From Clouds to Corsair: Kierkegaard, Aristophanes, and the Problem of Socrates

Eric Ziolkowski

Aristophanes’ comedy Clouds, the earliest surviving document to mention Socrates, is generally seen to attack him as “the arch-sophist, atheist, and corrupter of the young.” The play presents him as a quack pedagogue who holes up in his phrontistērion or “thinkery” amidst pale, nerdy pupils; devotes himself to astronomy, at times while suspended aloft in a basket, and to the study of subterranean phenomena; denies the traditional deities in favor of revering clouds and air; allows students to be trained to win an argument whether it is right or wrong; and charges a fee for his instruction—or so it seems to some. Clouds failed upon its first and only attested performance in 423 BCE, despite Aristoph-

---


4The conventional claim that Aristophanes portrays Socrates as charging fees reflects a loose reading of Clouds, lines 245-46, 876, 1146. That the text does not present Socrates as charging or even mentioning fees of his own is noted by A. E. Taylor, “The Phrontistērion,” in his Varia Socratica: First Series (Oxford: James Parker, 1911) 176-77; and Gilbert Murray, Aristophanes: A Study (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933) 89, 94.
anes' opinion of it as his most sophisticated comedy. The play apparently "was too subtle for the public," and "treated Socrates and his school too sympathetically and with too much friendly humour instead of rough satire." So Aristophanes revised the script, abandoning it unfinished sometime between 419 and 416. In that incomplete form, which was subsequently circulated and is the only version of Clouds we know today, Aristophanes toughened up the play's satire by inserting the parabasis (lines 518-52), the debate between Better Argument and Worse Argument, and the torching of Socrates' domicile at the end.

Augmenting the allusions to him in three of Aristophanes' other extant comedies (Wasps, Birds, and Frogs), the caricature of Socrates in Clouds strikes most readers as discrepant with the only other surviving portrayals by contemporaries, Plato and Xenophon—both of whom had known Socrates personally but wrote after his death. Thus George Grote opined in the mid-nineteenth century that the teachings of the Aristophanic Socrates seem "utterly different" from those of the real Socrates, against whom Clouds levels "calumnies." After Grote, classicists and historians of philosophy tended to regard Aristophanes' depiction of Socrates as "astonishingly false," "unfair," and "very unfortunate for the fame of Aristophanes." Such opinions, accompanied by a sense of the play's satire as "hostile," "malicious," or "ill-natured," are

---

5See Wasps, lines 1037-47; Clouds, line 522.
9Jaspers, Great Philosophers, 1:21.
thought to have "removed the Clouds from serious consideration as a possible source of information about Socrates' philosophy and intellectual biography."^{13}

Given the notoriety of Clouds, the seventh of the fifteen theses heading Kierkegaard's M.A. dissertation On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates (1841) gives pause for thought: "Aristophanes has come very close to the truth in his depiction of Socrates" (CI, 6; expounded 128-54). The consensus today that the Aristophanic Socrates lacks historicity is not all that might cause eyebrows to rise regarding this thesis. To the annoyance of his professors,^{14} Kierkegaard's tone in the dissertation is illustrative of the "concept" under consideration. Thus, with earlier commentators, Lee Capel views The Concept of Irony as "a consciously ironic work,"^{15} and, regarding Thesis VII, "wonders whether Kierkegaard, being aware of Hegel's recent rehabilitation of the Aristophanic Socrates" in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy (delivered 1805-1831; published posthumously), "is not here writing with tongue in cheek" and "follow[ing] Hegel with a serious bent on parody."^{16}

---


^{15}Capel (n. 14 above) 14; see also 8. This view can be traced back to the review of the dissertation in The Corsair 51 (22 October 1841): cols. 7-8: "Thank you, beloved Kierkegaard, for your irony!" (COR, 92-93). The same view, as documented in Capel's survey of the interpretation of the dissertation (Capel, n. 14 above, 351n.2-357), persists among certain later scholars. Cf. Thulstrup, who regularly detects irony in the allusions to Hegel in the dissertation (Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel, 213-61).

As with the rest of the dissertation’s first part, entitled “The Position of Socrates Viewed as Irony” (CI, 7), it would be difficult to consider Thesis VII without remembering that Socrates always occupied the highest spot in Kierkegaard’s estimation of human beings (excepting, of course, Christ). Having felt and conveyed “an inexplicable rapport from a very early age” with Socrates, whom Johannes de Silentio would call “the most interesting man who ever lived” (FT, 83), Kierkegaard is seen as the “Danish Socrates” or “modern Socrates,” the Christianizer of the Greek sage, and hence “Christianity’s Socrates.” To be sure, some scholars demur, submitting that Kierkegaard as a Christian “could not limit his pedagogic efforts to potential philosophers, as did the Republic’s Socrates,” or that “His attempt to resurrect Socratic dialectic was shipwrecked, ironically, upon modern objective thinking.” Nonetheless, others insist that “Kierkegaard’s unconcern for the opinion of the many and his intense inwardness would surely appeal to a returned Socrates” and that “Socrates attained no objective knowledge of the divine, but in spite of this clung to the passion which arises from the negativity and inwardness of dialectical conclusions. Now this is precisely the way by which Kierkegaard comes to the absolute.”


17 25 March 1853, JP, 6:6839. See also 4:4243-4304 passim, s.v. “Socrates.”
20 Gregor Malantschuk, JP, 4, p. 677, s.v. “Socrates.”
Aware of Kierkegaard’s special relation to Socrates, readers considering his seventh thesis naturally tend to regard Aristophanes simply as one of the three lenses through which Kierkegaard attempts to fathom the Athenian sage. Yet this tendency entails a neglect of whatever significance Aristophanes may have held in his own right for Kierkegaard. Oddly, despite this pivotal thesis on Aristophanes in the dissertation, despite the crucialness of the comic as an aesthetic and existential category throughout all of Kierkegaard’s writings, and despite his amply documented “lifelong enthusiasm for the theatre,” and the fact that “the world of the theatre pervades his authorship, providing him with a constant supply of illustrative material” and “a paradigm of the aesthetic consciousness, a paradigm which relates equally to aesthetics (as the sphere of artistic practices) and ‘the aesthetic’ (as an existential category)”25—despite all these factors, Kierkegaard’s view of the preeminent comic dramatist of ancient Greece remains unappreciated.

This essay will take account of those views, primarily as they emerge from Kierkegaard’s exposition of Thesis VII, but also as they develop further in his writings beyond the dissertation. Because Kierkegaard is unusual in the approach he takes to the Aristophanic portrait of Socrates, and in the weight he grants that portrait in relation to the Platonic and the Xenophontic, I will first provide a context for our examination by sketching the history of the interpretation of Socrates from antiquity on. Next I will consider the pertinence of Clouds to Socrates’ trial. Kierkegaard refrains from discussing that issue because, as Thesis VII will reveal, his image of Aristophanes seems to converge with that of Socrates in the categories of irony and the comic. In my closing account of the allusions to Aristophanes in Kierkegaard’s writings beyond the dissertation, the question will arise as to whether this Christian Socrates might have viewed himself also as a Christian Aristophanes.

1959) 46-50; here 48.

The Problem of Socrates

It is often observed that only two things about Socrates can be known with certainty: that he was publicly visible enough in Athens by his middle age to be burlesqued on stage,\textsuperscript{26} and that he was later executed in the archonship of Laches (400/399 BCE).\textsuperscript{27} Because he wrote nothing down, our only access to him and his teaching is through the surviving accounts by his three contemporaries, Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon. Hence emerges the so-called problem of Socrates: the historical-philosophical problem of ascertaining who the “historical” Socrates really was, and what he actually taught. To this problem, around which has accrued a scholarly literature of oceanic proportions,\textsuperscript{28} it is usually conceded there can be no definite solution, and that the person today “looking for the historical truth about Socrates, finds himself in a swamp of myth, archaic interpretation, and emotional need.”\textsuperscript{29}

The Socratic problem stems from the clash of attitudes and perspectives in which not only does Aristophanes’ “antagonism” toward Socrates differ from the “reverence” of Plato and Xenophon for him (as disciples), but Xenophon’s “common sense, stolid Socrates” differs from Plato’s “spiritual, even mystic Socrates.”\textsuperscript{30} Construed otherwise, the Xenophontic Socrates may seem “an eminently worthy but dull, prosy and sententious moralist (‘the patron saint of moral twaddle’, said Hegel),” in contrast to the


\textsuperscript{28}The most exhaustive treatment remains V. de Magalhães-Vilhena’s \textit{Le Problème de Socrate: le Socrate historique et le Socrate de Platon} (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952).

\textsuperscript{29}Levi, “\textit{Idea},” 94.

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid., 91.
Platonic Socrates, who appears "witty and humorous, and a great metaphysical thinker as well."\textsuperscript{31}

As if the differences between the Aristophanic, Platonic, and Xenophontic portraits were not enough to ensure that posterity could never recognize with certainty the character and teachings of Socrates, the mystery of his true identity was heightened by other factors after his life. First, Aristotle, who was born fifteen years after Socrates' death but spent twenty as a student in Plato's Academy at Athens, left his own testimony on Socrates that contradicts Plato's in denying that Socrates ascribed independent existence to the universals, or that he separated them from the particulars as Ideas or Forms.\textsuperscript{32} Another complicating factor was the emergence of the various Minor Socratic Schools (the Megarians, the Elean-Eretrian School, the Cynics, and the Cyrenaic School), each of which stressed one or another particular aspect of Socrates' teachings, whether in connection with logic, eristics, dialectic, or ethics, often synthesizing it with doctrines from other thinkers or traditions.

As in the case of the historical Jesus, the historical Socrates and whatever he actually taught became obscured beneath the proliferating myths and images of his character and the interpretations of his teachings. Just as the ancient Judaic tradition yielded claims that Socrates had been a disciple of the biblical Jewish sage Ahithophel\textsuperscript{33} or that his philosophical teachings had been based upon pre-Septuagintal Greek renderings of the Pentateuch,\textsuperscript{34} the Church fathers respected Socrates as the wisest of pagans, and some esteemed him as a heroic paragon, an anticipator of the Christian martyrs, even a type and adumbration of Christ.\textsuperscript{35} Like


\textsuperscript{32}Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics} 13.4.1078b.17-32, 13.9.1086b.2-3.


\textsuperscript{34}Aristobulus (2nd cent. BCE), as cited in \textit{Encyclopaedia Judaica} 3:444, s.v. "Aristobulus of Panes."\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{35}The seminal study was Adolf Harnack's \textit{Sokrates und die alte Kirche} (Giessen: J. Ricker [Alfred Töpelmann], 1901), which is challenged on specific points by Wilhelm Walther. "Sokrates und die alte Kirche I," \textit{Allgemeine Evangelisch-Luther-
Christ and the martyrs, he had been accused of blasphemy and executed for his beliefs. For Justin Martyr (d. 165), the first Christian apologist to discuss Socrates, Christ, and the Christians in the same breath, Socrates made manifest the same divine Logos Christ would later embody: “those who lived reasonably [μετά λόγου] are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them.” Like Christ, “who was partially known even by Socrates,” Socrates opposed Greek religion. Following Justin, as generalized by Pelikan, “A comparison between the suffering of Christ and that of Socrates seems to have become a common idea in Christian apologetics.”


37 Pelikan, Christian Tradition 1:58. However, certain patristics after Justin, especially in the Latin Church, betray toward Socrates an ambivalence, or even a distinct negativism which modern scholars often overlook. For example, it is misleading to suggest, as does James C. O’Flaherty, that the notion of Socrates as Christ’s forerunner “had been held by” Lactantius and Minucius Felix (Hamann’s “Socratic Memorabilia”: A Translation and Commentary [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967] 6). Minucius’s Octavius 13 quotes the anti-Christian pagan Caecilius as urging any would-be Christian philosopher to “imitate” Socrates.
According to Karl Jaspers, "In the Middle Ages [Socrates'] name lost its radiance." However, it might be more accurate to say that that "radiance" was rekindled in the Middle Ages after having already diminished among Christian apologists by late antiquity (see note 37 above). For within the medieval Islamic world, Socrates was venerated by the Faylasüfs (philosophers) from Ya'qūb al-Kindī (d. after 870) and Muhammad b. Zakariyyā al-Ḥārīrī (925 or 934) on. In the Epistles of the Pure Brethren (Ikhwān al-Safā'), a popular compendium of Hellenic lore and science composed during the 'Abbāsid caliphate, Socrates as martyr for truth represents the typical case of those who resign themselves to the will of destiny, and his death is compared with the deaths of Jesus, the mystic martyr al-Ḥallāj, and the soldiers of Husayn (grandson of the Prophet) who were martyred by Umayyad forces at Karbalā' in 680. Moreover, Socrates did have an important impact upon medieval European thought, through the fusion of his Delphic precept "Know thyself" with the biblical notion of the human being's divine image (Gen. 1:26-27). That fusion gave rise to what Etienne Gilson calls Christian Socratism, a tendency in medieval philosophy defined by the conviction that it is through self-knowledge that one comes to know the nature God gave humans and the place God marked out for humans in the cosmic order. As Jaspers acknowledges, Socrates also was still evoked by name from by Jewish and Christian thinkers in medieval Europe. Judah Halevi (before 1075–1141) points to him as epitomizing the highest human wisdom, which nonetheless is insufficient for comprehending the divine. Albert the Great (ca. through abiding by the latter's proverb that "What is above us is nothing to us."

Lactantius's Divine Institutes 3.20.11-12 and Epitome of the Divine Institutes 37 (cited in some editions as 32.4) condemn Socrates as a rejector and denier of religion.

38Jaspers, Great Philosophers 1:28.


40See Xenophon, Memorabilia 4.2.24.


views Socrates’ executioners as examples of those who sin against the light of reason.\[^{43}\] The Catalan mystic poet Ramon Llull (ca. 1235–1316) constructs a dialogue with Socrates in which he himself gradually wins the ancient sage over to the principles of his own *Ars magna.*\[^{44}\]

From the Renaissance on, as reflected in Erasmus’s oft-quoted entreaty *Sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis*, a rejuvenated esteem for Socrates as champion of independent philosophy and ethical freedom is expressed by such representative thinkers as Montaigne, for whom his thinking bespeaks skepticism and naturalism; and Moses Mendelssohn, for whom he is a moral paragon who proffered proofs of God’s existence and of immortality. Anticipated by the twelve discourses that constitute Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac’s *Socrate chrétien* (1652),\[^{45}\] and culminating a century and a half later in Joseph Priestley’s *Socrates and Jesus Compared*,\[^{46}\] interest was renewed in the parallels and differences between Socratic and Christian thinking, and between Socrates and Jesus as outstanding ethical teachers executed for treason against the faiths of their communities.\[^{47}\] The Socrates-Christ affinity is also asserted in Johann Georg Hamann’s *Socratic Memorabilia* (1759), although the text never mentions Christ by name. Dedicated to Immanuel Kant and Johann Christoph Berens, this tactful religious response to Enlightenment philosophy aims at revealing that the resemblance between Socrates and Christ is much closer than the Enlighteners allowed—so close, indeed, that Hamann presents Socrates as one of Christ’s prototypes.\[^{48}\]

---


Throughout the eighteenth century, Socrates was the most beloved philosopher, and, beginning with J. Brucker (1741), the Xenophontic Socrates was favored over the Platonic Socrates, presumably because the Xenophontic more closely approximated the current ideal of what a philosopher should be. During this time, the philosophical rationalism and scholarly historicism that engendered the quest of the historical Jesus led to a quest of the historical Socrates. The occasional dovetailing of these two enterprises is exemplified by the analogy drawn in Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* (1835) between the closing scene of Plato’s *Symposium* and Christ’s transfiguration, an analogy cited two years later by F.C. Baur in his “philosophical-religious” monograph comparing Socrates and Christ, and, again, disapprovingly, by Kierkegaard in his dissertation (CL, 52).

Schleiermacher gave the Socratic problem its initial, oft-cited formulation: “What can Socrates have been, in addition to what Xenophon reports of him, without however contradicting the distinguishing features and principles of life which Xenophon assuredly puts forward as Socratic; and what must he have been to have given Plato motive and justification to present him as he does in his dialogues?” A century later the classicist John Burnet would lament that this rule of thumb had been eclipsed by Hegel’s dictum that “in regard to the personality and method, the externals of his teaching, we may certainly receive from Plato a satisfactory, and perhaps a more complete representation of what Socrates was.

---

But in regard to the content of [Socrates'] teaching and the point reached by him in the development of thought, we have in the main to look to Xenophon."

However, by Burnet's time, the debate over the Socratic problem had become even more complex and contentious. Differing views on Socrates had been presented by three of the most important nineteenth-century philosophers after Hegel: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and John Stuart Mill, the first two of whom are credited with having put forward "the two most influential conceptions of Socrates in the modern world," but the third of whom, as influenced by Grote, was the only one to have a practical bearing upon Burnet's views. Moreover, as late as the 1890s, certain scholars still deemed either the Xenophontic or the Aristotelian portrait of Socrates as the most historically accurate. Burnet himself preferred the Platonic Socrates, reasoning: "while it is quite impossible to regard the Sokrates of Aristophanes and the Sokrates of Xenophon as the same person, there is no difficulty in regarding both as distorted images of the Sokrates we know from Plato."

Although other scholars dealt with the Socratic problem by trying to reconcile the Platonic, Xenophontic, and Aristotelian portraits of Socrates with each other so that "no unjustified violence... is done to any of the sources," Burnet's favoritism for the Platonic portrait carried the most sway as one of two extreme views held by twentieth-century classicists and historians of philosophy, especially as his position was supported and elaborated by his contemporary A.E. Taylor. Adherents to the other extreme

---

58Burnet, Greek Philosophy, 149.
59See, e.g., Copleston, History of Philosophy, 1:99-100, 102-104; quote on 100.
view, characterized as "nihilist" or "agnostic," hold that we cannot know anything for sure about the historical Socrates, and that therefore the Aristophanic, Platonic, Xenophontic, and Aristotelian portraits of him must each be viewed as fiction or poetry.\(^{61}\)

Of these portraits, nonetheless, the Aristophanic is the only one that, by virtue of its belonging to the comic-dramatic genre, self-evidently constitutes a poetic fiction,\(^{62}\) even if "in the opinion of the plain man, the 'Socrates' whom Aristophanes libelled and caricatured in the Clouds will continue to be the historical Socrates."\(^{63}\) Clouds is also the only source to ascribe to him an informed interest in astronomy and geology, to deny that he was a pious man, and to suggest that he taught his pupils how to succeed in the world through exploitation of such worldly arts as rhetoric and the law. According to K. J. Dover, there are three possible explanations of this basic conflict between Aristophanes on the one hand and Plato and Xenophon on the other:

(i) Aristophanes portrays, through caricature, the truth; Plato and Xenophon are writing fiction, putting their own ideas into [Socrates'] mouth. . . .

(ii) Aristophanes caricatures Socrates as he was in 424/3; Plato and Xenophon portray him as he became in the last twenty years of this life. . . .

(iii) Plato and Xenophon tell the truth; Aristophanes attaches to Socrates the characteristics which belonged to the sophists in general but did not belong to Socrates.\(^{64}\)


\(^{63}\)W. J. M. Starkie, introduction to The Clouds of Aristophanes (London: Macmillan, 1911) 1.

\(^{64}\)Dover, introduction to Clouds, xlvii, xlix. The first of these views approximates what Newell calls the "tight" interpretation of Clouds, while the third view and, to a certain extent, the second as well, approximate what he calls the "loose" interpretation (see his "Aristophanes on Socrates," 109-10).
Of these explanations, the third, to which Dover subscribes, is the one most widely accepted, despite the arguments of Burnet and Taylor favoring the second. However, the idea that Aristophanes depicted the truth through caricature has not gone without its own espousers. And John Newell has proposed yet another interpretation, suggesting that the irony for which the real Socrates was known allowed Aristophanes in *Clouds* "to present any philosophical view he pleased (or any combination of views) without sacrificing realism, because Socrates' irony made him a kind of mimetic actor who could believably present a variety of intellectual views, however much he might personally disagree with them." In ascribing irony to the Aristophanic Socrates, this last interpretation resembles Kierkegaard's, even though Newell, unlike Kierkegaard, whom he never cites, approaches *Clouds* philologically rather than philosophically. But before we consider Kierkegaard's own championing of the Aristophanic Socrates in the context of the interpretive history we have just sketched, let us take into account the question of the relationship of that portrayal to Socrates' actual condemnation and death—a question Kierkegaard will all but entirely ignore.

**The Implication of *Clouds* in Socrates' Condemnation**

One vexing problem raised by Thesis VII in Kierkegaard's dissertation has to do not with anything he says in promoting *Clouds* as the truest portrayal of Socrates, but with his avoidance of acknowledging the play's pertinence to Socrates' indictment, trial, condemnation, and execution (399 BCE). Throughout the discussion of *Clouds* (CI, 128-54), Socrates' condemnation goes unmentioned, and throughout the subsequent discussion of Socrates' condemnation (CI, 167-97), *Clouds* goes unmentioned. These silences seem remarkable today. For despite Hegel's surprising assertion that

---

65 See, e.g., M. Montuori, *Socrates: An Approach*, trans. M. de la Pae Beresford (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben), which Newell cites as an example of the "tight" interpretation of the Aristophanic Socrates ("Aristophanes on Socrates," 109n9). For other examples, consult Thulstrup, as referenced in n. 13 above.

The Concept of Irony

Clouds "had no influence on the condemnation of Socrates," classicists and historians of philosophy since Grote have generally not been content simply to see Aristophanes as having "exactly forecast[ed] the charges . . . against Socrates," or to accept its parodying of Socrates simply as a passive "expression" or "reflection" of the attitudes and prejudices of contemporary Athens. Rather, the tendency has been to hold Clouds responsible for fostering the public antagonism that led to the philosopher's doom.

The perception of a causal connection between Clouds and Socrates's condemnation finds its loci classici in Plato, Xenophon, and several later Greek sources. According to Aelian and Diogenes Laertius, it was Anytus, one of the three men who eventually brought Socrates to trial on the charge of impiety and corrupting the youth, that incited Aristophanes to compose a play lampooning Socrates. In Plato, the indicted Socrates himself cites Clouds as a specimen of the sort of slander with which anonymous people have long targeted him. Noting the impossibility of summoning an unseen adversary for cross-examination, he reminds the jury that it was nothing new for him to be accused of such acts of "criminal meddling" as inquiring into things beneath the earth and in the heavens, making the weaker argument defeat the stronger, and instructing others to emulate him: "You have seen it for yourselves in the play by Aristophanes, where Socrates goes whirling round proclaiming that he is walking on air, and uttering a great deal of

---

67Hegel, Lectures 1:427.
other nonsense about things of which I know nothing whatsoever."72

The fodder *Clouds* provided for Socrates' detractors long before his trial is exemplified by the unnamed Syracusan who interrupts the conversation of Socrates in Xenophon's *Symposium* (c. 380), which is set at a banquet purportedly held in Athens in 421, two years after the production of Aristophanes' play at Dionysia. Alluding to Socrates as "a thinker on celestial subjects" (μέτεώρων φροντιστής), an expression of reproach that was used parodically against Socrates in *Clouds* and would later carry grave implications at his trial,73 the Syracusan evokes another passage from the play to ridicule him: "But tell me the distance between us in flea's feet; for people say that your geometry includes such measurements as that."74

Despite these classical linkages of *Clouds* with Socrates' condemnation, together with the long lineage of Christian, Islamic, and Enlightenment comparisons of Socrates and Christ as martyrs, it seems curious that Aristophanes is seldom censured for having pilloried "the first philosopher who was tried and put to death" (πρῶτος φιλοσόφων καταδίκασθείς ἐτελεύτα)."75 As he is thought probably to have been in Athens during the trial, we cannot help wondering what he was doing then, and how he regarded this event.76 After Socrates' death, as Socrates had prophesied (according to Plato), and as Diogenes reports, the Athenians promptly repented, executed one of his accusers, and banished the rest.77 Yet Aristophanes evidently suffered no repercussion other than to be much later branded "a vulgar and ridiculous humorist."78 Al-

---


78Variae historiae 2.13, in Aelian 79.
though the rumors Aelian repeated about Aristophanes may have "tarnished [Aristophanes'] name, until the learning and sagacity of modern critics should redeem it from the bitter reproach of having caused the death of the noblest man of his age," some critics assure us that no offence was taken by Socrates when *Clouds* was performed, and that Aristophanes and Plato later remained good friends.⁷⁹

Whatever effect Socrates' death may or may not have had upon the Athenians' attitude toward Aristophanes, the fact that his burlesquing of Socrates has received relatively little criticism since being "rehabilitated" by Hegel might be attributable as much to the sway of Hegel's argument as to modern assumptions about poetic license and artistic freedom. Hegel initially turns to *Clouds* while arguing that the condemnation of Socrates was right and just, on the grounds that Socrates had subverted the Athenian "spirit" by replacing external religion with the judgment of inward consciousness as the sole criterion of truth. Anticipating the objection that Socrates in this play "was treated quite unjustly," Hegel responds

> but then we must recognize the merit of Aristophanes, who in his "Clouds" was perfectly right. This poet, who exposed Socrates to scorn in the most laughable and bitter way, was thus no ordinary joker and shallow wag who mocked what is highest and best, and sacrificed all to wit with a view to making the Athenians laugh. For everything has to him a much deeper basis, and in all his jokes there lies a depth of seriousness. He did not wish merely to mock; and moreover to mock what was worthy of honour would be perfectly bald and flat. It is a pitiful wit which has no substance, and does not rest on contradictions lying in the matter itself. But Aristophanes was no bad jester.⁸¹

Hegel was not the only defender of *Clouds* against possible censure. To the insinuation that Aristophanes ridiculed Socrates simply to elicit cheap laughs, the response is offered in Robert Browning's poem of 1875, *Aristophanes' Apology* (lines 3257-58):

---

"Our poet means no mischief! All should know— / Ribaldry here implies a compliment!"82

Written within a decade after Hegel’s death, and four decades before Browning’s poem, The Concept of Irony will only once, obliquely but revealingly, hint at the bearing of Clouds on Socrates’ condemnation.

"Very Close to the Truth"

Thesis VII, in leading to a pivotal “point of rest” (CI, 155) in Kierkegaard’s dissertation, caps off his treatment of the Socratic problem, a problem he broached in introducing his first, paradoxical thesis (to which one of his professors will object because of its “delicate subject matter”83): “The similarity between Christ and Socrates consists in their dissimilarity” (CI, 6; expounded 13-15; cf. 220fn.-221). The immediate stimulus behind this thesis was Baur’s book-length comparison (see JP, 4:4243, 1 November 1837). What has caught Kierkegaard’s attention, and what he now challenges, is Baur’s likening of the relation between Xenophon and Plato to the relation between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John (see CI, 13-14)—a comparison that represents another overlapping of the interests in the historical Jesus and the historical Socrates.

Another possible stimulus behind Thesis I, albeit one Kierkegaard does not acknowledge, may be the typological linkages drawn between Socrates and Christ in Johann Georg Hamann’s Socratic Memorabilia.84 Whereas Baur’s discussion of Socrates is based almost exclusively upon Plato and Xenophon, Hamann makes several key allusions to Clouds near the close of his own book. Of these, one is to the Aristophanic Socrates’ attestation that he and his followers believe only in “this Void, and the Clouds,

---

83P. O. Brønsted, quoted by Capel, in “Historical Introduction” to Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony (n. 14 above) 13.
and the Tongue, and only these three” (Clouds, line 424). Interestingly, Kierkegaard will discuss this very line in expounding Thesis VII. But whereas Hamann cites it to illustrate the Athenians’ actual charge that Socrates did not honor the gods, and that he desired to introduce new ones, Kierkegaard will quote it in conjunction with the Aristophanic Socrates’ oath, “By Respiration, by Void, by Air” (Clouds, line 627), to exemplify how the titular image of Clouds is “set forth as a creed, which like any creed contains both the subjective and the objective side” (Cl, 137n)—the subjective being represented by “respiration” or “tongue” (γλῶ ττα), and the objective, by “clouds” (νεφέλαι) and “chaos” or “void” (χά ο ς).

These different uses Hamann and Kierkegaard make of the same line from Clouds help illuminate what in my view is the most intriguing aspect of Thesis VII’s championing of Aristophanes’ caricature of Socrates: Kierkegaard’s almost complete silence about the pertinence of that caricature to the allegations and legal proceedings that led to Socrates’ death. In contrast to that silence, Hamann weaves into his Socratic Memorabilia’s penultimate paragraph yet another ironic allusion to the fateful slandering of Socrates in Aristophanes’ play, and then, associating the deaths of Socrates and Christ with each other, closes by remarking: “if it

85 All quotations hereafter are of Henderson’s edition (n. 2 above).
86 Hamann’s “Socratic Memorabilia,” 180-81.
87 Hamann suggests that whoever “does not know how to live on crumbs and alms not on prey, or to renounce everything for a sword [und für ein Schwert alles zu entbehren], is not fit for the service of truth” (Hamann’s “Socratic Memorabilia,” 184-85). Of Hamann’s two footnotes to this passage, one quotes verses from Clouds, lines 1064-66: “A knife? What a civilized reward the poor sucker got! Now Hyperbolus, the man from the lamp market, has made a vast amount of money by being a rascal, but never a knife, no indeed!” These are the words by which Worse Argument mocks Achilles’ father Peleus for having been given by the gods a knife with which to defend himself against wild beasts. Although, in the myth, that gift was meant by the gods as a reward for Peleus’s having refused a proposition by Acastus’s wife, Worse Argument offers the counteranecdote about Hyperbolus to suggest that a rascal is likely to garner more wealth than is someone decent like Peleus. The irony of Hamann’s allusion to this passage is that, whereas Worse Argument would have been taken by Socrates’ critics as representing his own morally corruptive mode of teaching, Hamann appropriates Worse Argument’s own words to associate “renounc[ing] everything for a sword” with “service of truth.”
is true, I say, that God himself became a man, and came into the world to bear witness to the truth, no omniscience would be necessary to foresee that he would not escape from the world as well as Socrates."88 By following up his allusions to Clouds with this thought, Hamann seems to come close to implying that if Socrates and Christ are to be juxtaposed, then Aristophanes' satire of Socrates, which contributed to the slander that led to the philosopher's trial and death, might be considered at least to some extent analogous to the vilification of Jesus that led to the Crucifixion. Kierkegaard, who we know considered blasphemous any comparison of Socrates' and Christ's deaths (see EPW, 99), let alone other aspects of their lives (see CD, 241), never pursues such an implication.

In finding the Aristophanic depiction of Socrates "very close to the truth," Kierkegaard's Thesis VII seems somewhat peculiar in the light of the two extreme views on the Socratic problem summarized earlier. The thesis not only contradicts the Burnet-Taylor perception of that depiction as a "distorted" image of the "truer" Platonic portrait of Socrates, but defies the opposed nihilist or agnostic view by ascribing a "truth" value to the one surviving portrait that is, generically speaking, fictional or poetic rather than philosophical, historical, or biographical.

Thesis VII also confirms Kierkegaard's separation from both Hegel and his own anti-Hegelian professor of ancient philosophy, Paul Martin Møller, in his stance toward the Socratic problem. Capel, as cited earlier, senses that this thesis parodies Hegel's "rehabilitation of the Aristophanic Socrates," a matter about which we will later say more. Suffice it here to remind ourselves that Hegel himself favored the Platonic Socrates and, even more so, the Xenophontic Socrates. Kierkegaard disregards this point, noting only that "there is nothing at all in [Hegel's] presentation of Socrates . . . to illuminate the relations of the three different contemporay views of Socrates" (CI, 221). To be sure, Kierkegaard himself could later express remorse over having written the dissertation as "a Hegelian fool" (entry of 1850, JP, 4:4281 [repr. CI,

88 Hamann, Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten, 82, lines 9-13; in O'Flaherty, Hamann's "Socratic Memorabilia," 184-85.
Yet his disregard toward Hegel's preference for the Xenophontic and the Platonic Socrates is already shown by his arguing in Thesis II that the Xenophontic Socrates never passes beyond the useful or the empirical to arrive at the idea (CI, 6; expounded 15-27); and in Thesis III that when Xenophon and Plato are compared, Xenophon will be seen to take too much from Socrates, and Plato, to raise him too high, and neither of them discovers the truth (CI, 6; expounded 27-34).

Having concluded from his consideration of the Xenophontic and Platonic views of Socrates in Theses II-VI that Xenophon, "like a huckster, has deflated his Socrates," whereas Plato, "like an artist, has created his Socrates in supranatural dimensions" (CI, 127), Kierkegaard submits that Aristophanes' view "will provide just the necessary contrast to Plato's and precisely by means of this contrast open the possibility of a new approach for our evaluation" (CI, 128). It is especially on this point that Kierkegaard parts from Møller, who had proposed that Aristotle's testimony on Socrates be employed to mediate (et Tredie) between Xenophon and Plato, as the latter two "must in some way correct each other, and what is common to them both must belong to the historical Socrates." For Kierkegaard, what makes the Aristophanic appraisal of Socrates so valuable is that "just as every process usually ends with a parodying itself, and such a parody is an assurance that this process has outlived its day, so the comic view is an element, in many ways a perpetually corrective element, in making a personality or an enterprise completely intelligible" (CI, 128; cf. JP, 4:4066, 4067, 4775). This "corrective element" in "the comic view" helps justify the anachronism of Kierkegaard's approach; as he will later acknowledge, he has classified these three interpretations of Socrates "more according to their relation to the idea (the purely historical [Xenophon]—the ideal [Plato]—the comic [Aristophanes]) than according to time," even though it is not his desire "to deprive the Aristophanic view of the weight it does have because it is closest to Socrates in time" (CI, 154*).

---

89 Cf. the opening paragraph of the dissertation, where Kierkegaard already disagrees with Baur for "think[ing] that, along with Plato, Xenophon should be most highly regarded" (CI, 13).
90 As translated by Capel (n. 14 above) 365n.25.
That Kierkegaard will ignore the question of the bearing of *Clouds* upon Socrates' trial seems ensured by a maneuver he now makes that resembles something Hegel did in his own discussion of the Aristophanic Socrates. Hegel resolved "not here to consider the real nature of the Comedy of Aristophanes, nor the wanton way in which he was said to have treated Socrates."\(^9\) Similarly, having evidently rejected or missed the point of Socrates' last (unrecorded) speech in Plato's *Symposium* (223d), where the former contends that the poet is capable of composing both comedy and tragedy, Kierkegaard sets in opposition the "tragic" ideality of the Platonic depiction of Socrates and the "comic" ideality of the Aristophanic, and dismisses as "totally irrelevant to this study" (CI, 128-29) the question of what motivated Aristophanes to see Socrates this way. Was Aristophanes bribed by Socrates' accusers or embittered by Socrates' friendship with Euripides? Did he oppose Anaxagorean speculations of nature through Socrates or identify him with the Sophists?

The bracketing of such questions of motivation would render pointless any investigation of the historical consequences of *Clouds*, since the aim of such an investigation would be to determine the degree to which those consequences may have borne out the motivation. So in choosing, unlike Hegel, to focus upon the charge against Socrates as strictly "a historical document," Kierkegaard will later bracket also the question of whether the Athenians were right to execute him (CI, 167-68; quote on 168).

Despite his apparent intent through such bracketings to eschew what might be called in the literary-critical parlance of more recent times the intentionalist and the affectivist fallacies, Kierkegaard does not confine his focus exclusively to the text of *Clouds* in arguing that Aristophanes' depiction of Socrates closely approaches "the truth." For support, he rehearses an anecdote from another classical source, which he significantly modifies, whether wittingly or not, or whether or not for ironic effect. Submitting that it would have been both beneath Aristophanes' dignity simply to portray Socrates empirically "as he walked and stood in life," and, at the same time, outside the interest of Greek comedy "to idealize him

---

on a scale whereby he became completely unrecognizable," Kierkegaard finds the latter point "attested by antiquity, which recounts that the performance of The Clouds was honored in this respect by the presence of its severest critic, Socrates himself, who to the public's delight stood up during the performance so that the theater crowd could see for themselves the fitting likeness" (CI, 129). Citing no source, Kierkegaard seems unaware that this anecdote comes from Aelian's Variae historiae (2.13), according to which Socrates' reason for rising from his seat on that occasion was not to demonstrate the verisimilitude of Aristophanes' portrayal, as Kierkegaard infers, but to show how great his contempt was for comedy and the Athenians.

This anecdote is cited by the German Hegelian Heinrich Theodor Rötscher (1803–1871) in his "philological-philosophical" study Aristophanes und sein Zeitalter, which is undoubtedly where Kierkegaard encountered it. Anticipating a point stressed later by Taylor, Burnet, and others about the Aristophanic Socrates and the nature of caricature as an art, Kierkegaard avers in his next breath that a Greek audience would not have accepted a portrayal of Socrates that was utterly discrepant with the character of the actual Socrates.

We must certainly agree with the perspicacious Rötscher that such a purely eccentric ideal view would not lie within the interest of Greek comedy, either. He has so excellently explained how the essence of comedy consisted expressly in viewing actuality ideally, in bringing an actual personality on stage, yet

---

92 As attested in entry of 1842–1843, JP, 4:4251, Kierkegaard did not learn until after he wrote his dissertation that Aelian was the source of this anecdote. By his own admission in an entry of 1852, he had not read Aelian when he wrote his dissertation (JP, 4:4289).

93 Likewise, during a performance of a Euripidean drama, Socrates is said to have gotten up and exited the theater in protest against the script. See Diogenes, Lives 2.33.


95 Taylor, "Phrontisterion," 131: "To succeed at all with any public . . . caricature must be, or must be believed by the public to be, like its original." Cf. Burnet, Greek Philosophy, 145; Copleston, History of Philosophy 1:113n.3.
in such a way that this one is indeed seen as a representative of the idea, which is why we find also in Aristophanes the three great comic paradigms: Cleon, Euripides, and Socrates, whose roles comically represent the aspiration of the age in its three trends. (CI, 129)

As shown by Kierkegaard’s constant further references to it, Rötscher’s study is, of the several scholarly sources he cites on Clouds (excepting Hegel), the one he most favors, and with which he most deeply and fruitfully engages.96 While focusing successively upon the play’s titular symbol (CI, 132-39), its plot (CI, 139-43), its comic and ironic elements (CI, 143-46), and its portrayal of Socrates’ personality, teaching, and existential “position” (CI, 146-52), Kierkegaard refers favorably to Rötscher’s interpretation on the following points: the notion that Socrates became a comic figure for Aristophanes only insofar as Aristophanes saw in him “the representative of a new principle,”97 the perceived unity of the Aristophanic Socrates and “the actual Socrates,”98 and the representation of the play’s chorus as clouds,99 in which Kierkegaard in turn finds “Socrates’ thoughts objectively envisioned” (CI, 137). Kierkegaard’s analysis of Clouds is based so extensively on Rötscher’s that in one instance he reproduces Rötscher’s language without acknowledgment.100

Aside from quibbling over Rötscher’s interpretation of a specific passage in Clouds,101 Kierkegaard questions only one major aspect of Rötscher’s approach, namely, “whether the earnestness he so definitely claims for this play does not make [Rötscher] somewhat at odds with the irony he otherwise attributes to

---

96 Cf. Thulstrup, Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel, 233n.12. For Kierkegaard’s other sources see CI, 129n.-130, 131, 143n.-144.
97 CI, 130; see Rötscher, Aristophanes und sein Zeitalter, 319-30.
98 See CI, 131-32; cf. 146; see Rötscher, Aristophanes und sein Zeitalter, 276-88, 312-19.
99 See CI, 132, 136; see Rötscher, Aristophanes und sein Zeitalter, 50-59, 325.
100 As Rötscher conjectures about the Aristophanic Socrates that “unter seiner Maske die Sophisten gemeint wären” (Aristophanes und sein Zeitalter, 288), so Kierkegaard speaks of “whether Aristophanes, behind the mask of Socrates, wanted to mock the Sophists” (CI, 138).
101 CI, 144*, citing Rötscher, Aristophanes und sein Zeitalter, 284-88 on Clouds, lines 852-61.
Aristophanes" (CI, 130).102 This question, and Kierkegaard's dealing with it, warrant scrutiny. The very phrasing of the question, with its reference to Rötscher's ascription of irony to Aristophanes, introduces what becomes an element of confusion in Kierkegaard's discussion of Clouds. If an overriding assumption in his dissertation is that "irony was constitutive in Socrates' life" (CI, 131; cf. 6, 12, 37, 40, etc.), Kierkegaard now also speaks of "Aristophanic irony" (CI, 135) and "irony worthy of an Aristophanes" (CI, 139). Because he never differentiates between his conceptions of Aristophanic irony and of Socratic irony, the two conceptions seem ultimately indistinguishable.

Even more influential upon Kierkegaard is Rötscher's characterization of Aristophanes' attitude in Clouds as "total earnestness of attitude" ("ganze Ernst der Gesinnung"),103 a characterization undoubtedly based upon Hegel's perception of "a deep political earnestness"104 in the merriment Aristophanes makes over the Athenian democracy. This notion furnishes Kierkegaard with a foil against which to develop his own defense of the play's comic dimension, and, later, to elaborate his own defense of Aristophanes against the charge of having slandered Socrates. If it is assumed that Socrates' life consisted of irony, says Kierkegaard,

one will certainly admit that this affords a much more comic side than would be the case if the principle of subjectivity, the principle of inwardness, along with the whole train of ensuing ideas, were taken to be the Socratic principle, and if the authorization of Aristophanes were to be sought in the earnestness with which [according to Rötscher] he as an advocate of early Greek culture had to try to destroy this modern monstrosity. This earnestness bears down too heavily, just as it restricts the comic infinity, which as such recognizes no limits. Irony, on the other hand, is simultaneously a new position and as such is absolutely polemical toward early Greek culture. (CI, 131)

Confusingly, again, the mention of "irony" in the last sentence could refer not only to Socratic irony but to Aristophanic irony, since "irony" is precisely what Kierkegaard wants substituted for

---

102See, e.g., ibid., 325.
103See Rötscher, Aristophanes und sein Zeitalter, 319-30; quote on 319.
104Hegel, Lectures 1:428.
“earnestness” as the proper designation of Aristophanes’ attitude toward Socrates. This confusion is now exacerbated by Kierkegaard’s calling irony “something that at rock bottom is comic” (CI, 131). “Comic” in the sense that Kierkegaard has called Socrates “comic” (CI, 129; cf. 145, 152)? Or “comic” in the sense that he will later call Aristophanes “comic” (CI, 153-54)? Kierkegaard offers no clarification. Nor, in classifying the Aristophanic portrait of Socrates anachronistically in its relation to the Platonic and Xenophon, does he seem aware that, as Burnet notes, “the ‘irony’ of Sokrates comes entirely from Plato.” Kierkegaard is well familiar with Hegel’s view of the irony of the Platonic Socrates as “a controlled element, a way of associating with people” (CI, 237). And he will adopt Hegel’s notion of irony as “infinite absolute negativity” (CI, 254, 259), which has been viewed as a “dazzling mystification” by which Kierkegaard’s own treatment of Socratic irony “is hopelessly perplexed.” Nonetheless, just as his presentation of Socrates as totally negative represents a break from Hegel, who, in keeping with his own comprehensive perspective, “necessarily had to find a positive element in Socrates, as he had to find it in every philosopher,” so Kierkegaard’s attribution of irony to the Aristophanic Socrates is entirely original.

Later, in discussing the delineation of the Socratic dialectic in Clouds, Kierkegaard will again comment upon Rötscher’s ascription of earnestness to the poet, and in this context hints for the first and

---

105 Burnet, Greek Philosophy, 127n.2; cf. Taylor, Socrates, 21-22. Burnet elaborates: “it is only the opponents of Sokrates that charge him with ‘irony’ (εἰρωνεία), a word which undoubtedly suggested the idea of humbug; but Plato shows us over and over again the real trait in his character which this uncomplimentary description was aimed at, with the result that the word ‘irony’ has changed its meaning for us” (Greek Philosophy, 132). The development of the word’s meaning is traced by Vlastos, Socrates, Ironist, 23-44. Cf. Newell, “Aristophanes on Socrates,” 112.

106 See Hegel, Lectures 1:398-402.


108 Thulstrup, Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel, 232.

109 Vlastos, Socrates, Ironist, 29: “The antihero of the Clouds is many things to many men, but an ironist to none.” Vlastos, who here has forgotten Kierkegaard’s interpretation, would today have to qualify this pronouncement also in the light of Newell’s interpretation in “Aristophanes on Socrates.”
only time at the play's pertinence to Socrates' condemnation. The Socratic dialectic, he claims, can be discussed "only insofar as it can be construed purely intellectually; whereas we have nothing at all to do with the altogether immoral conduct in which such a dialectic can become an active collaborator in the service of a corrupted will" (CI, 149)—as when the dim-witted farmer Strepsiades hoodwinks his creditors and his own prodigal son then beats him, after they both have been corrupted through witnessing a dialogue between Better Argument and Worse Argument in Socrates' *phrontistērion*.

Aristophanes himself must have been aware of this; if not, I really do not see how Aristophanes can be saved from the old accusation of having slandered Socrates. Even though Aristophanes with ever so much justification depicted Socrates as a representative of a principle that threatened early Greek culture with destruction, it nevertheless would always be an injustice to charge Socrates with corrupting the morals of the youth, with introducing a dissoluteness and superficiality that both the old and the new Greek culture must necessarily abominate. It would be an injustice not merely because Socrates had acquired a prescriptive title to being the most honest man in Greece, but mainly because without a doubt Socrates' position was so abstractly intellectual (something already sufficiently manifest in the well-known definition of sin as ignorance) that with regard to a view of him I think it would be more correct if one eliminated some of the bombast about his virtue and his noble heart but at the same time considered his life immune to all the charges of corrupting the morals. (CI, 149)

This passage, which defends *both* Aristophanes (against the charge of slander) *and* the Aristophanic Socrates (against the charges of corrupting the morals), brings to a head the convergence of Kierkegaard's views on the two figures. This convergence, dependent as it is upon the conviction that Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates was done "with . . . justification," presupposes the stimulus of Hegel. For it is from Hegel's own justification of Aristophanes that Kierkegaard has drawn that conviction, together with the recognition of Socrates' dialectic as negative (a recognition which Hegel credited Aristophanes as having been the first to
reach). Likewise, it is in apparent emulation of Hegel that Kierkegaard above dismissed "the bombast about [Socrates'] virtue," and will later ridicule "the scholarly professional mourners and the crowd of shallow but lachrymose humanitarians whose blubbering and sighing" over Socrates' death "still echo through the centuries" (CI, 167-68). Yet, when Kierkegaard invokes Rötscher once more as a foil, this time to his own defense of Aristophanes, he implicitly makes Hegel a foil as well: "Let Rötscher inflate as much as he wishes the earnestness with which Aristophanes laid hold of his task in The Clouds—Aristophanes is not exonerated thereby" (CI, 149).

Just as he later will recall Hegel's analysis of Socrates' irony (see CI, 237), so must Kierkegaard presumably now recollect Hegel's perception of a deep "earnestness" in Aristophanes. Given Kierkegaard's acceptance of "the qualification of irony, which Hegel so frequently stresses, that for irony nothing is a matter of earnestness" (CI, 235), it seems consistent with his own ascription of irony to Aristophanes that Kierkegaard should now want to dismiss Rötscher's Hegelian "inflation" of a perceived anti-ironic earnestness in Aristophanes. This dismissal helps prepare for Kierkegaard's summary point on Thesis VII, where he invokes once more "Rötscher's designation of Socrates' position as that of subjectivity" (CI, 152; cf. 131)—a designation that accords with Hegel's interpretation of Socrates. If one agrees with this designation, writes Kierkegaard, then "Aristophanes' view of Socrates will be found to be more true in terms of the comic and consequently more just" (here he includes a note on Hegel's observation that "it is Aristophanes who has understood Socrates' philosophy merely from its negative side"), and likewise one will also see a way to remove some of the difficulties that otherwise would remain in this Aristophanic play if

---

110 See CI, 152*, citing Hegel, Lectures 1:426; and CI, 226-27, quoting Hegel, Lectures 1:430. See also Kierkegaard's Thesis IV (CI, 6; expounded 34-37).
111 Cf. Hegel's mockery of Tennemann's pitying statements (History of Philosophy 1:430).
113 See Rötscher, Aristophanes und sein Zeitalter, 247-58.
one defines this position more specifically as an ironic position—that is, allows the subjectivity to pour out in its profusion, but prior to this lets it egotistically terminate in irony. (CI, 152-53)

Here, in confirming his own movement beyond Hegel and Rötscher by associating the Aristophanic Socrates with not merely subjectivity but irony as well, Kierkegaard follows through on his own insight that "irony is beyond subjective thinking" (CI, 124), an insight whose origins the Hongs trace to Martensen and Heiberg (see CI, 510n302). Kierkegaard rounds out his exposition of Thesis VII by concluding that "there are elements of the views of both [Xenophon and Plato] in Aristophanes" (CI, 153): if "Plato tried to fill up the cryptic nothing that actually constitutes the point in Socrates’ life by giving him the idea," and "Xenophon tried to do it with the prolixities of the useful" (CI, 153), then "with respect to Plato Aristophanes has subtracted, and with respect to Xenophon has added" (CI, 154).

For Kierkegaard, the Aristophanic Socrates thus represents the mean between the Platonic and the Xenophontic Socrates, and, as such, very closely approximates "the truth." In arguing this thesis, as we have seen, Kierkegaard has done some "subtracting" and "adding" of his own. From Aristophanes he has subtracted the earnestness ascribed by Hegel and Rötscher, and to the Aristophanic Socrates he has added the irony he himself perceives in him. As a result, the images of Aristophanes and Socrates, the satirist and the satirized, seem to converge in the categories of irony and the comic.

How does Aristophanes figure in Kierkegaard’s writings beyond the dissertation?

A Christian Aristophanes?

Kierkegaard’s special fondness for Aristophanes is evident in his writings both before and after his dissertation. In an outline on the development of comedy derived by Kierkegaard in a Journal entry of 16 January 1837 (JP, 5:5192) from a piece by J.L. Heiberg in *Kjøbenhavns flyvende Post*,¹¹⁵ Aristophanes is designated as repre-

---

¹¹⁵No. 13, 1828, p. 3.
sentative of the "immediate" type of "universal" comedy. Sometime during the next several years, Kierkegaard drafted "The Battle between the Old and the New Soap-Cellars" (EPW, 105-24), a philosophical drama he never finished or published.\footnote{This play has been dated variously between spring 1838 and spring 1840. See Thulstrup, 
\textit{Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel}, 180-200; JP, 4:viii; Julia Watkin's comment, EPW, 259-60; and the studies by Cain and Law cited below.}

Aptly described by Capel as "a satirical, quasi-Aristophanic comedy,"\footnote{Capel, "Historical Introduction" to Kierkegaard, \textit{The Concept of Irony} (n. 14 above) 27.} "Soap-Cellars" lampoons Hegelians and Hegelianism in a manner comparable to the satire of Socrates and the Sophists in \textit{Clouds}.\footnote{On the satire of Hegelianism in "Soap-Cellars," see Watkin, "Historical Introduction" to EPW, xxxii-xxxvi. As far as I am aware, the relation of "Soap-Cellars" to \textit{Clouds} has yet to be explored. Aristophanes goes unmentioned in the excellent analyses of this play by David Cain, "Kierkegaard's Anticipation of Authorship: 'Where Shall I Find a Foothold?'" and David R. Law, "The Literary Sources of Kierkegaard's \textit{The Battle between the Old and the New Soap-Cellars}," in \textit{ICK: Early Polemical Writings}, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1999) 131-57 and 160-94 respectively.} In both plays, the troubled protagonist—the financially strapped Strepsiades, and Willibald, a doubter and relativist (see EPW, 116)—seeks remedies to his problems from philosophers: the sophistical Socrates and his pupils, who lodge in the \textit{phrontistērion}, and the Hegelians Mr. von Jumping-Jack and Mr. Phrase and their associates, who lodge in the "prytaneum" (EPW, 106, 113, etc.), the same type of Greek public building which Plato's Socrates told his judges he deserved to be maintained in after they had pronounced him guilty.\footnote{Plato, \textit{Apology} 36d-37a; cf. CI, 195.} In a scene Kierkegaard will comment upon in his dissertation (CI, 146f), Strepsiades is surprised to be told by Socrates that thunder and rain are produced not by Zeus but by \textit{Clouds} (\textit{Clouds}, lines 368-424). Likewise Willibald is mystified by a celestial phenomenon, "namely, why it was that the sun in the prytaneum never changed its position at all, as a result of which the light was always the same" (EPW, 120; see also 123). And just as Phidippides, after Strepsiades has failed to learn from Socrates, is himself delivered by Socrates to Better Argument and Worse Argument to be instructed through hearing them debate (\textit{Clouds},...
lines 884-1111), so Willibald, "who had not found himself much edified or satisfied by Jumping-Jack's philosophical lectures" (EPW, 119), is referred to the "World-Historical College," where he hears pompous and convoluted lectures by the Hegelians (EPW, 119-23).

In summer 1840, sometime not long after he wrote "Soap-Cellars," Kierkegaard found himself parodied on the stage of Copenhagen's Royal Theater as a Hegelian (sic!) hairdresser in a comic play by Hans Christian Andersen. However, although he expressed irritation at having been depicted as "a prating Hegelian," and although he already esteemed Socrates "a remarkable personality" (entry of 1 November 1837, JP, 4:4243), Kierkegaard never acknowledged the affinity he now shared with Socrates as the victim of a theatrical burlesque.

The year after this experience, Kierkegaard’s dissertation was accepted and defended (16 July and 29 September 1841). For us, the question remains: if Brandes and others after him have been right in deeming The Concept of Irony "the true point of departure for Kierkegaard’s authorship," what specific legacies might Thesis VII be shown to have in his writings? As noted by the Hongs (CI, 515), Rötscher’s view of Socrates’ position as subjectivity, a view first taken up by Kierkegaard in expounding of Thesis VII, proves pertinent to the conception of subjectivity that runs

---

120 This play, entitled A Comedy in the Open Air (En Comedie i det Grønne), premiered 13 May. A translation of the pertinent scene is provided in EPW, 202-204.

121 In an unpublished retort to Andersen, "Just a Moment, Mr. Andersen!," Pap. III B 1; EPW, 218-22; quote on 220.

122 Of course, any such comparison of Kierkegaard and Socrates can be taken only so far. Unlike Socrates in Clouds, the character representing Kierkegaard in Andersen’s play goes by a different name. Whereas Socrates evidently did nothing personal to provoke Aristophanes, Kierkegaard had provoked Andersen with the scathing review, "Andersen as a Novelist, with Continual Reference to His Latest Work: Only a Fiddler" (1838; in EPW, 61-102). And whereas it was because Socrates was a well-known and controversial figure in Athens that he proved such an easy target for Aristophanes and other contemporary comic playwrights, Kierkegaard was, as he himself acknowledged, an "insignificant personage" at the time Andersen’s play was performed ("Just a Moment . . .!", EPW, 218).

123 Georg Brandes, Søren Kierkegaard. En kritisk Fremstilling i Grundruds (Copenhagen, 1877) 187; quoted by Capel, "Historical Introduction" to Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, 7-8. Cf. the Hongs, "Historical Introduction," CI, xvii; and the view of Vilhelm Andersen as summarized by Capel, 352.
through the pseudonymous corpus (see esp. EO, 2, PF, CUP, and SUD passim). (Kierkegaard, indeed, would continue consulting, admiring, and citing Rötscher’s scholarship long after the dissertation.124) But what about Kierkegaard’s consideration of Aristophanes in connection with Thesis VII? How did Aristophanes and his comedies bear upon Kierkegaard’s development as a thinker and writer beyond the dissertation?

In his writings from the first five years following the dissertation, Kierkegaard hardly ever alludes to Aristophanes’ Clouds. Aside from recording his belated discovery that it was Aelian who purported to place the historical Socrates at the play’s performance (see note 92, above), Kierkegaard has Quidam refer without acknowledgment to the pre-Socratic principle of existence ascribed to Socrates in Clouds (see SLW, 224, 710n66). And from both the draft and the final copy of Concluding Unscientific Postcript (1846), he deletes two iterations of a jocular reference by Climacus to Strepsiades’ notion of rain as Zeus urinating through a sieve (see CUP, 2:37; Clouds, 375). Despite all the dissertation says about the symbolic linkage drawn in Aristophanes’ play between the image of clouds and Socrates’ thoughts (see CI, 133-39), both playwright and play go unmentioned in the draft of the unpublished “Writing Sampler,” whose narrator claims to “take a fancy to the clouds” (entry of 1844–1845, JP, 5:5764; rpt. WS, 140), and in the unpub-

124From H. T. Rötcher’s Die Kunst der dramatischen Darstellung, 3 vols. (Berlin: Wilhelm Thomé, 1841–1846) 1:20. Kierkegaard notes a quotation of the Sophist Gorgias on tragedy (entry of 1844, JP, 4:4840), later used by the ethicist in SLW, 119. Kierkegaard also applies something found in Rötscher’s Kunst, 1:394-97 about “the accent on the ethical” to his own recollections on his break with Regine (entry of 1844, JP, 5:5748; rpt. SLW, 514), and notes that Rötscher in Kunst, 2:105, “uses the category: qualitativ Sprung [qualitative leap]—although he is a Hegelian” (JP, 3:2350). Johannes Climacus notes that Rötscher “in his book on Aristophanes does indeed understand the necessity of the transition in the world-historical development” (CUP, 1:116; see Rötscher, Aristophanes, 31-37). But the most significant allusions to Rötscher in the pseudonymous oeuvre are those Taci-turmus and Climacus make to his view of Hamlet as “morbidly reflective”; both pseudonyms approve that Rötscher, despite being a systematian, is “forced to use existence-categories” (quotes from SLW, 453; cf. JP, 3:2344; rpt. SLW, 635-36; JP, 2:1561; CUP, 1:116; see Rötscher, Kunst, 2:99-132). Climacus also cites Rötscher’s Seydelmanns Leben und Wirken (Berlin, 1845); see CUP, 1:446n. Kierkegaard again cites Rötscher on Plato as late as 1852; see JP, 1:1088.
lished draft of "Writings of a Young Man," which contains ruminations on clouds and thoughts as perfect "symbols" of each other (entry of 1846, JP, 3:2842; rpt. WS, 157-58).

Nonetheless, certain jottings of 1842-1843 on the endsheet of a copy of The Concept of Irony reveal that Kierkegaard, in those first two years after the dissertation, continued filling in gaps in his knowledge about the relationship of Clouds to Socrates, and now went on to read (in Danish translation) other plays by Aristophanes. These jottings note that Socrates was also depicted by comic poets other than Aristophanes (JP, 4:4258; rpt. CI, 450); that Aristophanes' Frogs closes with a reference to Socrates by name as an idle gossip and denigrator of tragedy (JP, 4:4256; rpt. CI, 450); and that Aristophanes, through the chorus leader in Wasps,125 "names the evil of which he [i.e., Aristophanes] wanted to cleanse the state with The Clouds: idleness and legal trickery" (JP, 4:4257; rpt. CI, 450). Kierkegaard must have recognized the reference in Frogs as a denigration of Socrates. Yet, true to his refusal in his dissertation to see Clouds as slandering Socrates, and consistent with the fact that Wasps does not mention Socrates by name, he may not assume, as scholars typically do,126 that the allusion to Clouds in Wasps implicitly associates Socrates with the "evil" Aristophanes "wanted" to purge. Evidently Kierkegaard, like Hegel and Rötscher, still regards the poet of Clouds as a conservative reformer or "cleanser" of the state; yet unlike them, he still refuses to associate Socrates with what he thinks Aristophanes meant to attack.

This refusal is crucial, because it protects Kierkegaard's esteem for Aristophanes as reformer from coming into conflict with his ever-growing reverence for Socrates as ironist. Indeed, mirroring the convergence already observed in Kierkegaard's images of the two men in the categories of irony and the comic, Kierkegaard's newly honed perception of Aristophanes as someone who wanted with Clouds "to cleanse the state" of "idleness and legal trickery" (e.g., Sophistry) practically matches his perception of Socrates as someone who was out "to destroy [the Sophists]... radically" (CI, 201).

125See lines 1036-42 of the Loeb edition.
126See, e.g., Ferguson, Socrates: A Source Book, 172.
Together with this ongoing convergence the images of Socrates and Aristophanes, there becomes manifest in his writings a pessimistic perception of a similarity between the age of Socrates and Aristophanes, and his own modern age. Referring to Hegel and Rötscher for discussion, Kierkegaard in his dissertation spoke of "the decline of the Athenian state" brought about by "the principle of decay" (CI, 200) that became more and more evident after Pericles: "There was a restlessness in Athenian life; there was a palpitation of the heart intimating that the hour of disintegration was at hand" (CI, 201). Accordingly, in reference to "Greece . . . at the time when the state was in the process of disintegration," the aesthete of Either/Or (1843) asks: "And does not our age have a striking likeness to that age, which not even Aristophanes could make more ludicrous than it actually was?" (EO, 1:141). Sensing his own age to be one of political and religious dissolution, one "more depressed and therefore deeper in despair" than Aristophanes' age, and one that "excels" that age in the unwillingness of anyone "to have responsibility," "A" exclaims: "Would not this inverted story of responsibility be an appropriate subject for Aristophanes!" (EO, 1:142). In this same cynical spirit, and anticipating Climacus's dismissal of rational theistic proofs (see PF, 39-44), "A" quotes from Aristophanes' Knights a passage he says yields "yet another demonstration of the existence of God" (EO, 1:36): Nicias's amusing claim that he "knows" the gods exist through his sense of himself as "such a wretched god-detested chap" (Knights, lines 32-35; quoted in EO, 1:36-37). "A" is so fond of Aristophanes that he prefaces "Rotation of Crops" with a quotation from Aristophanes' Plutus which suggests that, of all things other than Zeus, humans have too much (EO, 1:282-83).

Clearly Aristophanes is for Kierkegaard now the prototypical satirist and comic poet. His pertinence as such to the aesthetic stage of existence seems punctuated by a declaration made in a satirical article, later ascribed dubiously to Kierkegaard, that appeared in Ny Portefeuille two weeks before the publication of Either/Or: "Life parodies itself and does it with an aesthetic
thoroughness that puts every Aristophanes to shame.” This idea, regardless of whether Kierkegaard wrote that article, finds expression later in his Journal. Thus two different speakers at the aesthetical banquet of *Stages on Life’s Way* (1845) appeal to Aristophanes as a comic touchstone on the subject of love. Having summarized the theory of erotic attraction ascribed to Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*, 189d-93b, according to which the gods divided primeval man into two parts, which now seek each other (see SLW, 35), the Young Man takes up this thought again. Noting that whenever two persons “in union and in love form one self,” they end up subordinated to serving the species, the Young Man “find[s] this more ludicrous than what Aristophanes found so ludicrous. For the ludicrousness in that bisection lies in the contradiction, which Aristophanes did not adequately emphasize”: the contradiction of a “complete” human being “running around after his other half” (SLW, 43).

Perhaps inspired by the Young Man, Constantin too appeals to Aristophanes, but in a different connection: to make a point about the incompatibility of jealousy with intellect. In contrast to Othello, who, in Constantin’s racist view, as “a colored man . . . cannot be assumed to represent intellect,” a person of intellect “either does not become jealous or in becoming that becomes comic, and most of all if he comes running with a dagger” (SLW, 50). One can hardly even imagine Socrates surprising Xanthippe “in the act,” as “it would already be un-Socratic to imagine Socrates essentially concerned about or even spying on Xanthippe’s faithfulness” (SLW, 50). On the other hand, continues Constantin,

---


128 Entry of 1849, JP, 6:6392: “How witty actual life is! I do not believe that it would occur even to the Wittiest poet to use a hackney cabman à la Aristophanes.”
since Aristophanes at times wanted to portray Socrates as ludicrous, it is inconceivable that it never occurred to him to have Socrates come running onstage shouting: Where is she, where is she, so that I can murder her, that is, the unfaithful Xanthippe. Whether Socrates was made a cuckold or not really makes no difference. . . . Socrates, even with horns on his forehead, remains the same intellectual hero; but that he could become jealous, that he could want to murder Xanthippe—ah, then Xanthippe would have had a power over him that the whole Greek state and the death penalty did not have: to make him ridiculous. (SLW, 50)

This passage is significant in two respects. First, reflecting the cynicism of Constantin’s aesthetic disposition, it breaks from Kierkegaard’s own refusal to acknowledge that Aristophanes “wanted to portray Socrates as ludicrous.” And second, in drawing that desire of Aristophanes vis-à-vis Socrates into a more-than-subliminal association with the state’s failure “to make him ridiculous,” it ipso facto associates Clouds with Socrates’ execution. This, we will see, is not the last time this association will be hinted at in Kierkegaard’s writings; but it is perhaps the closest the association comes to explicitness.

Aside from the depiction of Socrates, the one Aristophanic theme by which Kierkegaard proves most deeply captivated is that of the Athenian sausage peddler who, as predicted through a series of oracles, becomes the deliverer and reformer of the state. For the religious thinker Frater Taciturnus, as for Kierkegaard himself, this theme of Knights epitomizes the principle of contradiction that underlies anything “comic in the Aristophanic sense” (“Letter to the Reader,” SLW, 409; cf. TA, 82). Having remarked how “completely unusable for poetry” the modern hero is who works for a finite goal, Taciturnus quips that “possibly he could be used as the sausage peddler in Aristophanes” (SLW, 410; cf. 412). In several other instances between 1845 and 1849, Kierkegaard again refers to the sausage-peddler theme in Knights, each time for the purpose of paralleling his contemporary age with Aristophanes’ age (TA, 133; cf. 82-83; COR, 193; JP, 6:6392). Likewise he speaks of both the modern concern with the natural sciences, and modern Christian scholarship, as furnishing motifs superbly suitable to an Aristophanic comedy—especially, in the former case,
if the poet "has Socrates present and has him peer into a microscope" (entry of 1846, JP, 3:2814; see also BA, 45).

Given his own experience as the butt of public satire during the Corsair affair of 1846, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard that year should strive emphatically to distinguish the Corsair's mean, destructive brand of satire and irony from the sort of satire exemplified by Aristophanes. "Anyone who understands the comic," he reflects, "readily sees that the comic does not consist at all in what the present age imagines it does and that satire in our day, if it is to be at all beneficial and not cause irreparable harm, must have the resource of a consistent and well-grounded ethical view, a sacrificial unselfishness, and a highborn nobility that renounce the moment; otherwise the medicine becomes infinitely and incomparably worse than the sickness" (TA, 74; rpt. in COR, xvii)—as illustrated by the Corsair's attacks on him. In contrast, he observes, in antiquity, the attacker had to appear personally in the square so that one got to see who it was; the attack was open; and when the attack was over, it was forgotten (see COR, 177-78; cf. TA, 91). And "the public," an abstraction created by the modern press, "simply could not have appeared in antiquity" (TA, 91). He concludes:

The concept of literary contemptibility may be characterized as follows: even if it has talent of a sort, it does not have the justification of an idea, has no view of life, is cowardly, servile, avaricious—therefore, to be anonymous comes naturally. To see the distinction properly, think in contrast of the disintegration of Greece and Aristophanes' comedies. Aristophanes has the authority of an idea; he is distinguished by genius and elevated by personal courage. . . . But just as antiquity could not arrive at the abstraction of modern disintegration, so also . . . it had nothing really analogous to the kind of cowardly moral turpitude which anonymity encourages. Admittedly Socrates says in the Apology [18d] that his real accusers . . . were like shadows no one can grasp, but if town talk and talking between man and man are like shadows, they are still formed in a way by actual human beings, but with anonymity one single person can conjure up a legion of shadows. (JP, 1:154).

Here, Kierkegaard manages in one breath to contrast Aristophanic comedy favorably with modern, anonymous "literary contemptibility," and to recall Socrates' allusion to his accusers. Yet
unlike the aesthete Constantin, he once again avoids acknowledging that Aristophanes wanted to satirize Socrates with Clouds. Why? Let us venture an explanation.

As augured, ironically, by the Corsair’s derisive reference to Taciturnus as “Socrates’ successor,” Kierkegaard is keenly aware that his own predicament in relation to the Copenhagen public actually is now comparable to Socrates’ in relation to the Athenians. In a Journal entry of 1846 he writes: “It is the press that actually destroys all personality, that a cowardly wretch can sit in hiding and write and print for the thousands. All personal conduct and all personal power must run aground on this. It would be most interesting to talk with Socrates about the matter” (JP, 5:5899). In another entry from that year, this one labeled “The Dialectic of Contemptibility,” he brings to bear upon his own experience as an abused, innocent man, the reply Socrates reportedly made to his wife when asked how an innocent man could be sentenced to death: “Would you rather have me guilty?” (COR, 161; quoting Diogenes, Lives, 2.35). Because his long-standing kinship with Socrates as a practitioner of maieutic dialectic is now augmented by a growing sense of affinity with him as a victim of slander (even if the modern press deploying the slander differs from the ancient media of slander), Kierkegaard could not stress Aristophanes’ satirizing of Socrates without subverting his own almost equally long-standing if not quite so obvious sense of affinity with Aristophanes as an employer of the proper form of the comic.

These converging senses of affinity with both Socrates and Aristophanes are nowhere clearer than in Kierkegaard’s unpublished essay of 1846, “A Personal Statement in Costume” (COR, 178-94). Here, in an attempt to conceptualize the comic as antithetical and antidotal to the Corsair, Kierkegaard aims “to deal with the comic in fear and trembling, to maintain the conception of responsibility rooted in ethical and religious earnestness together with the delight of the jest” (COR, 178-79). Feeling himself to be “rather alone in my thinking and perhaps the only one who here-with renounces any reputation for having a sense of the comic,” he

\[129\] The Corsair 277 (9 January 1846): col. 7; quoted in COR, 117.
The Concept of Irony

is reminded of "the question Socrates asked in a similar situation," that is, at the trial: does everybody but one know how to ride horses, or do only a few riding masters know this art, while others know nothing about it? (COR, 179; see Plato, *Apology* 25a-b). Claiming that "in a small country like Denmark a disproportionate and immoral phenomenon such as *The Corsair* does great harm and is of no benefit whatsoever . . . because it counterfeits and taints the comic and thereby silences the authentic comic," Kierkegaard knows that "the proof" of this claim "is valid only on the basis of my understanding of the comic and thus only for the individuals who Socratically assume that the comic is like riding, that only a few know how but the majority do not" (COR, 179, 180).

To whom, then, might Kierkegaard appeal as a sharer of this assumption about of the comic? Although he arrived at this assumption "Socratically," it is not to Socrates, but to Aristophanes that he appeals at the essay's end. After recounting how notorious the *Corsair* has made him in Copenhagen for wearing trousers with legs of uneven length, he distinguishes as follows between Aristophanes' comedy and the *Corsair's* sort of crude cartooning.

You see, the poet does, after all, exaggerate a little so that the pathos and the comic may stand out. For example, to depict the topsy-turvy situation in Athens, Aristophanes had a sausage dealer become the supreme power in the country. So it was in the play; in actuality it was not that bad. But in Copenhagen a pair of trousers has actually attained the position of highest standing and importance. I wonder what Aristophanes would think of that? Certainly he would be envious of this comedy I am writing herewith, but that contemptible paper and the curious are so muddled that they do not grasp the comedy of this, which is comic only according to my view of the comic. (COR, 193)

If the question here about "what Aristophanes might think" seems consonant with his earlier-quoted comment that "It would be most interesting to talk with Socrates about" the destructive power of the modern press, the consonance may not be merely coincidental. The *Corsair's* mocking of Kierkegaard's physical appearance undoubtedly strengthened all the more his sense of affinity with Socrates, whose own reputation as "the ugliest of men" he discussed years before in his Journal and dissertation (quote in JP, 4:4244; rpt. in CI, 442; cf. JP, 4:4246; rpt. CI, 447-48;
see also CI, 148, 212*). Yet, at the same time, it is surely his sense of affinity with Aristophanes as an exemplar of the "good" form of the comic that explains the special indignation Kierkegaard expresses in 1848 at the thought of the Corsair’s "attempt at being a sort of moral enterprise in which ethical satire would be beneficial to the good (à la Aristophanes). I regard it as very important to have gotten this lie exposed" (JP, 6:6282). This sense of affinity becomes one of virtual identification in a Journal entry of 1850, where Kierkegaard lambasts the suggestion by M. A. Goldschmidt, the Corsair’s editor, that the Corsair and the comic embody "the first stage" in the development of a life. "As a rule," Kierkegaard responds, "the comic is at the end—comedy quite properly concludes Hegel’s Esthetics, and an Aristophanes certainly would feel strange if he were advised to make his life as comic poet the first part—and then become 'earnest'" (JP, 6:6602). Consistent with his dissertation’s dismissal years earlier of the Hegelian ascription of "earnestness" to Aristophanes, Kierkegaard now attests: "As a writer, I have never banned the comic; it was utilized in an auxiliary way by the pseudonymns," in whom "the comic is, if anything, too high a stage, since it is something demonic" (JP, 6:6602).

Is Kierkegaard, the so-called Christian Socrates, also a Christian Aristophanes? To say yes would be to stretch my point, which has been to suggest that he was able to preserve the balance of his dual esteem for both Socrates and Aristophanes, especially during the Corsair affair, only by not confronting fully the pertinence of Clouds to Socrates’ condemnation. Such a confrontation would have forced him into an either/or position of having to choose a side. Having accepted "the clinical task assigned to me: Copenhagen in moral disintegration" (JP, 6:6602; cf. 6:6282; PV, 119, 276-79), he would have been forced to side either with the poet whose comedies represented an effort to reform and preserve Athens in its own "age of disintegration," or with the philosopher whose dialectic was seen, perhaps by Aristophanes himself, as contributing to that disintegration.

Kierkegaard never made that choice—except, perhaps implicitly, at the opening of For Self-Examination (1851). There he once more alludes, but only as obliquely as ever, to the implication of Aristophanes in Socrates' doom. Having noted that Socrates “lived
in circumstances that in my opinion quite correspond to our situation today," Kierkegaard adopts as his own the voice of Socrates from Plato's *Apology*, who he imagines to have suggested: "The thoughts, ideas, and concepts that I, known by everyone, ridiculed by your comic poets, regarded as an eccentric, daily attacked by 'the anonymous' (it is his word), . . . have developed in conversation with the first person to come along in the marketplace—these thoughts are my life" (FSE, 9).

The distance from *Clouds* to the *Corsair* is far indeed, and not just temporally. Yet, even from amid all else that Kierkegaard had written to distinguish proper from improper employment of the comic, the words above stand out: "ridiculed by your comic poets." By 1854, contemplating the "life and death" stakes that Socrates faces in the *Apology*, and recognizing that "On a small scale something like this is apparent in my life," Kierkegaard reaches a conclusion which would seem to negate the whole seventh thesis of his dissertation thirteen years after the fact. Without mentioning Aristophanes, he blurts out: "How ridiculous for a poet to want to seize hold of Socrates" (JP, 4:4301)!

---