view in his *Aristophanic Comedy*⁵.

Dover is right to raise this problem, but wrong to dismiss it as pointless. First, while Aristophanes is not troubled by verisimilitude, he nevertheless starts with a keen observation of the details of daily life (ledgers, thick-wicked lamps, household icons etc.), which he then subjects to fantastic distortion⁶. In *Peace* we see two slaves baking bread. The joke (that they are kneading dung-cakes for a beetle) depends upon the immediate credibility of the scene in all other respects. In *Birds* the priest, poet, oracle-monger et al. are the same banes of Athenian life that Peisthetaerus and Euelpides sought to escape: they merely happen now to be plying their various trades in the clouds. Second, Strepsiades is typical of the Athenian middle class. He is anticonceptual and utilitarian in outlook, attending the old festivals and sacrifices (385-88, 408-11) and believing in the old gods (368-73) without questioning the theoretical validity of such actions and beliefs. He contrasts sharply with the new theoretical outlook of Socrates⁷. To make this contrast as pointed as possible, Aristophanes will have portrayed Strepsiades behaving in typical ways. Third, this particular morning is entirely typical, as Pheidippides' blasé attitude (35-38) shows.

These last two considerations answer Dover's question of why Strepsiades is sleeping with his son rather than his wife, namely that this arrangement is normal for Athenians of his bourgeois social-class⁸.

The remainder of this section will be devoted to demonstrating this with other evidence from Athenian literature and vase-painting⁹. A man's wife is defined as his bed-mate. "Ακοιτις, ἄλοχος and σύνευνος all have the

(⁴) Dover (above, n. 2, 92).

(⁵) Berkeley, Los Angeles 1972, 106.

(⁶) V. Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes*, Oxford 1943, 26-30.

(⁷) P. Green, "GRBS" 20, 1979, 15-25, esp. 16 and L. Woodbury, "Phoenix" 34, 1980, 108-27 = *Collected Writings*, Atlanta 1991, 335-54.

(⁸) Once a fairly wealthy farmer (43-45), he has married a woman from an aristocratic (46) family. Even in his present financial difficulties, he exemplifies a bourgeois rather than a peasant way of life.

(⁹) I refer to vase-paintings by the pages and numbers that they are assigned by J. D. Beazley in his catalogues, *Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters*, Oxford 1956, and *Paralipomena to Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters*, Oxford 1971. I abbreviate these titles as ABV, and Para.

etymological sense of "bed-sharer" (cf. Pl. *Cra.* 405c-d)¹⁰. Strepsiadēs spent his wedding-night in bed with his wife (*Nub.* 49-50), so making her truly his "bed-sharer", but the Athenian couple may have spent the next night apart. Pollux (3.39) describes the ἀπαύλια as the night that the bridegroom spent alone at his father-in-law's. Some scholars consider this to be the night before the wedding¹¹, but others identify the word with ἐπαύλια (cf. Hsch. s.v. ἀπαύλια [sic]), which denotes the day after the wedding (Poll. 3.39, Hsch. s.v. ἐπαύλια [sic])¹². In any case, the married couple would again share a bed on the third night as *Thesm.* 477-89 shows¹³. In some cases, this arrangement would continue throughout a couple's marriage. Theophrastus' distrustful man typically passed the night with his wife (*Char.* 18.4) because of his characteristic distrustfulness¹⁴.

But this practice, which seems reasonable to us, may have been abnormal. The segregation of women from men in Athens is well documented¹⁵. Freeborn women stayed indoors (*Men. fr.* 592 Koerte, *Theophr. Char.* 28.3)¹⁶. Inside the house was a courtyard (αὐλή) where all family members, including women, could mingle (*Dem.* 47.55 [1155-56], *Plut. On Curiosity* 516e-f). Even so, women usually avoided the sight of male relatives (*Lys.* 3.6-8) and of all male house-guests (*Pl. Symp.* 176e). The scenes on vases showing women who have draped their faces in their cloaks (e.g. *ABV* 109.24, *Para* 65, 66) as in a Homeric κρήδεμνον (*Od.* 1.334), may similarly be explained as avoidance of the sight of males¹⁷.

That segregation was thorough-going enough to effect even married couples is suggested by the fact that it left its stamp on domestic architecture¹⁸. In addition to the courtyard, the house comprised men's and women's apartments (the ἀνδρῶν and the γυναικῶν τις), separated by a locked door (*Xen. Oec.* 9.5). The women's chambers were built as far from

(10) Similarly, many words for "bed" such as κοίτη, λέκτρα (λέχος) and εὐνή are used in tragedy to mean "marriage" (e.g. *Soph. Ant.* 573, 1224; *Eur. Med.* 435-36) and to mean "wife" (see Kamerbeek on *Soph. Aj.* 211, 212 and Stevens on *Eur. Andr.* 928).

(11) LSJ s.v. ἀπαύλια and P. Chantraine, *DELG* s.v. αὐλή.

(12) J. Oehler, "Hochzeit", *RE* 8.2 2131a.

(13) The pretended woman states that she had been married only three days (478) in order to explain why her husband was asleep next to her. Without some such motivation, their sleeping together would have been inexplicable.

(14) Cf. the precautions taken by other husbands (*Ar. Thesm.* 414-17) to ensure their wives' fidelity (*Thesm.* 395-404).

(15) E.g. K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality*, Oxford 1974, 95-98.

(16) L. Woodbury, "TAPA" 108, 1978, 285-99 at 297 = *Collected Writings* 283.

(17) J. Boardman, *Athenian Black Figure Vases*, New York 1974, 199.

(18) As has been noted, e.g. by S. Pomeroy, *Goddesses. Whores. Wives and Slaves*, New York 1975, 80.

the house-door as possible, on the second-floor (πύργος, ὑπερῶν, διήρες) if such existed (Ar. *Eccl.* 697-99, Dem. 47.53-57 [1155-56], Lys. 1.9-14). In them was a bed-room (θάλαμος, Vit. *De Arch.* 6.7.2) where the couple passed their wedding-night (e.g. Theoc. 18.3). When the couple spent other nights together, they did so in this room (Ar. *Thesm.* 477-89, Hdt. 1.12)¹⁹.

In Athens, as a rule, marriages were arranged by a match-maker (προμνήστρια cf. *Nub.* 41-42) between couples of very unequal ages²⁰ and ratified by the girl's father and the groom-to-be at the ἐγγύη, a ceremony that the girl herself probably did not attend²¹. The ties that bound the pair together were often weaker than the forces separating them as members of opposite sexes. Husband and wife seldom conversed (Xen. *Oec.* 3.12) and Strepsiades and his wife seldom agreed when they did (as in the matter of Pheidippides' name, *Nub.* 61-67).

The symposium was held in a room off-limits to freeborn women (cf. Dem. 59.48 [1361]), the principle furnishings of which were bed-sofas (κλίναι)²². This article of furniture was used for dining and sleeping²³, as well as other uses²⁴. It was designed to accomodate only one person²⁵. These parties often ended when the guests fell asleep on their various couches (Pl. *Symp.* 223c-d, cf. 217d). The guests included married men (Xen. *Symp.* 9.7). Since symposia were common (although not nightly) events among the wealthy²⁶, this proves that Athenian men did not always sleep at home.

Even while sleeping at home, a man would with surprising frequency sleep apart from his wife. In Plato's *Protagoras*, for example, Hippocrates

(19) This is the picture drawn by B. C. Rider, *The Greek House*, Cambridge 1916, 210-38. The principle testimonia are collected by D. M. Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthus 12. Domestic and Public Architecture*, Baltimore 1946, 399-452. For the archaeological evidence, see J. E. Jones et al., "ABSA" 57, 1962, 75-114, esp. 108-114, and J. V. Luce, "G&R" 18, 1971, 143-49.

(20) Relevant passages are collected by M. L. West, *Hesiod: Works and Days*, Oxford 1978, on 696-97 and 698.

(21) C. Brown, 37-50 in D. E. Gerber ed., *Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, 'Woodbury Festschrift', Chico Ca. 1984, esp. 38 n. 2.

(22) G. M. A. Richter, *The Furniture of the Greeks. Etruscans and Romans*, London 1966, 52-63 with plates 290-340.

(23) Richter (above, n. 22, plates 335 and 337).

(24) Including laying out of the dead and on some occasions sexual intercourse; see Boardman (above, n. 17, 219).

(25) E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus*, New York 1985, 212.

(26) See G. Giangrande, 39-41 in A. E. Raubitschek ed., *L'epigramme grecque*, 'Entretiens Hardt' 14, Geneva 1969, and E. L. Bowie, "JHS" 106, 1986, 13-35.

is excited by Protagoras' arrival in Athens and rushes to Socrates' house before dawn, where he bursts into his bedroom and sits on the bed. No mention is made of Xanthippe, Socrates' wife (Pl. *Phd.* 60a, Xen. *Symp.* 2.10), who on this occasion at least, was clearly not sharing his bed²⁷.

In his speech on the murder of Eratosthenes (1.9-14), Lysias explains one reason for such domestic arrangements. The speaker, Euphiletus, says that his house normally had the men's quarters on the first floor and the women's on the second, but when his child was born, the mother slept with the child downstairs (where the infant was close to the well and to the house-door for "toilet-training" [cf. *Nub.* 1384-85], and where it could not fall down the ladder). Euphiletus, in his turn, took to sleeping upstairs where his wife would sometimes join him, while at other times sleeping downstairs with the child (and as it turned out often with her lover as well)²⁸.

This degree of separation of husband and wife results from the purpose of marriage. The chief reason for a man to sleep with his wife was to have intercourse (for companionship he would turn to a male ἐρώμενος: Pl. *Symp.* 180d-181d, Plut. *Amat.* 751a-b)²⁹. The main reason for having intercourse with his wife was to beget children (Xen. *Mem.* 2.2.4)³⁰, and so produce a single son (Hes. *Op.* 376, Pl. *Leg.* 740b-d). The begetting of younger sons would divide the estate and impoverish all the sons (Lys. 16.10, 19.46, Dem. 36.8-11 [946-47], 48.12-13 [1170-71])³¹, angering the eldest and so endangering the τροφεῖα that the father expected to receive. For pleasure, a man went to a courtesan (Dem. 59.122 [1386]) or prostitute³². (In the scenes on vases depicting amatory encounters during komoi and symposia, the women portrayed are courtesans or prostitutes rather than citizens' wives.)

Now, since Strepsiades already had an heir, Pheidippides (an only son, cf. *Nub.* 794-98), there was no necessity for him to have intercourse with his wife. She was probably still of child-bearing age³³ and the birth-control

(27) I owe this reference to Professor Eric Csapo.

(28) See G. Morgan, "TAPA" 112, 1982, 115-23 for a reconstruction of the house.

(29) See K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, Cambridge, Mass. 1978, 53.

(30) The betrothal formula preserved by Men. *Dyscol.* 842-43 (cf. fr. 682 Koerte) runs: ἀλλ' ἐγγυῶ παίδων ἐπ' ἄρ' ὅτ' ἂν γνησίων / τὴν θυγατέρ' ἤδη, μειράκιόν, σοι....

(31) W. K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece*, Ithaca NY 1968, 125-50 and D. M. MacDowell, *The Law in Classical Athens*, London 1978, 92-95.

(32) The sexual relations of husband and wife, for pure pleasure's sake are the fundamental assumption of Ar. *Lys.* Consider, too, Xen. *Symp.* 9.7.

(33) Hes. *Op.* 698 recommends that a girl marry five years after puberty. Arist. *HA* 14.31 (581a) claims fourteen as the age of puberty. Since Pheidippides is still a youth

methods at her disposal were primitive³⁴. Therefore he would have been less likely to sleep with her. It would also have been troublesome. Young children of either sex, both of the couple themselves and of their slaves, lived in the women's quarters (Hes. *Op.* 130-31, Pind. *Pyth.* 4.186, Pl. *Leg.* 808e, Plut. *Pel.* 9.5) where, as we have said, the θάλαμος was located. Their cries could be very irritating (Lys. 1.11-12). Bed-bugs would make sleeping hard enough, even if one were not sharing a bed (cf. *Ran.* 115, *Nub.* 144-53, 634, 699, 709-15). In Strepsiades' case these afflictions would be augmented by his natural restlessness. He has been unable to sleep all night (36, 75) on account of his debts. In 254-803 he again finds himself in bed and is again restless on account of bugs (709-15) and his penis (734). Pheidippides talks in his sleep (25-32) and is not a sound sleeper either.

The separation of the married couple will be broken on special occasions such as the period immediately following the wedding, the return of the man from a long trip (cf. Lys. 1.11-12, *Od.* 23.288-96), or periodic amatory sessions. Even so, none of the evidence compels the belief that husband and wife regularly passed their nights together. Since a man sleeps in the men's quarters while his wife sleeps in the women's, it is not surprising to find him in the same room as the other males of the household – his teenage son and the man-servants. This is the scene that Aristophanes has put before us.

ii. In his commentary on Semonides' poem *On Women* (fr. 7 West, lines 57-58), H. Lloyd-Jones writes that "[t]he troubles of Strepsiades... are caused by his marriage with a perfect specimen of the mare-woman"³⁵. This correct observation can be taken one step further, to say that Aristophanes has modelled the niece of Megacles directly upon Semonides' mare-woman. This choice was natural enough, for Semonides' poem was doubtless a favourite for recitation at symposia, and perhaps also at weddings³⁶, and the allusion to it adds familiarity and depth to Aristophanes' comic portrait.

The principal point of similarity is, of course, horses. Semonides' mare-

(*Nub.* 8, 990, 1000, 1071) but perhaps already a member of the cavalry (cf. 119-20), he will be about nineteen. If he was born when his parents had been married for a year, his mother will be thirty-eight.

(³⁴) E.g. anal intercourse (Hdt. 1.61.1-2, Ar. *Thesm.* 488-89, Plut. 149-52), interrupted coitus (Archil. fr. 478.9-15 *SLG*), magic (Pliny *HN* 25.115), oral contraceptives such as copper sulphate dissolved in water (Hippocr. *Nature of Women* 98), abortifacients (Gal. *Nat. Fac.* 3.12.183) and in extreme cases exposure of the new-born. See E. D. Phillips, *Greek Medicine*, London 1973, 112-13.

(³⁵) H. Lloyd-Jones, *Females of the Species*, London 1975, 78-79.

(³⁶) L. Schear, "EMC" 3, 1984, 39-49.

woman is created from a horse (Sem. fr. 7.57) while the niece of Megacles is responsible – both through inherited nature and through her training (*Nub.* 69-70) – for her son's horse-sickness (*Nub.* 74, 243), which is the initial problem of the play. But the similarity goes far beyond this. Both women are of strikingly similar character, delicate and refined (ἄβρῃ Sem. fr. 7.57, τρυφῶσα *Nub.* 48). This delicacy manifests itself in the use of myrrh as a perfume (Sem. fr. 7.64, *Nub.* 51). The mare-woman devotes much time to her long (βαθεῖα) hair (Sem. fr. 7.65-66, cf. 57), while Pheidippides wears his hair long (κόμην ἔχων, *Nub.* 14), apparently in keeping with the tradition of his maternal family. The mare-woman turns the household chores onto others (Sem. fr. 7.58); Strepsiades' wife, while not exactly lazy (*Nub.* 53), is incompetent at housework, "weaving too closely" (*Nub.* 55), whatever may be the full implication of this phrase. Both women are apparently also lascivious.

The result from the husbands' perspective of their various refinements is financial ruin (ἀνάγκη Sem. fr. 7.62³⁷, δαπανή *Nub.* 13, 52); this is the problem that sets in motion Aristophanes' play. In both cases, the husband views this woman and his marriage as a bad thing (Sem. fr. 7.68; ἀγαθή *Nub.* 61, sarcastic³⁸), but the evil is not so much inherent in the woman herself as in her marriage below her station³⁹: it is the fault of the man who marries the mare-woman without himself being a king or tyrant (Sem. fr. 7.69-70) and of Strepsiades – and of the matchmaker who urged him on (*Nub.* 41b) – for marrying Megacles' niece without himself being an Alcmeonid or the social equal of one (cf. *Nub.* 46-47).

iii. *Clouds* 80-132 parodies Sophocles *Trachiniae* 971-1278. In both scenes a father lies in bed on stage (*Nub.* 37, *Trach.* 1078) dying (*Nub.* 16, *Trach.* 1008) in unbearable torment that prevents him from sleeping (*Nub.* 12, *Trach.* 1005) and that he attributes ultimately to his wife (*Nub.* 41b-55, *Trach.* 1039)⁴⁰. After an opening soliloquy, he addresses his son, who

(³⁷) This is the meaning attached to the word by R. Lattimore, "AJP" 65, 1944, 173; D. A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, London 1967, 189; and Lloyd-Jones (above, n. 35, 80). This problem is discussed by D. E. Gerber, "Phoenix" 28, 1974, 251-53, who rejects Lattimore's interpretation on syntactical grounds. For my purposes, it is sufficient to say that the phrase could be understood by Aristophanes (however Semonides intended it) as a reference to financial ruin.

(³⁸) So Dover ad *Nub.* 61.

(³⁹) On the reasons for Strepsiades' marriage above his station, see the brilliant discussion by C. G. Brown, "Prometheus" 17, 1991, 29-33.

(⁴⁰) And in Strepsiades' case also to his matchmaker. Strepsiades desires her death (*Nub.* 41b) as Heracles desires Deianeira's (*Trach.* 1109, 1133). Note, too, the emphasis

gives him his right hand (*Nub.* 81, *Trach.* 1181)⁴¹ and swears an oath of obedience (*Nub.* 83-91, *Trach.* 1181-90). Asking the son if he sees or knows of a landmark nearby, in one case Socrates' door (*Nub.* 92), in the other Mount Oeta (*Trach.* 1191), he asks him to perform a cruel task there, to enroll in the phrontisterion (*Nub.* 110-11) or to burn his father alive (*Trach.* 1193-99). The son at first refuses (*Nub.* 119-20, *Trach.* 1206-07), but eventually is persuaded to obey (*Nub.* 866-68, *Trach.* 1215).

This little burlesque, at the expense of a Sophoclean play produced as little as six years earlier⁴², also foreshadows the end of *Clouds* (1476-1511), which involves lighting a fire (cf. *Trach.* 1193-99). Heracles was the prototype of the philosopher, as in the eulogy of him by Socrates' associate in Cloud-worship (*Nub.* 360-61), Prodicus (84 B 2 Diels-Kranz), which Plato treats as commonly known just eight years after *Clouds* was first produced (*Symp.* 177b)⁴³. Moreover, Socrates likened his life of inquiry to the labours of Heracles (Pl. *Ap.* 22a7, with Burnet's note, *Euthyd.* 297c). This image may have prompted Aristophanes to liken the sufferings of Socrates' reluctant pupil to those of Heracles.

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on Heracles' "matchmaking" in Deianeira's prologue-speech.

(⁴¹) On the giving of the right hand in pledge, see *Il.* 2.340-41, Pythagoras 58 C 6 Diels-Kranz, *Eur. Med.* 21-22 (cf. 496, 899), *Soph. Phil.* 813, *Ar. Ran.* 754, and *Xen. Anab.* 2.4.1 and 7.3.1.

(⁴²) *Trach.* was produced between 457 and 430 (see P. E. Easterling, *Sophocles. Trachiniae*, Cambridge 1982, 23); M. Davies, *Sophocles. Trachiniae*, Oxford 1991, xviii with n. 4 despairs of achieving a close date. *Nub.* was first produced in 424; see Dover (above, n. 2, lxxx).

(⁴³) The dramatic date of *Symp.* is 416 (see R. G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato* 2nd ed., Cambridge 1932, lxvi).