

Nubes 1493ff: Was Socrates Murdered?

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AT THE END of the *Clouds* Strepsiades sets fire to the Phrontisterion. Most scholars, including the most recent commentator on the play,¹ have believed that Socrates and his companions come running out of the burning building, and are chased away by Strepsiades and his slave. E. Christian Kopff, however, in a recent article in this journal,² argues that they remain inside the building, and are burnt to death. I offer five arguments in favour of the traditional view.

1. First, a general consideration: people do not get killed in Old Comedy. Insulted, humiliated, beaten, yes; threatened with death (Diakaiopolis at *Ach.* 280ff, esp. 325); even, like Lamachos (*Ach.* 1174ff), wounded; but not killed. On the other hand, they do frequently get chased; in particular, *Thesmophoriazousai* provides a good parallel for a chase at the end of a comedy.

Such generalizations are admittedly hazardous. Houses do not normally get burnt down in Old Comedy either; *Clouds* might be exceptional in both respects. Furthermore, we can generalize from only a handful of plays; a new papyrus might at any time undermine the rule. Until such evidence is forthcoming, however, the argument cannot be lightly dismissed.

2. Next, Strepsiades' intentions. He tells us what he proposes to do. He will follow Hermes' advice *ὡς τάχιστ' ἐπιμπράναι τὴν οἰκίαν τῶν ἀδολεσχῶν* (1484–85): he will burn the house. He does not add “and Socrates too, and his wretched disciples.” If Strepsiades' idea of taking revenge were so violent that, like Phalaris, he was prepared to roast his instructors alive, we should expect him to say so explicitly. He does not. Similarly the startled character at 1497 cries out “Who is setting fire to our house?” not “Who is incinerating us?”³

The destruction of the house, then, is Strepsiades' first aim. He

¹ K. J. DOVER, *Aristophanes, Clouds* (Oxford 1968), hereafter ‘Dover’.

² “*Nubes* 1493ff: Was Socrates Murdered?” *GRBS* 18 (1977) 113–22, hereafter ‘Kopff’.

³ For what it is worth, the Hypotheses too refer only to the burning of the house: Hyp. I (Dover) 9, III 27, IV 8.

does, however, utter more serious threats. At 1489 he tells his slave to demolish the roof “until you bring the house down on top of them,” *ἕως ἂν αὐτοῖς ἐμβάλης τὴν οἰκίαν*. Strictly, the occupants must remain inside if this is to happen; but again Strepsiades does not say “until they are burnt to a cinder,” and the collapse of the roof is quite compatible with an escape from the blazing house.⁴ At 1499 a Socratic shouts “You will be the death of me,” to which Strepsiades replies “Yes, that’s just what I’d like.” Perhaps by now he is thinking of homicide, whether by fire or falling tiles and masonry or whatever. At this stage he is in no mood to draw distinctions; it is the climax of his fury. Strepsiades’ threats, then, get more violent as he warms to his task, but this is not to say that he carries them out. His rage may be frustrated by the escape of Socrates and his merry men.

3. Lines 1499, 1504, 1505: Kopff (120) adduces parallels from tragedy, where cries of woe from characters *in extremis* are heard from within: “the audience might be able to deduce . . . the imminent death of the Socratics.” We cannot, in fact, be sure that the cries are from within,⁵ but let us assume that they are. Such cries in tragedy take various forms,⁶ but only one of them is in the future tense like the exclamations of Socrates and his pupil: Lykos’ cry in Euripides’ *Antiope* (fr. 48.59 Kambitsis = 56 Page), *οἶμοι θανοῦμαι πρὸς δυοῖν ἀσύμμαχος*, “Alas I shall die. . . .” As it happens, Lykos does *not* die, because Hermes opportunely intervenes (67ff = 64ff Page) to prevent bloodshed. No more do Socrates and his pupils, I suggest: the audience, if in a pedantic mood, can easily understand a conditional clause: “Alas, I shall be choked to death [if I don’t get out of here quickly].” As for *ἀπολείς*, there are numerous examples of this exclamation in comedy, in the sense

⁴ “I’ll make you pay for this” at 1491–92 is too unspecific to serve as evidence.

⁵ C. W. Dearden, *The Stage of Aristophanes* (London 1976) 24, has the Socratics “appearing at the window shouting for help” without specifying line-numbers. W. J. M. Starkie, *The Clouds of Aristophanes* (London 1911) 309, 311, brings them out from 1493 onwards. A. H. Sommerstein in the Penguin translation (Harmondsworth 1973) brings them out at varying speeds from 1497ff. K. J. Dover, *PCPhS* 192 (1966) 11 = H.-J. Newiger (ed.), *Aristophanes und die alte Komödie* (Darmstadt 1975) 114, and in his commentary *ad loc.*, prudently leaves the question open.

⁶ Present tense (most commonly), perfect, deliberative subjunctive, imperative both positive (“help!”) and negative (“do not kill!”), invocations, vocatives, and tenseless wails. Only three are in the future tense as in the *Clouds*. Of these, one is a threat (*ἀναρρήξω*, Eur. *Hec.* 1040) and another a periphrastic imperative (*οὐκ ἀρήξετε*; Eur. *Antiope* fr. 48.53 Kambitsis = 50 Page); this leaves only the line discussed in the text.

“you will be the death of me” rather than “you will kill me,”⁷ though of course the predicament of the speaker makes a literal interpretation more likely here. But there is no reason to assume that his prediction comes true.

My attention has also been drawn to the “stress on terror” in this scene: *οἴμοι τάλας δειλαιοσ* (1504), *ἐγὼ δὲ κακοδαίμων* (1505); will characters uttering such cries easily be thought of as contemplating escape? But these exclamations hardly constitute a stress on terror. Strepsiades cries out *οἴμοι τάλας* because of his debts (23) and because he is bitten by bugs (742). He is *δειλαιοσ* because he cannot sleep (12), because of the bugs (709), and because he thought Dinos a god (1473); Hyperbolos is *δειλαιοσ* because he was attacked by comic poets (552). *κακοδαίμων ἐγὼ* exclaims Strepsiades, yet again because of the bugs (698); *οἴμοι κακοδαίμων* exclaims Pheidippides, afraid of becoming a living corpse like Chairephon (504, cf. *κακοδαίμονα* at 1112); *οἴμοι κακοδαίμων* says Strepsiades, beaten by his son (1324). Various individuals are characterized as *κακοδαίμων*: Socrates (104), Strepsiades (791), Peleus (1064), the second creditor (1263); and when Strepsiades calls himself *κακοδαίμων* at 268 the force is simply “Poor old me, to think that I came out without a hat!”⁸ Such expressions hardly build up an atmosphere of terror; they are intended to make us laugh. So is *ιοὺ ἰοὺ* at 1493—indeed Aristophanes explicitly mentions this in the parabasis (543) as one kind of cheap joke.⁹

4. Line 1508: *δίωκε, παῖε, βάλλε. Δίωκε* is most naturally taken as an order by Strepsiades to his slave to chase Socrates and his companions. Kopff says (118) that these “are the sort of thing an angry crowd shouts,” but only one of the passages he cites to support this view contains *δίωκε*, and that is an instance of physical pursuit: the entry of the chorus of Knights in pursuit of Kleon

⁷ E.g. *Ach.* 470; *Vesp.* 849, 1202; *Pax* 166; *Av.* 1506; *Thesm.* 1073; *Eccles.* 775; *Plut.* 390.

⁸ Other passages where these words are juxtaposed are *Ach.* 1018–19 *οἴμοι τάλας . . . ἀνήρ κακοδαίμων* (farmer, oxen stolen); *Eq.* 1200 *οἴμοι τάλας*, 1206 *οἴμοι κακοδαίμων* (Kleon, hare stolen); *Vesp.* 1150 *οἴμοι δειλαιοσ*, 1166 *κακοδαίμων ἐγὼ* (Philokleon, smart cloak and shoes); *Thesm.* 229 *κακοδαίμων ἐγὼ*, 232 *οἴμοι κακοδαίμων*, 237 *οἴμοι κακοδαίμων*, 241 *οἴμοι τάλας* (Mnesilochos being shaved and singed); and *Plut.* 850–52 *οἴμοι κακοδαίμων, ὡς ἀπόλωλα δειλαιοσ, καὶ τρεῖς κακοδαίμων καὶ τετράκις καὶ πεντάκις καὶ δωδεκάκις καὶ μυριάκις ἰοὺ ἰοὺ* (sycophant, loss of property).

⁹ Aristophanes’ claim that he does not descend to *ιοὺ ἰοὺς* can hardly be serious in view of the opening words of the play and lines 1321 and 1493.

(*Eq.* 251, *cf.* 246). Physical pursuit is also implied by *δίωκε* at *Ach.* 204 and *Thesm.* 1223 (neither cited by Kopff), the latter, as in *Clouds*, at the end of a play. In these passages *δίωκε* means literally ‘chase’, and at *Clouds* 1508 too it is better taken literally than as a vague shout; in which case Socrates and his friends must have emerged from the Phrontisterion.¹⁰

5. Finally, to incinerate the occupants, it would be necessary to lock, bolt, or barricade the door.¹¹ Strepsiades starts burning the building from the roof (1487 with Dover *ad loc.*); anyone inside would naturally run out, unless he were prevented. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the door has been blocked.¹² Strepsiades gives detailed instructions: a ladder, a mattock, demolish the roof, bring a torch—but there is not a word about keeping the door shut. Nor is there time for it: after 1485ff he and his slave are on the roof, otherwise employed.¹³ Kopff, in citing the parallel from Kroton (116), uses the word ‘trapped’; but Socrates and his associates are not trapped. The fire begins on the roof, and wherever one envisages them at any given moment, they have plenty of time to escape.¹⁴

Was the *skene* then actually burnt to the ground?¹⁵ Wilamowitz argued that this happened at the end of the *Troades* (Kopff 119 with n.26), and Dover (on 1485ff, *cf.* lxxi–ii) believes that it may have happened here. This seems implausible. Whatever one may or may not believe about light movable wooden screens or panels,¹⁶

¹⁰ This argument against Kopff reaffirms and strengthens the views of Dover (*supra* n.5), and commentary *ad loc.* J. Vaio in Kopff 118 n.24 refers to LSJ *s.v.* *διώκω* III.2–5; but III.2 is ‘drive, drive on’ rather than ‘hurry it up’, and there is no need to take *Clouds* 1508 in this way; III.3 requires an object, and 4 and 5 are post-classical.

¹¹ I assume two doors, not one; *cf.* Kopff 120 with n.30.

¹² A reader points out that there is no mention of escape either; but I cannot see why there need be.

¹³ Kopff 119 speaks of “Strepsiades and slave racing up and down the ladder twice in a short period of time.” This is oddly put; they each go up and down only once.

¹⁴ For various views on when they emerge see *supra* n.5. Calculations must of course be based on how many lines are required for an actor to emerge from the *skene*, not on how long it would take to escape from a blazing house in real life.

¹⁵ The question cannot be dismissed as academic on the grounds that the revised version, in which the burning of the school was a new feature (Hyp. I 7–9), was probably never produced (see Dover [*supra* n.1] lxxxii). Aristophanes certainly *intended* that the revised version should be produced; and that is what matters for our purposes.

¹⁶ Dover (*supra* n.5) 3–4, 11–12 [=Newiger 101–03, 114–15], and (*supra* n.1) lxxi–ii; Dearden (*supra* n.5) 19–20, 38–40.

the structure which Strepsiades places his ladder against, climbs to the top of, and attacks the roof of, must surely be the main wooden skene—and this would have been required for the next play.¹⁷

THE UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

July, 1981

¹⁷ I am very grateful to Sir Kenneth Dover and Dr Richard Seaford for their comments on an earlier draft of this note, and to an anonymous referee who has forced me to reconsider my arguments and to temper my dogmatism.