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Socrates According to Plato and Aristophanes

Although Socrates never wrote any great works or taught a class, he is considered one of history's greatest teachers and philosophers. Unfortunately, before much of his contemporary public realized the benefit of his philosophical prowess, Socrates was executed for impiety. Whether his views were a political threat or his fellow Athenians really were offended by his alleged impiety, after Socrates' death, Athens regretted this injustice. In trying to understand the life of this remarkable man, two of his contemporaries, Aristophanes and Plato give a picture to examine. In comparing Aristophanes' *The Clouds*¹ and Plato's *Apology*², it is evident that both authors have very different views of the man. Due to the differences in Socrates' character, this comparison also compels a reader to question whether Aristophanes' and Plato's accounts are genuine. Through examination of the two texts, it is apparent that both Aristophanes and Plato had reason to misrepresent Socrates' character so that only a partial image of the man is available to both authors' audiences.

To compare the authors' perspectives of Socrates, Aristophanes and Plato both lived during Socrates' lifetime, but their associations with him differed greatly. First, Aristophanes was born twenty years after Socrates and Plato was born forty years after Socrates. At the time of Aristophanes' release of *The Clouds*, Socrates would have been in his forties, but Plato would have been an infant. Plato was one of Socrates' young followers. According to Bury,³ Socrates attracted the attention of young men in Athens because he questioned the basis

¹ Aristophanes. "Lysistrata and Other Plays." *The Clouds*. Trans. Alan H. Sommerstein. London: Penguin Books, 2002.

² Plato. *Apology*. Trans. Harold North Fowler. Cambridge, MA: 1966.

³ Bury, J.B. and Russell Meiggs. *A History of Greece: To the Death of Alexander the Great*. Fourth Ed. New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1975.

of every thought and action of those around him. Because older men were angered at his inquisitive challenges, younger men jumped at the chance to learn Socrates' dialectic method of evaluation (Bury 358). In this respect, Plato had an amicable relation with Socrates and respected him highly as his teacher. Aristophanes did not have any connection to Socrates other than a possible chance acquaintance and observations of Socrates' public actions in the agora. Understanding these relationships gives insight on the perception each writer may have had concerning Socrates.

In *Apology*, Plato writes the dialogue of Socrates' defense of himself against the charges brought forth by Meletus. The charges claimed Socrates was a wrongdoer in that he did not believe in the gods of the city and thus corrupted the youth of Athens with his infidelity. As one of the youth Socrates supposedly corrupted, Plato came to be another of the ancient world's greatest philosophers. Whether he was corrupted by Socrates is questionable, but deeply affected by his teacher, it seems most certain. Of the many works written by Plato, at least four deal directly with the principles of Socrates and the circumstances surrounding his trial and execution. With so many references to his mentor, Plato is one of the modern world's most detailed links to the life of Socrates. Considering this, it causes many to ask how accurate Plato's depiction really is.

While reading this dialogue, it is necessary to consider how it was written in order to determine its legitimacy. Plato may have recorded the dialogue during the trial, but if he had, it is doubtful that so many scholars would place it as one of his middle works. With this in mind, the piece may or may not have been composed within a few years of Socrates' execution. While not doubting Plato's memory, it seems likely the farther from the trial the dialogue was written, the less accurate it is in portraying the exact words of Socrates. Fewer words attributed to Socrates means more of *Apology* was created by Plato. Plato's creative liberality has two major consequences: one, the audience is given access only to the Socrates Plato wants to portray, and two, the ideals and ideas of Plato are diffused to the public under the auspices of Socrates' teachings. For

example, when he questions Meletus during the trial, Socrates tells his jurors and his accuser that if he corrupted those around him, it was involuntary and should have been dealt with on a personal basis, not in public court (Plato 26a).

Socrates very well could have conveyed this idea to the jury believing a hearing was unnecessary, but Plato could also have decided to make this point in the dialogue because he was bitter about the treatment of his venerable teacher.

Again, insertion of Plato's own views might explain the frequent recurrence of Socrates claiming to believe in the Gods when Socrates is generally considered agnostic (Bury 358). Although Socrates never actually states his own beliefs while proving himself innocent of Meletus' charge of atheism, he does mention "God's will" while trying to convince the jury that he should not die (Plato 30d). Socrates first discusses his personal religious convictions in saying he is God's gift to mankind (31a). Whether this is actually where Socrates' sympathies lie or Plato put those words in his mouth for comic relief is a fact difficult to distinguish, but another sample of the same tone is inserted in the last line of Apology. Socrates wittily remarks that he does not know whose fate is better, those who will live on, or his own, which is to die (42a). This brusque quip could easily be attributed to either philosopher, though it sounds ironically like a threat coming from Socrates. Socrates does not make threats anywhere else in Apology. This farewell note seems more likely the dramatic ending Plato would include to signify that an Athenian state who would shun his instructor deserves whatever discord it brings upon itself. If Plato is using Socrates' reputation to spread his own teachings, the principles that seem to belong to Socrates in this dialogue may not be his at all.

Although the past few paragraphs have generally portrayed Plato as the devoted student of Socrates, he may have had ulterior motives in writing this dialogue. Examining these motives may also give insight on what Plato was trying to convey in Apology as well as inconsistencies in his depiction. The most obvious motives, as illustrated above, include Plato writing in admiration of Socrates. In this case, Apology was composed as a tribute to his instructor's strong will. Socrates' futile defense makes his conviction logical, because it is

obvious that he makes no effort to prove his innocence. For example, Socrates begins the defense saying not to heed any warnings of his being a “clever speaker.” (Plato, Apology 17b) This hurts his case, considering his entire dialogue is tricky. This is especially evident when he tries to discount his guilt in the cross examination of Meletus. In order to make his innocence known, he attempts to make Meletus seem guilty of having “never thought about the youth [for which] you haled me into court.” (25c) Though unfamiliar with the intricacies of Athenian courts, this does not seem the most effective method of proving one’s innocence. If Plato intentionally created the dialogue to show these ironic intrigues, the purpose would be to show his fondness for Socrates’ unique perspective and eccentric traits, not to defend Socrates after the fact. Because he does not attempt to prove his innocence, Plato shows readers the strength of Socrates’ principles and that he would rather die than claim false beliefs. If making Socrates seem of stronger will than ordinary people was Plato’s goal, it may be necessary to embellish certain details about him so the image is congruent throughout the dialogue. Exaggerating Socrates’ characteristics may give the audience a false impression of who he really was.

Though less likely to be true, Plato may have had another goal in mind entirely. Plato may have been trying to separate himself from his teacher by showing Socrates’ undeniable guilt. If the dialogue had been written immediately after the trial, the purpose of separating himself from Socrates would have been to avoid suspicion. Because Socrates was likely seen as a political threat through his encouragement of individualism, Anytus, one who helped restore Athens against the Thirty, had reason to take him out of a position to threaten the newly reborn democracy (Brickhouse 2.1.7)⁴. If Plato feared these political ties coming to haunt him, the desire to separate his beliefs from Socrates’ is justified. If Plato did not fear the politicians of Athens, because he probably released Apology many years after the trial, he may have wanted to separate himself from Socrates to show that he had come into his own right as a philosopher.

⁴ Brickhouse, Thomas C. and Nicholas D. Smith. Plato and the Trial of Socrates. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Whatever Plato's motive in designing the dialogue of Socrates, it is undeniable that Plato had much free reign to portray Socrates in any way. Without more sources to compare, this description may give a wrong impression of Socrates life and demeanor.

In addition to considering Plato's multiple motives to portray Socrates poorly, Plato's other works give evidence of his disregard for complete accuracy regarding Socrates. For example, a discrepancy arises between the accounts of Diogenes Laertius and Plato concerning the number of jurors present at the trial and their votes (Brickhouse 75). Although no evidence points to one account over the other, most historians accept Plato's account over Diogenes' because he was not present at the trial. Although this is quite acceptable, this does not clear up the question of how many jurors were present. At the time of the trial, it was common practice in Athens to have an even numbered jury, where the adoption of odd numbered juries occurred a few years after Socrates' trial. Plato claims 501 jurors heard the case. Despite the fact that historians credit Plato more in this detail, the fact that a discrepancy arises brings one to question all the details in Plato's accounts. The most controversial detail in Plato's writing is the death scene of Socrates. In the last part of the *Phaedo*, Plato portrays Socrates' last days alive (Brickhouse 253). In addition to conflicting doctrines, the science of the death scene has aroused question of Plato's accuracy. According to Thomas Brickhouse, Socrates' views on the afterlife in *Phaedo* do not align with his proclaimed views stated in Plato's other writings (253). This is a cause for concern considering most of the modern perception of Socrates' teachings comes from Plato's accounts. Furthermore, Socrates is portrayed as willingly accepting his death. His sentence was execution by ingestion of poison hemlock. After considerable study of the effects of hemlock, especially by a Roman by the name of Nicander, results show it leads to convulsions, nausea, thick speech, loss of feeling in the limbs, and many other unpleasant side effects. No parallel symptoms appear in Plato's account except paralysis (Brickhouse 259). Debating why Plato would portray Socrates' death as more peaceful than would be scientifically reasonable is a complex issue, but finding an

inconsistency of this magnitude causes a reader to reevaluate everything Plato claims about Socrates in all of his works.

Now that Plato's representation of Socrates has been shown to have possible inaccuracies and ulterior motives, Aristophanes' depiction of Socrates in *The Clouds* deserves the same analysis. Aristophanes writes a comedic play about parodying the intellectual movement occurring in Athens. The growing numbers of intellectuals in the city, whose ideals threaten the traditional foundation of Athenian democracy, are depicted by a blanket characterization under the name of Socrates. Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates shows an atheistic sophist who teaches Athenian youth how to make the "wrongful argument" seem right in a debate through deception and trickery (Aristophanes 116). Although this character has the name Socrates, it is ambiguous whether he truly represents his namesake. Assuming Aristophanes did intend to make fun of Socrates as the leader of this intellectual movement, it is questionable whether he allows comedic efforts to compromise the actual traits of Socrates or he truthfully depicts the public opinion of Socrates at that time.

Aristophanes was known as a sarcastic and satirical playwright, depicting public opinion in a style of vulgar comedy. *The Clouds* was originally written for the city Dionysia in 423 BC, but it was a complete failure in the competition. Aristophanes revised it and this revision is the only version left to the modern world (Sommerstein 69). The changes Aristophanes made are not entirely known, but speculation points to only three parts having changed significantly. In this effect, it can be assumed the play was modified to suit the audience better than the original. One cannot be certain what Aristophanes' intent was in writing as he did, but the general goal of a playwright is to entertain the audience. Therefore, his portrayal of Socrates in *The Clouds* is primarily ascribed to his effort to please an Athenian crowd.

In order to understand what Aristophanes meant to impart to his audience, it may be beneficial to explore how he represents Socrates and how this could effect a reader's interpretation. Considering Aristophanes' reputation for vulgar humor and traditionalist perspectives, the representation of Socrates' education

interspersed with the bodily functions of gnats and lizards seems to demean the value of his intellect (160-180). This may be because Aristophanes, or more likely, his audience, does not understand Socrates' philosophy, or because Socrates' actions in public are so offensive that a lizard defecating upon him is a better outcome than whatever revolutionary idea he may come up with next. Later, Aristophanes refers to Socrates as a sophist (331). Although sophist literally means educated person, the sophists of Athens at that time were usually men who charged for an education in the skill of rhetoric (Brickhouse 88). Socrates did not charge for his services, but instead engaged passersby in conversation, thus influencing the young men with whom he conversed (Bury 359). Aristophanes also portrays Socrates as "worshipping" the Clouds, "patron goddesses of the lay about." (Aristophanes 317) This is obviously a pun indicating Socrates believes in no divinities at all and, by instituting the clouds as the deities of his educational institute, influences others to "believe" in the Clouds as well. The lack of religious reverence for the Clouds becomes apparent when Strepsiades and Socrates discuss the origin of flatulence and lightning (386). Additionally, Socrates often swears by "Chaos, Air, and Respiration" or some other such list of natural occurrences (628). Aristophanes pokes fun at Socrates' philosophy to contemplate tangible phenomenon, by instead saying he worships the quest for knowledge over any city gods. Strepsiades' gullibility in believing every word Socrates or his students utter indicates the social atmosphere believing the youth of Athens are susceptible to absorbing any nonsense Socrates might try to spread throughout the city (815). Although the above is just a sampling of the many acerbic jabs Aristophanes makes at Socrates, it is already apparent each needs analysis before it can be reasonably applied to the philosopher described by Plato, which, in effect leaves plenty of room for misinterpretation.

Although Aristophanes misconstrues the true characteristics of Socrates in *The Clouds* for humor's sake, a modern audience must also consider this version as a second draft. As mentioned earlier, Aristophanes' first production failed miserably in competition. Because he was considered a popular and successful

comedian, this brings one to question what would cause this unexpected dissatisfaction of a play so characteristic of Aristophanes. For the purpose of evaluating his representation of Socrates, the original representation may have been the factor encouraging him to change the play. Two situations, then, could have been the cause. For the first, Aristophanes' original version of *The Clouds* may have depicted Socrates in a much more negative light. In this case, the Athenian public had no reason to dislike him, and Aristophanes' comedy was really too mean to gain favor. If this was the audience's response, the revised play is more likely to show what Athenians thought of Socrates. In the second case, Aristophanes' original depiction of Socrates was too nice, and the Athenian public disapproved of such tolerance of the man degrading the city's integrity. In this case, the portrayal of Socrates in the revised version would be more outrageous than can be considered a reasonable representation. Either way, Aristophanes tailors the character to his audience, giving doubt to its accuracy altogether.

The tone Aristophanes adopts for his play may also give insight on his portrayal of Socrates. The plot is rather bleak, an uncommon trait for a comedy. This somber tone may have been Aristophanes' contempt for his original audience's response, or Aristophanes' contempt for Socrates. In the latter case, it would make one question what Socrates did to offend Aristophanes to deserve such ridicule. If Socrates had personally offended Aristophanes, each of his traits would be magnified for the worst in *The Clouds*. If this bleak tone instead comes from contempt for his audience's disapproval, the revised play may have shown his indignation. For example, Aristophanes may have taken out his anger for the crowd on Socrates' character by portraying him more corrupt and vulgar than he may have been in reality in order to reflect badly on the society in which Socrates belonged. Though uncharacteristically "compassionate" for Aristophanes, he could also be showing disdain towards the audience because the Athenian society does tolerate Socrates' presence even when he is obviously a negative influence on the city. If the tone Aristophanes uses for this piece is in

any way related to his depiction of Socrates, it would indefinitely make Socrates seem more of a miscreant.

However accurately (or lack thereof) Aristophanes intended to portray Socrates, his play obviously had a profound impact on Athens' opinion of the man. *The Clouds* was performed twenty years before Socrates' trial, but Socrates practically begins his defense by assuring the jury it was a fictitious work (Plato 18d). Ironically, though, the charges brought against Socrates by Meletus parallel those traits presented in Aristophanes' comedy (24c). Though it seems rather ironic that the charges that resulted in Socrates' death would be identical to the claims made by Aristophanes two decades earlier, this may have been less coincidental than it seems at first glance. Obviously, Aristophanes' comedy could have fueled public opinion, so that a few years after the idea was introduced, public awareness finally made Socrates too great a threat to Athenian ideals. It is equally as likely that Meletus did not have sufficient evidence to convict Socrates of any other crime; therefore, accusing him of a long-standing community myth was a last resort to take him out of the political arena. That this accusation gained support implies at least a few saw it to be true.

It becomes apparent that both Plato and Aristophanes had reason to portray Socrates inaccurately, but this entire concept of accuracy depends on what a reader considers a valid account of a person. The challenge of accuracy is to determine whether a man is defined by the way others see him or whether a man is defined as he sees himself. In light of this definition of "accuracy," Plato and Aristophanes may both have dependable information despite their differences. Because Socrates begins his defense by denying Aristophanes' claims, he effectively tells the reader he expects much of the jury believes these claims. Plato was intimately related to Socrates as his student, thus his description of his mentor might be either the Socrates he remembered or the Socrates he wanted to share with the world. Whatever Aristophanes and Plato intended to share with their readers fits within this criterion for accuracy.

Aristophanes and Plato both seem capable of misrepresenting Socrates in *The Clouds* and *Apology*, either through partiality, ulterior motives, or for the sake of humor. That both seem capable does not mean the Socrates described is altogether inaccurate, though, either. This lesson shows a reader should carefully discern the undeniable truth from the speculation and conveniently altered characteristics an author will include in a description. Relying too heavily on an author's portrayal can prevent a reader from realizing the complexities presented by other sources as well as stealing a reader's chance to make connections and investigate the man behind the written words. Although he may not be perfectly portrayed, the pieces of Socrates' character found throughout historical record still paint an intriguing puzzle for modern readers to ponder.