Aristophanes vs. Socrates

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ABSTRACT: In Plato's Apology, *Socrates claims that* phthonos *and* diabolē *caused Aristophanes to become one of his accusers. Either Socrates is blowing things out of proportion because Aristophanes was clearly just kidding around, or we are wrong to pass Aristophanes' humour off as 'just kidding around.' In this paper, I defend the second alternative. I argue that Aristophanes is a specific kind of social conservative and that Socrates was the sort of social liberal that bothered Aristophanes. I conclude that* Clouds *is not innocent, but is, as Socrates claimed, driven by* phthonos *and* diabolē.

*RÉSUMÉ : Dans l'*Apologie *de Platon, Socrate affirme que* phthonos *et* diabolē *ont conduit Aristophane à devenir l'un de ses accusateurs. Soit Socrate commet une grossière exagération, car clairement Aristophane ne faisait que plaisanter, soit nous avons tort de penser que l'humour d'Aristophane n'est rien d'autre que de la plaisanterie. Dans cet article, je défends la seconde position. Je soutiens qu'Aristophane est un type spécifique de conservateur social et que Socrate était le genre de social-libéral qui dérangeait Aristophane. Je conclus que* Les Nuées *n'est pas un texte innocent, mais est, comme Socrate le prétendait, motivé par* phthonos *et* diabolē.

Section 1: Introduction

Aristophanic humour transgresses norms regarding class, gender and social decency. But the fact that his transgressions are humorous does not entail that he is 'only joking,' and the fact that his humour is transgressive does not entail that he is subversive. In this paper, I build on what I take to be the view of Walter Burkert, i.e., that in *Clouds*[1], Aristophanes expresses a view that is, at

[1] I do not distinguish between '*Clouds I*' and '*Clouds II*.' On the date of the revision, see E. Christian Kopff 1990, Ian Storey 1993, Jeffrey Henderson 1993 and Keith Sidwell 2009, 217-23.

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least in part, in deadly earnest and in support of traditional religion.[2] Scholars regularly and unjustifiably ignore Burkert's view.

In Section 2, I coin the term 'unversive' to identify transgressive humour that is designed to reinvigorate rather than to undermine social norms. I also define the specific sense in which I think Aristophanic humour in *Clouds* is 'conservative.'[3] In Section 3, I indicate structural features of, and particular jokes in, *Clouds* that reveal its unversive and conservative nature. At most, my argument in Section 3 entails that Aristophanes thought unversive humour would go over well with his audience.[4] I conclude in Section 4 with an argument suggesting something stronger, i.e., that Aristophanes deliberately designed *Clouds* to have a genuine unversive impact on Athenian society in general, and on Socrates in particular.[5]

Section 2: Unversive Humour

Since the antonymic prefix in English is 'un-' (as in 'unhappy'), I define 'unversive' to be the antonym of 'subversive.'[6] Subversive transgression is an attempt to 'turn' or change a norm by violating it, thereby presenting it as violable and undermining the hold it has on those it is designed to govern. Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat for a white passenger is a famous case of subversive transgression. In theory, at least, white racists could have engaged

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[2] Burkert 1985, 316.

[3] I will resist the temptation to discuss comedies other than *Clouds*. I do think that the specific form of 'conservatism' I see animating *Clouds* is apparent in other comedies, but it would be taking on too great a burden of proof to make this case in one paper.

[4] See Alan Sommerstein 1996, 336.

[5] I oppose Angus Bowie's separating the issues of (1) audience reception, and (2) authorial intention (Bowie 1993, 9). Bowie correctly points out that Aristophanes "is dead and cannot tell us what he himself thought," but I hasten to point out that his audience is also dead. Surely we are safe in concluding that Aristophanes intended to win the competitions he entered, and that he believed the main key to winning was getting the audience to laugh. If we figure out why a certain joke would have made the audience laugh, we have also figured out the author's intention. Bowie further points out that contradictory pictures of Aristophanes' intentions have been drawn from his texts, but the fact that a task is difficult does not entail that it is not worth attempting, or that success is impossible.

[6] The drawback of this word is that the prefix 'un-' often indicates a lack or absence (as in 'untrue'), and I conceive of 'unversive' humour as positively in support of certain norms (e.g., racist jokes positively support, and might even foster, racist beliefs). But the lack or negation has to do with the '-versive' part of my neologism, which derives from *vertere*, to turn. 'Unversive' humour decidedly lacks the tendency to turn us away from the norm it supports.

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in unversive transgression in an attempt to preserve existing segregation laws, e.g., they could have publicly violated a segregation law in a place where the law was not being vigorously upheld precisely in order to draw public attention to—and provoke the anger of white racists at—the fact that the law was not being upheld. Law enforcement agencies continuously engage in unversive transgression by sneaking proscribed articles through airport security. They do so not to undermine airport restrictions, but for exactly the opposite reason: by exposing looseness in security, they hope to tighten it. In general, where complacency etc. can lead to weakening the grip norms have on our choices and actions, unversive transgression may be an effective 'wake-up call' and a means of reinvigorating compliance.

Blackface minstrelsy is a premier case of unversive humour. It was transgressive, both of colour and gender, but its function was not to undermine the norms it transgressed; rather it reinforced those norms by transgressing them on stage in exaggerated and ridiculous ways. Eric Lott has argued that although blackface minstrelsy "arose from a white obsession with black (male) bodies which underlies white racial dread to our own day, it ruthlessly disavowed its fleshly investments through ridicule and racist lampoon."[7] Lott is quite clear that this is not the end of the story, but it is—and must be—the beginning. To miss the racism of blackface, to blind ourselves to the role blackface played in creating, defending and propagating race hatred and all the heinous acts that followed in its wake, is—to say the very least—a hermeneutic error.

Unversive transgression animates much social satire. "The funeral of a neighbour terrifies an anxious and envious man, and the fear of death forces him to stop and think about his own life; so also the disgrace of others often frightens away the vices of an impressionable soul" (Horace, *Satyrarum libri* 1.4.126-129).[8] Rather than describe and praise virtue, a satirist might instead focus on the ridiculous results of folly and vice in order to provoke us to self-reflection and moral improvement, whereby 'moral improvement' is meant as a reinvigorated commitment to existing moral norms.

Since humour may be unversive, it is a fallacy to infer subversion from transgression.[9] Mikhail Bakhtin famously argued that the transgressiveness of medieval carnivals was profoundly subversive of certain social norms: "laughter demolishes fear and piety."[10] Despite the many analogies between the carnivals discussed by Bakhtin and the festivals of Dionysus, for which Aristophanes' plays were produced, it would be a fallacy to assume that Aristophanes' *Clouds* is subversive in ways that Bakhtin argues Rableis' *Gargantua*

7 Lott 1993, 3.

8 All translations are my own.

9 This fallacy is committed by Storey 1998, vii.

10 Bakhtin 1984, 119. In *Rablais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, published in 1965 as *Rabelais and His World*.

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and Pantagruel was subversive.[11] In the context of Christian moral and religious norms, it is difficult for transgressive bawdy humour to be anything but subversive. However, in a pagan culture whose pantheon included such gods as Hermes, Aphrodite and Dionysus, transgressive sexual and scatological humour may be pious and unversive.[12]

Something similar must be said of Henderson's view that "Old Comic festivals were organized protest."[13] Linking "satire and partisan criticism" with "carnival, *komos* and iambic poetry," Henderson takes it as "striking" that such "public airing of minority views; promotion of the concept of society as inclusive and suprapolitical; and criticism of those holding power" would be tolerated, much less endorsed, by the state. He takes this as evidence of the "self-confidence" of Athenian democracy in that it did not fear such subversive behaviour.[14] One person's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens*: the fact that Old Comedy was state-run and produced as part of rituals to Dionysus suggests that in the main, at least, it was not subversive at all. I am well aware of the subversive potential of comedy, but we mustn't lose sight of the lesson Albert Brooks learned while making his 2006 film, *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, i.e., "Polish jokes work everywhere."[15] Brooks revealed that

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11 Halliwell's view of the Dionysian context of Aristophanic comedy is similar in some ways to Bakhtin's view of medieval carnivals; cf. Halliwell 1998, xvii-xx, xxxix-xliii. Halliwell's view is developed in Halliwell 1984a, 1984b, 1991, 1993. Influenced by M.L. Apte, Bowie suggests that Bakhtin's views are helpful in understanding Aristophanes (Apte 1985, 151-76; Bowie 1993, 11-17). Connections between Bakhtin and Aristophanes are explicitly developed by S. Goldhill 1991, 201-222; Anthony Edwards 1993, and Goldhill 1998. See especially Charles Platter 1993, 2001 and 2007. I resist the urge to see Bakhtinian 'unfinalizability' in Aristophanic comedy (cf. Platter 2007, 5): unlike, e.g., the novel, comedy is a genre in which successful authors must be adept at creating 'finalizable' jokes, i.e., punchlines; if the audience doesn't laugh, then the comedy is no good, and the audience can't laugh if the jokes are never 'finalized.' A single joke may have more than one meaning, but it can't have no meaning (this is true even in absurdist comedy in which incongruity, provokes, for example, laughter—'meaninglessness itself is *the* meaning' we might justifiably say).

12 Transgression and inversion can be subversive if they have the function of revealing everyday norms to be contingent and open to change through the "contest of public voices" (Goldhill 1991, 167-76). But when they are integral to cultic ritual, their function can be quite the opposite.

13 Henderson 1996, 12.

14 Bowie's view is similar. I disagree with Bowie's view that "it was comedy's job to make fun of the city" (Bowie 1993, 10). It was comedy's job to contribute to the cultic festivities.

15 Jay Jacobs 2012.

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the Hindus in his film crew made jokes about Sikhs, and that a Sikh cab driver made a joke about Muslims. At this point, Brooks had his epiphany: "I get it now. I saw the hierarchy. So it seems to me that everywhere on the planet somebody is talking about someone else." Ridicule is a prominent function of making someone look ridiculous, and this function may be employed by people higher in a social hierarchy against people beneath them precisely in order to maintain and even reinvigorate the hierarchy.[16]

Consider the fact that in festivals for Artemis girls not only leave the women's quarters of the home, they leave the city entirely, don bear skins and wear *phalloi*. We would be misunderstanding such rituals if we saw them through the modern lens of feminist 'girl power.' To adapt a saying attributed to Emma Goldman, if such rituals had been genuinely subversive of gender norms, they would have been outlawed very early on. Given that such rituals had been repeated from time immemorial, and that as far as we know, after every single repetition, the girls went back to their culturally assigned stations, Burkert is on solid ground when he says that through such "grotesque negation, a person is led to accept his or her role."[17] Building into the festival calendar regular transgressions and inversions of traditional norms has "the effect of maintaining existing relations of authority and domination."[18] 'What is the complement of an apple?' is a question with no wrong answer. But if you grow up in a culture that repeatedly enacts uncanny rituals in which apples are temporarily displaced by oranges, then for you the question will have one obviously correct answer. The ritual framing of an act as transgressive is a means by which dominant norms dominate.[19] The fact that certain topics or targets of humour that are normally off limits are fair game during the Dionysia does not entail that festival comedians are subversive.

In this sense, transgressive humour may be called 'conservative,' and it is in this sense that I call Aristophanes' humour conservative. Note that I take no stand on whether Aristophanes was a 'political conservative' in the sense that

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16 Lott's study of blackface draws upon Bakhtin (Lott 1995, 146), but he never loses sight of how comedy can be used by a dominant class to oppress subordinate classes.

17 Burkert 259, cf. 151.

18 Burkert 257, cf. 246-50.

19 Regarding the Dionysia, F. Frontisi-Ducroux speaks of "the awakening of the animality nestled in the heart of the civilised," and claims that the image of the satyr confronts "man with the image of his hidden desires, of the savagery he holds in check" (Frontisi-Ducroux 1989, 156). This seems to me a bit too Victorian—even Freudian—a reading of the pagan festival. But more importantly, if anything the opposite is closer to the truth: by carving out a regular place in the ritual calendar for the Dionysia, and using state funds to organize festival activities, rather than releasing the caged beast, the Dionysia is the cage.

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his sympathies lay with the pro-oligarchic faction and against the radical democrats associated with Perikles.[20] I am not arguing that (1) Aristophanes opposed democracy and favoured oligarchy, or (2) he opposed the radical democracy of his day, or (3) he aimed to oppose the abuses of power by demagogues, or (4) he was a champion of the rural classes, or (5) he sympathized more with the wealthy than with the poor or the middle class. In addition, I am not arguing that (6) Aristophanes was 'stylistically conservative,' i.e., that he clung to older styles and eschewed innovation. Finally, with special reference to *Clouds*, I also do not think that (7) Aristophanes' viewpoint can be identified with the character of 'Right,' nor that (8) he intended to champion traditional forms of education as opposed to newer models (nor do I think that he was searching for some third alternative).[21]

I am largely in agreement with the apolitical interpretations of K.J. Dover and Stephen Halliwell.[22] However, both Dover and Halliwell proceed injudiciously with their arguments. Dover, for example, goes too far when he imputes to Aristophanes "a fundamental irreverence which sees the ludicrous side of *everything*,"[23] and Halliwell lets his argument get away from him when he claims that Dionysiac festivity "entitled [a comic playwright] to denigrate and attack *with impunity*."[24] We should be surprised if we found that state-sponsored Dionysiac festivity allowed anyone to act with true impunity; the references to Aeschylus' prosecution for revealing the Mysteries on stage are not incredible, and from this we should infer that even when there were no explicit censorship laws, Athenians probably did not take the stage to be a space of utter license. Further, the bounds of successful entertainment can be even more restrictive than those of legal prosecution: a joke can fall flat if enough members of the audience feel offended by it. Aristophanes' comic jibes are not restricted to one social class, age or gender, but he does not treat all social norms as ridiculous. If we look more closely, we'll see that Aristophanic transgression is decidedly unversive, not subversive.

Aristophanic humour knows no boundaries along several dimensions (e.g., age, sex, class), but from this it does not follow that Aristophanes sees everything

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20 Hence my view is distinct from (though compatible with) those of G.E.M. de Ste. Croix 1972, 355-76; Moses Hadas 1988, 7-8; and Henderson 1998, 14. But my view is also compatible with Sidwell's view that Aristophanes was a supporter of "radical democracy" (Sidwell 2009, 41-3, 297-8). My view gains support from Bowie's application of the *nomos*/*phusis* distinction to *Clouds*, indicating that the questioning and even violation of *nomos* is a highly significant theme in the play (Bowie 1993, 107-8).

21 See Martha Nussbaum 1980, 43-6, 96-7; 1985, 239-40.

22 See A.W. Gomme 1938, M. Heath 1987 and Heath 1997.

23 Dover 1968, lvii; emphasis added.

24 Halliwell 1998, xlii; emphasis added.

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as ridiculous. In Aristophanic comedy, people generally are short-sighted, selfish, venal and stupid. We mustn't let the author's misanthropy blind us to what he does not hate, i.e., certain social norms. An Aristophanic misanthrope can be an 'equal opportunity offender' while still being decidedly 'conservative' in my sense: left to themselves, short-sighted, selfish, venal and stupid conservatives will ruin society; short-sighted, selfish, venal and stupid liberals will do a quicker and more thorough job of it. From this point of view, people are the problem and cannot be looked to for any solutions; what holds society together is not our alleged virtue or our misguided problem-solving logistical skills, but one thing and one thing only: the dominance of custom.[25]

It is because this conservative view animates Aristophanic comedy in *Clouds* that I began my discussion by explaining and illustrating the prominence of unversive transgression in Greek cult festivals. Girls are led to cross-dress and dance with *phalloi* in wild places, for example, not as a means of liberating them from their socially prescribed gender roles, but for exactly the opposite reason, i.e., to help them learn gender boundaries and the personal and social skills necessary to earn and maintain status in their society. We mustn't think of the carnivalesque transgressions involved in, for example, Dionysian and Artemisian festivals as periodic attempts to throw off repression, but rather as long-evolved social structures that are stable because their function is to make the yoke of custom more comfortable. We should not expect a comedian for the mass audience at the Dionysia to denigrate with true impunity or make absolutely everything look ridiculous—a mass audience will contain people who are unlikely to laugh if a comedian makes a mockery of the customary norms that give structure to their lives.

I hasten to add two clarifications. First, while I do see in Aristophanes the conservative attitude according to which our only salvation lies in accepting the dominance of custom, I will not argue that he thinks *every* custom, or everything that could conceivably be considered to be a custom, ought to play those roles. He is not, for example, a fashion-conservative (in fact, he seems to have been stylistically innovative). In the next section, I will argue that the core of Aristophanic conservatism lies in the Hesiodic emphasis on honest labour and piety. This is not a novel insight; the novelty of my position lies in identifying the specific form of *epistemic* domination Aristophanes believes custom ought to have in our lives.

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[25] Platter argues that *Clouds* exhibits Bakhtinian "dialogized heteroglossia" (Platter 2007, 3-4, 67-8, 180). However, indiscriminate misanthropy will account for much of what we might see as "dialogized heteroglossia." But as noted above, Aristophanes systematically avoids ridiculing fundamentally important socio-religious *nomoi*. This is "dialogized heteroglossia" only if we restrict the 'hetero-' within respectably conservative bounds. My view gains support from Paul Ludwig's argument that in Aristophanes' view, "man is in dire need of gods" (Ludwig 2002, 88).

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Second, since 'liberal' is the complement to 'conservative,' my view implies that Aristophanes ridicules Socrates[26] as a 'liberal,' i.e., as someone who does *not* think that our only salvation lies in allowing custom to have the sort of epistemic domination in our lives that Aristophanes favours.[27] In this I think Aristophanes was spot on. Socrates rejects the epistemic domination of custom: to allow custom to dominate our personal and social lives in this way is to take ourselves to know something we do not know, and this Socrates rejects (cf. *Apology* 21b9-c8). Socrates injects justification-based scepticism where a conservative (in my restricted sense of the term) holds that it does not belong: without calling into question the truth of conventional beliefs (truth-based scepticism), Socrates tries to show people that they lack sufficient warrant for their conventional beliefs, and hence ought to inquire into the truth of those beliefs (cf. *Charmides* 166d4-6). For a conservative (again, in my restricted sense of the term), the truth of conventional beliefs is beyond question.

Section 3: Aristophanic Conservatism

Clouds tells the story of a man who is economically and socially well off so that neither he nor his son must work for a living.[28] Nevertheless, he borrows two substantial sums of money for luxury items (lines 21-31), and instead of simply paying off his debts, he plans to resort to legal battles and verbal trickery (lines 94-118). He enrols his son in Socrates' school and has him reject the 'better argument' (*ho kreissōn logos*, lines 113, 882-3, 893-5, 990) so that he can shamelessly take advantage of his creditors who had done him friendly favours in lending the money in the first place (cf. line 1216), and in court defrauds them of the money that is theirs by right. Shamelessness chases away shame when the son strikes his own father (line 1325), and then threatens to strike his own mother (line 1443). Only after suffering at the hands of his son does this short-sighted, selfish, venal and stupid[29] man learn his lesson that, if we let our children grow up this way, then we really do deserve all the ill treatment we receive from them (line 1439). But he has learned his lesson

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26 In this paper, I assume that Aristophanes' character was designed to poke fun at Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus, and that Plato's character was designed to valorize the same person.

27 In a distinct sense, Socrates could be called 'conservative' since he does affirm the importance of traditional values (cf. Apology 29d7-e3, 36c5-d1). In this paper, I am unconcerned with Socrates' acceptance or rejection of traditional values, but in his stance on whether they ought to *dominate* our personal and social lives.

28 See Dover xxvii, Bowie 1993, 104.

29 Daphne O'Regan 1992, 43. Bernard Freydburg is too willing to see mere cognitive competence as acumen (Freydburg 2008, 16), and he is forced to admit to Strepsiades' "stupidity" (24), and to accept that some of his ideas are "nonsensical" (38).

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too late; in the end, he is worse off than he was before, and much worse off than he would have been if he had shunned luxury and focused on honest work, following the straight and narrow path of right.[30] This should sound utterly familiar.

> Hesiod, *Works and Days* (*WD*) 27-32: O Perses, store this in your heart and do not let that mischief-loving Strife turn your heart away from work, watching and listening to battles in court. Little time for court battles does he have who has not stored up enough food for the year.
> *WD* 213-8: O Perses, heed right and do not strengthen *hubris*, for *hubris* is bad for us lowly mortals. Not even a prosperous man can easily bear it; instead he is crushed when he is touched by *atē*. The better (*kreissōn*) road is to go on the other side towards what is right (*ta dikaia*), for Right (*Dikē*) defeats *Hubris* in the end, a fool learns this only by suffering.
> *WD* 320-6: Property is not for seizing, god-given is much better. For if someone takes great wealth by the force of his hands, or plunders it by his slick tongue—as often happens when gain deceives someone's mind and shamelessness chases away shame—the gods easily sap his power and waste his household, and prosperity attends him for only a short while.

If Hesiod plays a central role in your culture's traditional 'wisdom literature,' and you happen to be a fifth century comedian familiar with Socrates and the sophists, *Clouds* practically writes itself.[31] In the structure of its plot, *Clouds* is comically unversive: point by point we see before us someone who violates good old-fashioned Hesiodic wisdom, and we laugh at his predictable come-uppance. By our laughter we signify our collective cognitive superiority: because of our inherited wisdom, we know more than self-proclaimed and wanna-be know-it-alls like Socrates and Strepsiades.

Aristophanes' creation is even less surprising if we remind ourselves of the story about Thales being so absorbed in his astronomical research that he failed to see what was right in front of his feet. His tumble into a ditch greatly amused a nearby old woman, who pointed out the ridiculousness of directing one's intellect to what is impractically far away while turning a blind eye to things that can actually trip you up and injure you (Diogenes Laertius 1.34). Aristophanes' Socrates is tinged with a bit of Thales.

What shows Aristophanes' particular genius is that his conservatism is played out not only in the overall structure of the plot, but also in the details of

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30 See John Newell 1999, 110; Nussbaum 1980, 78-9, 96; Bowie 1993, 111.

31 I am sympathetic to Bowie's use of structural anthropology to interpret Aristophanes' comedies, but I think it is a serious oversight on his part to miss the Hesiodic "code" as a structuring principle for *Clouds* (on Bowie's use of a "Christian code" to interpret the plot of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, see Bowie 1993, 1-3).

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his jokes.[32] The clearest example of this is the chicken joke at lines 659-66. Socrates stops Strepsiades from following linguistic custom and using '*ho alektruōn*' to refer to both male and female chickens. Instead, Socrates insists on restricting '*ho alektruōn*' (a third declension masculine) to male chickens and he invents the word '*hē alektruaina*' (following first declension feminines) for female chickens. We risk missing the joke if we simply remind ourselves that to the ears of the audience, '*hē alektruaina*' will almost sound normal since it ends as does '*hē leaina*' (lioness) and '*hē phallaina*' (whale)—both of which are comic comparisons with the common hen. The novelty of '*hē alektruaina*' together with its humorous rhyming connection with words for far more majestic animals is a bit on the cerebral side. What provokes the hearty belly-laughs is not the fact that '*hē alektruaina*' is novel, but that it is wrong.[33] In Greek, "some names of animals have only one grammatical gender without regard to sex," and this is related to the fact that in Greek the "gender of most nouns denoting sexless objects has to be learned by the endings … and by observation."[34] This would have been just as true for Aristophanes' Greeks as it is for people learning classical Greek today. Learning which animal names have only one grammatical gender is not a matter of mastering an abstract rule; it is a simple matter of noticing and obeying linguistic custom. We might say that when it comes to grammatical gender, "custom is king of all" (cf. Herodotus 3.38.4, who attributes this to Pindar). We laugh at Socrates' neologism because in creating the word he sets himself at odds with custom, thereby making himself ridiculously wrong. The chicken joke is unversive: our communal laughter marks Socrates as the oddball, who is out of step with correct Greek grammar, and marks ourselves as the socially mature ones who speak Greek properly.

This point is worth clarifying because modern scholars have missed the joke. There simply is no further fact about the gender of the Greek word for a

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[32] I disagree with Ludwig's assumed distinction between humour and serious ideas (Ludwig 2002, 255). This view is suitable for public speakers who sprinkle their serious ideas with jokes simply to break up the monotony. The proper way to take Aristophanes' ideas seriously—and even to discover what his ideas are—is to discover the point of view from which his jokes are funny. For example, both sexists and feminists may find the joke in the final note to this paper funny, but they will do so for different reasons. We learn about people's ideas if we find out *why* they think certain jokes are funny.

[33] We see the limitation of structural anthropology as a hermeneutic device in Bowie's one-dimensional interpretation of the chicken joke (Bowie 1993, 107, 131). Bowie is right to interpret this scene against the backdrop of initiation into cult mysteries, but if this is our only frame of reference, then '*hē alektruaina*' is nothing more than obedience to 'new rules of gender,' and all the humour is drained from the joke.

[34] Smyth 1956, 46.

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female chicken beyond actual linguistic custom—the evidence for the fact constitutes the fact. When there is no gap between the evidence for a fact and the truth of the fact, there is no room for scepticism: the evidence is necessarily conclusive and the inference from one to the other is indubitable. This is the epistemic conservatism that lies at the heart of Aristophanes' humour. It is not simply that he prefers custom; he thinks that we are indubitably aware that custom is correct. By inventing '*hē alektruaina*,' Socrates is insinuating scepticism into an indubitable inference; in doing so he makes himself ridiculously wrong, and ordinary speakers of Greek know that he's wrong. Those of us who learned and simply obey custom unquestioningly are the ones who know the truth, and snobs like Socrates, who act as if ordinary custom isn't good enough for them, make themselves ridiculous. We can enjoy the laughter of those who are indubitably aware that their own wisdom is superior to that of self-proclaimed know-it-alls like Socrates, who look down their noses at us.[35] Aristophanes is deliberately setting Socrates up as a clownish Thales making a pratfall into a grammatical ditch.

Probably Aristophanes is deliberately conflating Prodicus and Socrates for the sake of this joke.[36] However, it is only the linguistic part of this linguistic anti-conventionalism that was probably peculiar to Prodicus. The sceptical anti-conventionalism attributed to Socrates here is confirmed by Plato. By the standards of Plato's Socrates, his own wisdom is greater than that of those who humbly follow conventional ethical wisdom (cf. *Apology* 21c3-23b7; *Crito* 46b4-47d5; *Laches* 184d5-185a7, 186a3-187b7; *Meno* 80a8-b5). Socrates asks about virtue and living well, but conventional answers aren't good enough for

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35 Social hierarchy plays a repeated and important part in Aristophanes' humour. Strepsiades' slaves (line 5), son (line 8) and wife (lines 47-8) all act above their station, and this all helps to create problems. Aristophanes takes the audience down a peg when he makes it the butt of his insulting jokes (lines 1098-1101). When we first see Socrates, he is speculating (*periphronō*) about the sun (lines 225); Strepsiades immediately substitutes the word *huperphroneis* (line 226) for *periphronō*. Whereas '*peri-*' means around, '*huper-*' means above. By assuming that he can fully encompass Helios in his thoughts, he is guilty of setting himself above Helios as a superior to the god. This sets up the ultimate joke of the entire comedy when what we might call a 'mini-helios' burns Socrates' school to the ground: Strepsiades 'refutes' the Deep-Think-Tank with a torch (note that the word for torch, *phlox*, is used to refer to the heat of Helios, cf. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 22, *Persians* 505, and Sophocles *Trachiniae* 696). The one who thought himself above the sun is shown to be ridiculously inferior.

36 On 'Socrates' as a conflation of many different people, see Andreas Patzer 1993 and Dover xxxv-xl. It is also possible that Aristophanes is defending Prodicus by associating such objectionable activity not with him but with Socrates (Sidwell 2009, 172-5).

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him: he asks further questions, implying that custom is questionable and insinuating scepticism where conservatives believe it is inappropriate. Meno spots this and warns Socrates not to behave like this as a *xenos* in another *polis*: people sometimes don't take it very kindly when strangers treat their *nomoi* as questionable and hence risk undermining their binding force (*Meno* 80b5-7).

In particular, Socrates insists on asking a question that is itself unconventional. For example, when he asks Laches to tell him what courage is, he is not inviting Laches to recount the exploits of a brave man; rather he is asking something quite unfamiliar from a conventional point of view, i.e., what is one and the same in all the cases where we say that someone acted bravely (*Laches* 190e7-192b8). In the *Euthyphro* when he asks a similar question he says that he is looking for an *eidos*, *idea* or *paradeigma* (*Euthyphro* 5c8-6e6). At this point in the *Laches* and *Euthyphro*, why shouldn't we break into just as hearty a laughter as when Aristophanes' Socrates insists on inventing '*hē alektruaina*'? In grammar, 'custom is king' in the sense that the inference from grammatical evidence to grammatical truth is indubitable: it is ridiculously wrong (1) to notice the gender of the Greek word for a female chicken and then (2) ask for a general grammatical rule governing the gender of Greek words for various female animals in order (3) to determine what the correct gender is for the Greek word for a female chicken. Your job is done at step (1). If custom is king in the same sense when it comes to morality, then Socrates' quest for an *eidos*, *idea* or *paradeigma* that he can use to determine which actions are *hosios* and which are not (*Euthyphro* 6e3-6) is equally ridiculously wrong. We know with indubitable certainty which actions are *hosios* and which are not simply by consulting custom: from the perspective of Aristophanic epistemic conservatism, the evidence for the fact constitutes the fact in both the grammatical and the moral cases. Though the chicken joke is clearly silly, the deeper point is well-aimed: Socratic epistemic liberalism with respect to morality is ridiculously wrong from the perspective of Aristophanic epistemic conservatism.

To see Aristophanes' epistemic conservatism more clearly, contrast it with the defense Herodotus gives for the Pindaric claim that "custom is king of all" (Herodotus 3.38). Ask a Kallatian to burn the dead body of his father and he will decline; Kallatians have a custom of eating the bodies of their dead fathers. Ask a Greek to eat the dead body of his father and he will decline; Greeks have a custom of burning the bodies of their dead fathers. Knowledge of the Greek custom does not cause the Kallatians to question whether their custom is right, and knowledge of the Kallatian custom does not cause the Greeks to question whether their custom is right. For each, custom is king. Notice the two anthropological facts upon which Herodotus' argument relies: (1) different ethnic groups have different funerary customs, and (2) when confronted with the different funerary customs of another ethnic group, people prefer their own funerary customs. If either fact had been different, Herodotus may not have concluded that 'custom is king.' If in his travels he found that all peoples the whole world over burn the bodies of their dead fathers, Herodotus might have concluded not that it

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is right to burn the dead because it is customary, but that it is customary because it is right. Similarly, if learning of the alternative funerary customs of different ethnic groups caused people to question the rightness of their own customs, Herodotus might have concluded that people obey their funerary customs only because they are convinced that those customs are right, and not that they are convinced that their funerary customs are right simply because they are customary. Herodotus concludes that in fact there is no external viewpoint allowing us to settle conflicts between competing ethical customs, but his anthropological argument assumes that this is simply a matter of empirical fact, and hence that things might have been otherwise. Imagine a Kallatian wondering, 'What really will happen to the spirit of my father if I eat his dead body? Will I be trapping it here on earth instead of allowing it to rise to heaven? Do I owe it to my father to burn his body releasing his spirit, or would that condemn his spirit to dissolution?' Such a Kallatian might be looking for a viewpoint external to custom to use as a basis for deciding whether it is right for him to obey his people's funerary customs. If Herodotus is correct, then a preponderance of evidence justifies us in concluding that this Kallatian is seeking something that, as a matter of empirical fact, does not exist—though it might have. I call this a free-thinking liberal defense of the sovereignty of custom because it does not presume that evidence for the rectitude of Kallatian funerary customs for Kallatians constitutes the rectitude of those customs for those people. The mere fact that Kallatians have long-standing customs establishing the right and wrong ways to treat their dead fathers does not in itself prove that those right ways really are right and those wrong ways really are wrong; more evidence needs to be considered (i.e., (1) and (2) above). It is only a preponderance of evidence that might have turned out otherwise that entails the rectitude of Kallatian customs for Kallatians. To rest the argument for the sovereignty of custom on an evidence-based argument is implicitly to accept that believing in the sovereignty of custom is to be determined by the quality of the evidence and argument considered, and hence to assume that custom's reign must face the judgment-seat of evidential reason.

A second approach to defending the sovereignty of custom is one that every schoolchild knows, i.e., to ridicule anyone who is out of step with custom. I call this a 'conservative' defense of custom because it assumes no higher judgment-seat of action than custom. Aristophanes takes this route in *Clouds*, which is why I conclude that his comedy is conservative.[37]

[37] Bowie might object that I am failing to see how the text both affirms and deconstructs the meaning or message I find in it (cf. Bowie 1993, 130-3). In reply, I think Sommerstein's argument suffices (Sommerstein 1994, 189). Bernard Freydberg might argue that I am displaying a remarkably tin ear when it comes to the subtle and sophisticated sarcasm and irony in Aristophanes' humour. It is difficult to argue against an appeal to irony when that appeal does not cite any specific part of the text as evidence that irony is involved (see Iakovis Vasiliou 1998, 456 and David Wolfsdorf 2007, 176-7). Such interpretations verge on being unfalsifiable.

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Further support for my interpretation can be seen in the flea joke in lines 144-7. When Strepsiades arrives at Socrates' school, Socrates had just raised the question to Chaerephon of how far a flea can jump as measured in flea feet. As with the chicken joke, Socrates has insinuated scepticism—in the form of an inquiry based on presumed ignorance—into a situation where scepticism is not only unexpected, but ridiculously wrong. Socrates and Chaerephon were not examining a flea 'under laboratory conditions' as we say today; a flea had just bitten Chaerephon on the brow and jumped onto Socrates' head—they are literally flea-bitten. Everyone in the audience with a lick of common sense knows to keep themselves clean from fleas, and here these two knuckleheads are examining fleas instead of getting rid of them. They violate cultural *nomoi* of hygiene, but not in such a way as to undermine our own commitment to obeying those *nomoi* (e.g., by making medical discoveries that greatly improve public health); in fact the effect is quite unversive since they make themselves look unappealingly ridiculous.[38] As with the chicken joke, the sceptical question is not to be answered, but rather reveals the questioner to be ridiculously wrong. The mere fact that they would ask such a question in this way instead of just getting rid of the fleas is an aspersion on their characters.

We see this same self-impugning scepticism in the vomit joke at lines 906-7. Adikos has advanced one of the most profound and enduring of philosophical problems, i.e., 'the problem of evil,' and has done so in a brilliant manner. Adikos argues that justice does not exist.[39] He poses this as a rhetorical question, but if we put it in the form of an argument, it might look like this:

1. If justice exists, then Zeus has been destroyed (for imprisoning his father).
2. Zeus has not been destroyed.
3. So, justice does not exist.

What is so brilliant about this argument is not simply the fact that it is logically valid, i.e., if people accept the truth of the premises, then they suffer the

[38] Platter argues that an emphasis on the body is part of the "elimination of hierarchy" and the "dissolution of spiritual hierarchies" (Platter 2007, 12). Lott, however, points out that in blackface minstrelsy the emphasis on the body has exactly the opposite function. In 'wench' acts, white men transgress the colour line and indulge in the inversion of cross-dressing; by these transgressions and inversions they manage to be simultaneously racist and misogynist (Lott 1993, 159-68). Crude bodily humour can be subversive, but it can also be decidedly unversive.

[39] This in itself is funny because '*Adikos*' ('Wrong') is saying to '*Dikaios*' ('Right') that '*Dikē*' ('Justice') does not exist (line 902): this will sound to a Greek audience almost as if Adikos is proving to Dikaios that he, i.e., Dikaios, doesn't exist.

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embarrassment of making an irrational decision if they do not also accept the truth of the conclusion. In addition, these premises are ones that Dikaios would be embarrassed to reject. If Dikaios denies premise 2, then he would seem to be committed to affirming that Zeus has been destroyed (for imprisoning his father), but that is just as bad as Socrates, who comes right out and states that "there is no Zeus" (line 367). If Dikaios denies premise 1, then he denies the fundamental feature of Greek piety that it is wrong to mistreat a parent, especially one's father.[40] That this is a serious problem is underscored by the fact that Aeschylus raised a very similar problem in *Eumenides* (lines 640-1), and there is clearly no humour intended when he raised it.[41]

Dikaios has at least two strategies for replying to this argument. First, he might reject premise 1 without impiety by pleading special circumstances: Kronos had been swallowing Zeus' siblings, and one might argue that eating one's own offspring is worse than mistreating one's father, so the latter is a justifiable means to stopping the former. Second, Dikaios might defend a divine command theory of morality and argue that Zeus himself determines what is right, so if Zeus does it, then it is necessarily right. Either of these replies raises a number of interesting theological and philosophical issues, many of which have been repeatedly explored in great detail in the two and a half millennia since the original production of *Clouds*. I consider these to be free-thinking 'liberal' answers because they rest on the assumption that 'the problem of evil' is to be answered with evidence and argument, i.e., that our stand on the justice of Zeus must be determined at the judgment-seat of evidential reasoning.

Aristophanes has Dikaios take a much different approach: "Yech! What a foul argument you've crapped out! I'm going to vomit" (lines 906-7). This is a decidedly conservative reply, taking for granted that the justice of Zeus stands in no need of defense. Dikaios responds to Adikos as Camillo responds to King Leontes when the King casts vile aspersions on the Queen's character and conduct in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, i.e., he refuses to engage with the content of what is said, focusing instead on the character of the one who would dare say such a thing (lines 278-83).[42] Dikaios might well approve of Chaucer's miller when he says (Chaucer, *The Miller's Prologue* 3163-4),

> *An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf*
> *Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.*

[40] See MacDowell 1978, 92, 174.

[41] If Aristophanes were parodying Aeschylus (cf. Platter 2007, 68), he would have given Adikos a sillier version of the argument.

[42] See Nussbaum 1980, 58-60.

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Here the "shal" is clearly not expressing futurity but necessity or obligation, e.g., 'don't go poking your nose where it doesn't belong!' To ask the question, or to venture an evidential response, is to impugn your own character. Unlike free-thinkers who subvert the boundaries of pious decency when they raise forbidden questions seriously, Dikaios and Chaucer's miller take such questions unversively, i.e., as strengthening the hold custom has over their thoughts by revealing subversives to be contemptible.

We reveal ourselves to be free-thinking 'liberals' to the extent that we take 'the problem of evil' seriously as a philosophical and theological problem (even if we believe it to have a perfectly reasonable and pious answer). The same is true of our willingness to take entomology seriously: if more Greek intellectuals had studied fleas, the role fleas play in the promulgation of plague might have been discovered much sooner. This same 'liberal' attitude would no doubt cause us to be open-minded if a lexicographer advanced a general theory of the assignment of grammatical gender according to which '*alektruōn*' was anomalous. Conservatives will (a) laugh at us for wasting our time on such grammatical speculations, (b) object to our wasting precious research money studying fleas, and (c) scoff at us when we consider the 'problem of evil,' saying that we are merely engaged in a pretentious form of carping. And yet, at least in the case of the fleas, we now know that some liberal inquiry can have quite unexpected value.

Section 4: The Causality of Humour

Plato's Socrates refers to Aristophanes, implying that with *Clouds* he made himself one of Socrates' accusers (*katēgoroi*, *Apology* 18c4), and that he did so out of *phthonos* and *diabolē* (18d2, cf. 19c2). By '*diabolē*' he means 'slander,' i.e., making a false allegation that is intended to damage his reputation. Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith have summed up the alleged slander as follows: "Socrates undertakes naturalistic inquiries, argues sophistically, and teaches others to do the same."[43] I agree with the case made by Brickhouse and Smith that what Socrates says in reply to this slander is "a sufficient defense."[44] What is unclear is why Socrates thinks the slander was borne of *phthonos*: he himself admits that the things 'Socrates' spouts in *Clouds* is a lot of foolish nonsense (*phluarian phluarounta*, 19c4), and this invites the view that, while Aristophanes falsely attributes a lot of silliness to Socrates, it wasn't done to damage his reputation since none of it was meant seriously: he was only joking.

43 Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 63.

44 See Brickhouse and Smith, 68. See also C.D.C. Reeve 1989, 9-21. On Socrates' early interest in natural philosophy, see Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 17-18.

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'*Phthonos*' might mean 'envy' but since Socrates was not a comic poet, it's unclear what the grounds for envy would be. '*Phthonos*' might mean 'malice' but if Plato's portrait is fairly accurate, then Socrates was witty and engaging. I find it hard to believe that Aristophanes wouldn't have enjoyed his company. Certainly if we compare Socrates and Meletus as depicted in Plato's *Apology*, Aristophanes would loath the humourless and self-righteous dullard while admiring—if only grudgingly—the former. So I suspect that Plato is using '*phthonos*' in the generic sense of 'reproach' (cf. Euripides, *Hecuba* 288). On my view, Aristophanes found Socrates to be ridiculously wrong and wrong-headed, and this is grounds for reproach and for holding Socrates up for public ridicule. If I am right about '*phthonos*,' then given my view of *Clouds*, Plato's Socrates was spot on.[45] Even if the two engaged in playful verbal sparring, enjoyed each others' company, and shared a mutual respect, Aristophanes and Socrates were profoundly opposed in a serious cultural war. In my view, Aristophanes was a cultural (not a political) warrior, who accurately perceived Socrates to be a prominent enemy of conservatism, and in true conservative fashion he deliberately made Socrates look ridiculous. I, therefore, hold Aristophanes partly to blame for Socrates' execution, though I suspect he was horrified when it happened.

That Aristophanes was partly to blame for what happened to Socrates is my argument against all who would link Aristophanes too closely with Socrates in particular, or with the liberal intelligentsia in general.[46] Every schoolchild knows that to be ridiculed publicly (e.g., on the playground or on the stage), is to be marked as ridiculous. If you are further subjected to the putatively absolving hypocrisy, 'I was only joking,' then you are in addition marked as weak and unable to take a joke. Most of us don't need to worry too much about such verbal roughhousing because a normal part of growing up is learning how to secure friends who help protect us from the potential results of being marked as ridiculous and weak. Those who are, for one reason or another, lacking such friends are vulnerable to serious, even life-threatening,

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45 Bowie is right to worry that using structural anthropology to interpret Aristophanes is a bit like the Rohrschach ink-blot tests (Bowie 1993, 6). But in reply, Bowie only emphasizes our ability to discover more "points of contact" between the text and the cultural "structures." This may suffice as a reply to the objection of interpreter-relativity (i.e., that different interpreters will detect different patterns in the same text), but it is no reply to the objection of interpreter-subjectivity (i.e., that the pattern detected tells us about the pattern-recognizer and not about the image in which the pattern is recognized). My interpretation does have a reply to this objection, since I affirm Plato's interpretation of *Clouds*. It is one thing to claim to find ancient "structures of thought," but it is quite another to find direct evidence that some ancient actually thought such and such.

46 See Sidwell 2009, 174-5.

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escalating repercussions.[47] Aristophanes must have known that by making Socrates look ridiculous he was socially marking Socrates as someone not to be taken seriously, and hence targeting him for some degree of social ostracism.[48] 'I was only joking' does not absolve a comedian of all culpability.[49]

Of course, we need to be careful in identifying what kind of causality humour possesses. This is a poor argument: Kleon got elected after Aristophanic ridicule, Socrates got executed after Aristophanic ridicule; the correlation is not statistically significant so we must reject a claim of causal connection. It is possible for two people to catch the same virus but only one of them comes down with a cold. This does not refute the putative causality of viruses.

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47 See www.thetrevorproject.org and the American Psychological Association's "Resolution on Bullying Among Children and Youth," which cites, among other consequences of bullying, lowered self-esteem, higher rates of depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness and suicidal ideation (http://www.apa.org/about/policy/bullying.pdf). In this regard, I am troubled both by Platter's argument that Aristophanic comedy is "unfinalizable" in Bakhtin's sense (cf. Platter 2007, 5; see note 11 above), as well as by Bowie's argument that Aristophanes' comedy deconstructs itself (cf. Bowie 1993, 130-3; see note 37 above). Racist, misogynist and homophobic humour, for example, often constitute unjust assaults, but we protect the assailants in their assaults if we take up hermeneutic stances that prevent us from concluding that a piece of verbal ridicule is, for example, racist. Such verdicts needn't be the final word on verbal assaults (there may be very interesting inter-textual connections to be considered), but any legitimate interpretive strategy must allow that such verdicts can be right and proper or we will never be able to protect vulnerable people from such injustices, and we will be undercutting our ability to fight racism, for example. I am sympathetic with Barbara Herrnstein Smith's concerns as articulated in her 1988 book, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*.

48 Plutarch's anecdote about a citizen voting to ostracize Aristides simply because he was annoyed to hear him repeatedly called 'the just' is not entirely incredible. Also, Platter correctly links the competitive aspect of comedy with "the importance of openness in public life and the equality of all before the law" (Platter 2007, 25). But this de-contextualizes the comic *agōn*. It is possible to win comedic competitions before mass audiences by airing unorthodox viewpoints, but the popularity of blackface minstrelsy is proof that it is possible to beat the competition by playing to, rather than against, dominant prejudices, i.e., by unversive comedy.

49 I take this as an objection to Freydberg's view. This is also my argument against Bowie, L. Edmunds and Sommerstein. We can give up on looking for "authorial intent" (Bowie 1993, 9) only if we assume that Aristophanes was unaware that ridicule is a prominent effect of making someone look ridiculous. Aristophanes is guilty of a similar cognitive failing if he believed that socially prominent ridicule is causally inert (cf. Edmunds 1987, n.62). Sommerstein's plea that Aristophanes may simply have been catering to "the anticipated prejudices of the theatre audience" (Sommerstein 1996, 336) is a version of the 'I was only following orders' defense.

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The comparative strength of one's immune system plays a crucial role. Hence, one may make people sick directly by infecting them, but one may also make them sick indirectly by weakening their immune systems. If Aristophanes' *Clouds* factors into the explanation of Socrates' execution, it needn't be because it caused people to dislike Socrates,[50] but rather because it helped to compromise the forces that led people to restrain their dislike of Socrates.

Knowing that humour can have such an effect requires no greater knowledge than that of the average school child. If a bully picks on someone and gets away with it, others may try to pick on the same child. If they get away with it, still more may try. Unless the picked-on child has friends to counter-act the social damage, this story could have a tragic ending. Ridicule may not cause people to dislike someone, but if they do dislike someone, successful public ridicule could create an atmosphere in which people's inhibitions against acting on their dislike are diminished. A recent study of sexist humour shows that,

> sexist humour is not simply benign amusement; it can have a deleterious effect on men's perception of the immediate social context and thereby promote the behavioral release of prejudice against women.[51]

After exposure to sexist humour,[52] test subjects were increasingly willing to focus hypothetical budget cuts on a women's organization rather than to distribute budget cuts equally. There was no indication that sexist humour caused sexist attitudes in people who did not already have them, but it did show that people who already had sexist attitudes were more likely to act in overtly sexist ways in the presence of sexist humour. This is the "prejudice-releasing function of sexist humour."[53]

> These findings suggest that exposure to sexist humour did not simply create a "false consensus" bias…whereby sexist participants overestimated the prevalence of their sexist attitudes in the general population. Rather, for sexist participants, the sexist humour created a realization of two separate and conflicting norms of appropriate conduct toward women: a general, nonprejudiced norm and a local, prejudiced norm—a norm tolerant of sexism. Sexist participants took advantage of the local prejudiced norm to release their prejudice against women without fears of disapproval from others. Disparagement of women through humour "freed" sexist participants from having to conform to the more general and more restrictive norms regarding discrimination against women.[54]

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50 However, if Bowie is right that Aristophanes patterns 'Socrates' on *goētes*, *magoi* and the like, he may have aroused some antipathy towards the real Socrates.

51 Thomas Ford, Christie Boxer, Jacob Armstrong, and Jessica Edel 2008, 169.

52 For example, 'A man and a woman were stranded in an elevator and they knew they were gonna die. The woman turns to the man and says, 'Make me feel like a woman before I die.' So he takes off his clothes and says, 'Fold them!'"

53 Ford, *et al*. 163.

54 Ford *et al*. 168.

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I do not believe that *Clouds* turned anyone against Socrates. However, I do think that it helped to create an atmosphere in which conservatives with an antipathy towards Socrates felt more comfortable 'releasing' their feelings in overt action, e.g., voting against him. Probably Aristophanes simply hoped that people would take Socrates less seriously. Sadly, he underestimated his influence.

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