

PARTLY *CLOUDSY* PSEUDOLUS

Abstract: This note argues for a previously unnoticed reference in Plautus' *Pseudolus* to the title of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, and argues that *Pseudolus* more broadly refers to Aristophanic and Platonic versions of Socrates.

Keywords: Plautus, *Pseudolus*, Aristophanes, *Clouds*, Socrates, philosophy, parody, Roman comedy

At Plaut. Pseud. 464–465, the old man (and title character's enslaver) Simo tells his neighbor Callipho that Pseudolus is liable to answer questions like he's Socrates rather than Pseudolus: *con-ficiet iam te hic uerbis ut tu censeas / non Pseudolum, sed Socratem tecum loqui* ("that guy'll finish you off with his words to the point that you'll think not Pseudolus but Socrates is talking with you").<sup>1</sup> Immediately before this, Callipho has used an odd phrase to say to Pseudolus that they want him to confirm or deny some rumors they've heard: *sunt quae te uolumus percontari, quae quasi / per nebulam nosmet scimus atque audiuimus* ("there're some things we wanna ask you about, which we know and have heard through a cloud, so to speak," 462–463). The odd phrasing "through a cloud," marked as an unusual metaphor by the word *quasi*, can be compared to the American idiom "through the grapevine":<sup>2</sup> Callipho

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1) Text is *Questa / Torino* 2017. Translations are my own. I thank Will Lewis, Amy Laser, and Serena S. Witzke.

2) OLD<sup>2</sup>, s.v. *nebula*, 1c, glosses *quasi per nebulam* as "dimly, faintly," and cites only this moment in Pseud., plus Pl. Capt. 1023–1024: *nunc edepol demum in memoriam regredior audisse me, / quasi per nebulam, Hegionem meum patrem uocari* ("damn, finally now I'm coming back to the memory that I've heard – through a cloud, so to speak – Hegio referred to as my father"; text is *Torino* 2013). TLL 9.3.340.60–65, s.v. II.A.2.a.α, classifies both of these Plautine instances as belonging to the metaphorical ("tropice") use in reference to the obscuring ("obscurando, infestando") effects when a *nebula* covers other things ("secundum effectus -ae alia regentis"), specifically for perception ("respicitur perceptio, cognitio impedita, turbata") of the senses ("sensum"), particularly of the ears ("aurium"). Both instances convey the cloudiness of the information they've heard, but in *Captiui*, the fogginess

is cloud sourcing the talk of the town. But it's a pretty evocative phrase, sitting so close to a name-check of Socrates. I argue that the phrase is a heretofore unnoticed<sup>3</sup> footnote to Aristophanes' *Clouds* and furthermore that, in this line, this scene, and the figure of Pseudolus more widely, Plautus makes broad reference to Aristophanic and Platonic versions of Athens' silenic gadfly.

Upon hearing Simo's pronouncement, Pseudolus acts insulted (*itast, iam pridem tu me spernis, sentio*, "that's how it is, you've been throwing shade at me for a while now, I get it," 466, with further protesting-too-much at 467–468, 471), but then promises to answer Simo with oracular authority (*quod scibo Delphis tibi responsum dicit*, "you'll have to say what I know's a response in Delphi for you," 480). Coming this soon after Pseudolus has been labeled a Socrates, the philosopher's own connection to the Delphic oracle – he's labeled by her the wisest of all mortals, per Pl. Ap. 20e6–21a8 – is a likely candidate for allusion. While Pseudolus' remark can seem *prima facie* like a claim to be the oracle,<sup>4</sup> I suggest we instead take it to mean that Pseudolus, already calumniated as Socrates, now asserts that his knowledge has the oracle's seal of approval. Pseudolus puts on the mask of Socrates with gusto – they're both sometime residents of Athens, after all – and with the certainty that he is, if not the wisest, then certainly the cleverest person in the play.<sup>5</sup>

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is caused by time, in *Pseudolus*, by the rumor mill. Though *Nubes* is the conventional Latin translation of the title of Aristophanes' play, it is in fact *nebula* that is cognate with the Greek title, Νεφέλαι.

3) E. g., Morris 1895, 146 ad Pseud. 465 merely notes that "[t]he idea that Socrates was a great sophist, a man of words, is no doubt traditional in comedy from Aristophanes," without further discussion. Carbonero 1993, 84 suggests, without considering fragmentary or lost Old Comic lampoons of Socrates besides Aristophanes', that the only possible source for the characterization of Socrates implicit in Simo's words is *Clouds*: "Unde autem, ut ad propositam revertamur quaestunculam, nisi ex Aristophanis opere, quod «Nubes» inscribitur, tam malignam Socratis repraesentationem Plautus mutuatus est?". van den Berg 2021 reads *Pseudolus* alongside Plato's Socrates, hitting some of the same points I do, but ultimately attributes the references to generic stereotype of Socrates and does not mention Aristophanes; van den Berg also evokes overlaps between *Pseudolus* and Plato's *Phaedrus*.

4) So, e. g., Stehle 1984, 246–247; Nikulin 2009, 188 = 2014, 131; Christenson 2020, 35–36, 222–223.

5) Cp. Stehle 1984, 246: "Pseudolus means 'liar' in Greek. This liar's lies will be so effective that he will seem to be the most famous seeker after truth, one of the most famous of Greeks. Only a Greek liar could lie that well, in Roman eyes. Fur-

What follows is some banter that could be taken as parody of Platonic dialogue,<sup>6</sup> although with Simo closer than Pseudolus to the role of Plato's Socrates. Since he is trying to verify things he already knows by rumor, Simo<sup>7</sup> asks questions to which he is confident Pseudolus' answer will be "yes," and eventually even orders Pseudolus to say "yes."<sup>8</sup> Pseudolus consistently does so, pointedly, in Greek (482–488):

SI. *quid ais? ecquam scis filium tibicinam  
meum amare?* PS. *ναὶ γάρ.*<sup>9</sup> SI. *liberare quam uelit?*  
PS. *καὶ τοῦτο ναὶ γάρ.* SI. *ecquas uiginti minas  
per sycophantiam atque per doctos dolos  
paritas ut a me auferas?* PS. *abs te ego auferam?*  
SI. *ita, quas meo gnato des, qui amicam liberet?*  
*fatere, dic καὶ τοῦτο ναί.* PS. *καὶ τοῦτο ναί.*

Simo: Whaddaya got to say for yourself? Do ya know  
my son's fallen for some flute-girl?

Pseudolus: Yes, indeed.

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thermore, the usual effect of Socrates' truth-seeking was to leave his interlocutors dazed; perhaps Pseudolus will have this effect also."

6) Cp. Nikulin 2009, 188 = 2014, 131: "The subsequent discussion between the master and the slave parodies a dialectical dispute ... Simo thinks that he outsmarts Pseudolus in the debate, but in fact the master is tricked and fooled skilfully by the slave without even having noticed it."

7) His name Σίμων, we should note, is both a typical name for a citizen father in Greek New Comedy and, at the same time, the name of a follower of Socrates. Per Nails 2002, 261–262 (with citations there of further bibliography), Simon was a cobbler who often hosted Socrates at his shop, and wrote down Socrates' teachings – possibly, in so doing, originating the form of the Socratic dialogue. Simon is the title character of a dialogue by another Socratic philosopher, Phaedo, and also features in Phaedo's (or Aeschines') *Cobblers' Tales*, according to Diogenes Laertius 2.105; Simon is one of the penpals in pseudo-Socratic Epistles 9.4,12; 18.2. Simon is, coincidentally, one of the leaders of the Followers of Socrates' faction in the educational Reacting to the Past roleplaying-game scenario set in Athens in 403 BCE (Ober et al. 2015).

8) These questions also helpfully summarize the play's basic plot, for spectators who might have been distracted at key moments so far.

9) For discussion of this phrase's divergence from classical Attic Greek and a conjecture that it should instead read *ναὶ Γῶν* both here in *Pseudolus* and at Pl. Bacch. 1162, see Folge 2014.

Simo: A girl he wants to free?

Pseudolus: Yes, indeed, that too.

Simo: And are ya fixin' to snatch away from me some twenty big ones, by trickery and skilled schemes?

Pseudolus: Me, steal from you?

Simo: Yeah, to give 'em to my son, so he can free his girlfriend? Admit it, say "yes, that too."

Pseudolus: Yes, that too.

Pseudolus' answers sound like the passive, agreeable interlocutors answering long-winded, leading questions from Socrates in Plato's dialogues: e. g., δεῖ γάρ ("yes, must be," Resp. 2.379a); καὶ τοῦτο, ἔφη, πολὺ ("that too," he said, 'by far,'" 5.456e); καὶ μάλα, ἔφη ("yes, indeed," he said," 4.436a). This is about as far as Simo can get with cloud control in Pseudolus' play.

The connections to Socrates, Aristophanes, and Plato go even deeper. Just before his line about Socrates, Simo had, upon first spotting Pseudolus, accused him of corrupting the youth – in fact, a particular youth, Simo's own son Calidorus (*hic mi corrumpit filium*, "this guy's corrupting my son," 446). The grumpy old man's comment can be taken as a wink and a nod at a key charge Plato's Socrates says he's been brought up on (Ap. 24b8–9), one he lays at the feet of Aristophanes (Ap. 19c2–5), whose very own *Clouds* depicts Socrates educating a grumpy old man's wastrel son to disastrous effect.<sup>10</sup> Pseudolus has turned out to be quite the *seruus cloudus*.<sup>11</sup> Simo even wants to execute him (*excruciari*, 448, which can simply mean "torture," but in Plautus always already carries

10) Wright 1975, 411 identifies this scene and specifically Simo's complaints about Pseudolus' handling of Calidorus and Socrates-like speech as the starting point for the play's transformations of its title character, transformations that ultimately culminate in Pseudolus' becoming Plautus. Carbonero 1993, 85 remarks on several similarities between Simo of *Pseudolus* and Strepsiades of *Clouds*: "uterque conditionis mediae sortisque homo est, uterque segnem filii prodigalitem periniquo patitur animo, uterque inanes nihilique profuturas molitur machinationes ut profusae illius luxuriae damna aliqua saltem ex parte compensentur vel praecaveantur."

11) Cp. Christenson's overview of the character of Pseudolus: "The socially mobile trickster / magician is also (à la Socrates) a critically detached *iron* who exposes and exploits his fellow characters' pretensions, self-deception, sentimentality, and other weaknesses, while remaining acutely aware of his own body's physical vulnerability and textuality" (2020, 26).

the implication of fatal crucifixion). Simo's alliterative allegation that Pseudolus is planning "learned deceits" (*doctos dolos*, 485, endorsed verbatim by Pseudolus himself later in this scene, 527) reiterates the old man's suspicion that Pseudolus will philosophize his adversaries into confusion.<sup>12</sup>

Pseudolus finds a silver lining on cloud nine, though, in reaffirming the identification of himself with Socrates a couple of times later in the play. After Simo and Callipho have left him alone on stage, Pseudolus tells the audience that he knows he'll accomplish his tricky tasks, but is unsure how (562–570); in this soliloquy, with Pseudolus' hedge *quod sciam* ("as far as I know," 566), Christenson argues that the title character's "epistemological status here, *mutatis mutandis*, is not unlike that of Socrates in the *Apology*" (2020, 222 ad loc.). In a subsequent appearance, Pseudolus does some philosophizing of his own (678–686), saying that people attribute success and even wisdom (*sapere*, 680, whence the Latin word for 'philosopher,' *sapiens*) to people who luck out with the better end of Fortuna; Pseudolus concludes his ruminations by saying "enough philosophization for now" (*sed iam satis est philosophatum*, 687).<sup>13</sup> Pseudolus' Mini-Me, Simia, also seems to have gotten the mini-memo that *serui callidi* in this play are supposed to be philosophers, when he's pretending to be the soldier's enslaved adjutant Harpax looking to meet with the sex-trafficker<sup>14</sup> Ballio (971–974):

SI. *ecquem in angiporto hoc hominem tu novisti? te rogo.*  
 BA. *egomet me.* SI. *pauci istuc faciunt homines quod tu praedicas,*

12) I also think that *sicophantia* (485, 527; later in the play, 572, 672; similarly *sucophanta* / *sycophanta*, 1197, 1200, 1204; the hapax *sycophantiose*, 1211) – which in Plautus properly designates trickery (thus OLD<sup>2</sup>, s. v. *sycophantia*, citing only Plautus: Pseud. 527, Bacch. 740, Capt. 521, Mil. 767, Trin. 867) – loops back to Socrates, arguably the most famous victim of *συκοφαντία* ("vexatious or dishonest prosecution," per LSJ) in ancient Athens.

13) Cf. Nikulin 2009, 188 = 2014, 131: "Pseudolus appears as a non-dialectical tragicomic *raisonneur* speaking about the illusion of striving toward a desired end in life, and about suffering and death. But at a certain point, he abruptly interrupts himself ... because rather than being engaged in idle talk, one has to return to action."

14) I render *leno* "sex-trafficker" as being more accurate than "pimp," in line with the findings of Witzke 2015.

*nam in foro uix decumus quisque est qui ipsus sese nouerit.*  
 PS. *saluos sum, iam philosophatur.*

Simia: D’you know anybody in this street? I’m askin’ ya.

Ballio: I know myself.

Simia: Few people do what you’re saying, ’cause there’s barely ten percent of everyone in the Forum who know themselves.

Pseudolus: I’m saved, now he’s having a go at philosophy!

Simia intentionally misunderstands Ballio’s reply, that he himself lives on this street, as an opportunity to reflect on the Delphic γνῶθι σεαυτόν; Pseudolus, eavesdropping and making asides, praises him (as often throughout this scene) for his cleverness, this time specifically as a philosopher.

The cumulus-ative effect of the *Clouds* / Socrates intertext is no mere vapor. For spectators in the know, whether they’ve read *Apology* or *Clouds* (or perchance seen a revival of the latter), Simo’s *non Pseudolum, sed Socratem* is the key to unlocking a series of little meteorothatrical references and throwaway lines throughout the central storm system of the play. But it doesn’t depend on Plautus having direct access to Aristophanes or Plato, because Socrates’ reputation, for better or worse, as well as simply the potential associations of him with *Clouds* and *Apology* – in other words, Socrates in the general cultural awareness – would be enough to get the jokes.<sup>15</sup> We might compare the shoutout to Thales, an obscure presocratic philosopher, at Capt. 274, where it is possibly enriched by a subtle nod to the Elean philosophers,<sup>16</sup> since the two

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15) Sort of like how I can appreciate riffs on Marlon Brando’s Godfather, despite never having seen any of the films, nor read plot summaries, nor had them explained to me. More seriously: the presence of Greek philosophy in Plautus has been established elsewhere (see, e. g., Dutsch 2009, 2014). Not every joke or allusion has to be gettable by every spectator, and I imagine that Plautus’ forecast would be that no spectator will get every joke. This one might be only for the enslaved Greeks in the audience – there’s lots of that (thus Richlin 2017) – plus maybe a few Roman elites who’ve done their reading (thus Fontaine 2010).

16) Most famously Pyrrho, the first skeptic, but also Phaedo of Elis, name-sake of Plato’s *Phaedo* and, per Diogenes Laertius 2.105, founder of a school of philosophy in Elis; see Nails 2002, 231.

title characters of Plautus' play are from Elis (cf. line 280; there, too, *philosophatur* crops up, at 284).<sup>17</sup> These moments in *Pseudolus* may supply evidence bearing on the *nexata quaestio* of whether Titus Maccius Cloudus had direct access to Aristophanes, whether Titus Maccius Plato could have read *Apology*.<sup>18</sup>

Either way, *Pseudolus* is valuable evidence for the perception of Socrates in Rome at the time of the Middle Republic. By the time of Lucilius' satires, it seems that Socrates had "attained the status of a presiding figure whose character and philosophy were looked to for the sustenance of a fledgling form," and that, in Hor. Sat. 2, "the transformation of Socrates from satiric butt (where Aristophanes placed him) to moral ideal is complete."<sup>19</sup> Likewise, for Cicero, Socrates is an exemplar of the value of philosophy, and Cicero, in the judgment of McConnell, "presumes a positive and widely held view of Socrates among first century BCE Romans" (2019, 354 and n. 25). Yet *Pseudolus*' response to Simo's Socrates comparison indicates, according to Christenson, that "*Pseudolus* rightly sees the comparison to Socrates as an insult" (2020, 207 ad loc.). Plautus is an earlier point in the reception of Socrates than Horace or Cicero or even Lucilius, and he is a rough contemporary of Cato the Elder, a famous paragon of Roman ambivalence about Greek culture and influence.<sup>20</sup> *Pseudolus* evinces this same ambivalent outlook about Socrates specifically. In this play, the wisest man in Greece is, yes, a gadfly, an irritant to Athenian citizens, the conversational equivalent of an overcast sky, an aider and abettor of the dissolution of at least one youth – and, at the same time, he is associated inextricably with the play's titular protagonist, the trickster hero whose wit, intellect, special relationship with the audience, preternatural control over the unfolding of theatrical reality, and capacity for self-reflection, self-replication, and improvisation are the principal sources of the play's humor, entertainment, and theatrical success.

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17) Note also the assessment of Murray 2007, 62 that, at Capt. 669–721, "Tyndarus leads Hegio through a process of Socratic-type reasoning."

18) I would not, however, go so far as to endorse the suggestion of Dumont 1977 that the Greek original for Plautus' *Persa* may have been by Aristophanes himself.

19) Guilhamet 1985, 3, citing Anderson 1968 on Horace; on Socrates and Roman satire, see further Littlewood 2019.

20) See Stehle 1984, 240–244 for more on this historical and cultural context.

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