Aristophanes’ *Clouds*: The Comedy and Poetics of the Sublime

As some scholars such as K.J. Dover have argued, Aristophanes often mocks his targets with verbal weapons that are provided by the butt of the jokes themselves. In the *Clouds,* Socrates and the sophists are lampooned through their own teachings and high-flown language. These σφραγιδονυχαργοκομήτας such as astronomers, doctors, and teachers of geometry employ the same style of language in the *Clouds*, the style of high and low language, which I suggest might be called the poetics of the sublime. This feature of the *Clouds*, evident through language and through spatial relations, adds another layer of meaning to the work.

Aristophanes, I wish to show, fits into the wider tradition of the Longinian sublime. His work demonstrates how the poetics of the sublime is not only the language of literary critics; *Clouds* makes it apparent that the language of the sublime was used by a wider range of educated people. Aristophanes’ engagement in the poetics of the sublime and his mockery of those through the sublime, proves that he recognized that the sophists used the language of the sublime, taught sublime education, and that he himself was educated in it. The sublime, therefore, by 423 BCE the language of scholarly circles wishing to elevate their own works, or like Aristophanes, wishing to bring them down. In this paper, I will study the language of the *Clouds*, specifically within the prologue and the parados, which are both saturated with the language of the sublime. My analysis will show that Aristophanes is part of a pre-Longinian tradition of the sublime.

More specifically, I will argue that the *Clouds* can be read as a sublime text in which which ἐπεισκθκλούμενα μεγέθη συνεχῶς (sublimity piles upon itself continuously) as Longinus states in his treatise *On Sublimity*. As M.S. Silk has argued, Aristophanes’ language and style can be summarized as containing three main qualities: it is 1) physical, 2) accumulative, and 3) discontinuous. It is my contention to suggest that these are qualifiers of the Longinian sublime, as can be seen for instance in the way Longinus analyzes space. In his analysis of *Iliad* 5.770ff, Longinus comments upon the leap of horses, as if they were able to span the entire world. Likewise, the accumulative, or αὔξησις (amplification), and the discontinuous, περιόδους ἀρχάς τε πολλάς καὶ ἀναπαύλας (many starting and stopping points), are key features of both Longinus’ criteria of sublimity and of Aristophanes’ language. Further comparisons will be made to point out the similarities between the two authors and Longinus. Emphasis will also be brought to bear on the sublimity of the language of the sophists whom Aristophanes lampoons.

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