

Everybody Loves Strepsiades: Type Characters and Family Relationships in Aristophanes

Much has been said about the fathers of Aristophanes as type characters. They have been identified as both doting and dismissive (French, 1999; Henderson, 1987); they are combative with later generations (Sommerstein, 2019); they are typically caught between the *oikos* and the *polis* (Gardner, 1989); and so on. There is still something to be said, however, about the father as a father, and the particular functions borne by the type character in that role. One of these functions is the license he provides to the author to engage with the same questions surrounding what we might call the “philosophy of parenthood” that concern other authors. Strepsiades, the unfortunate father of the *Clouds*, is one such figure. Through comparisons with different genres, this paper will investigate the way that Aristophanes employs this character “variant” to consider especially how parents demonstrate their love for their children and what sort of treatment they can expect in return (Sifakis, 1992).

After receiving a beating from his son, Strepsiades tries to convince his son that his actions were wrong. He reminds Pheidippides of everything he did for him as a boy, from bringing him food and water to dealing with his “potty business.” He puts special emphasis, however, on the process behind fulfilling those needs. What was difficult for Strepsiades, and what sets him apart from other people in Pheidippides’ life, is that he took the time to understand what the boy needed: “I studied and learned all your toddler-talk, what was in your little mind. And if you asked for a sippies of something, I alone knew what you needed and found it for you. If ever you called out for your nibbles, I was always there with a whole loaf. You couldn’t get the word “poos!” out of your mouth before I’d pick you up, take you outside, and hold you up out there myself...” (*Clouds* 1380-1390).

A similar sentiment is expressed by Kilissa in the *Libation Bearers*. Upon learning of Orestes' death, Kilissa recounts her struggles in raising the baby Orestes. Like Strepsiades, she focuses on the mental exertion of understanding the child's needs: "A child without intelligence must needs be reared... by the intelligence of his nurse (τροφοῦ φρενί); when he's still an infant in swaddling clothes he can't speak at all if he's in the grip of hunger or thirst...and the immature bowel of small children is its own master. I had to divine these things (πρόμαντις οὔσα) in advance, and often, I fancy, I was mistaken..." (*Libation Bearers*, 754-759, trans. Loeb). Kilissa describes this process as an application of her mind—"τροφοῦ φρενί." In fact, she even calls herself a "πρόμαντις," a prophetess—in other words, the job of understanding a baby's needs is difficult enough to require the intervention of a god.

Xenophon will provide another point of comparison. In the *Memorabilia*, he considers the nature of maternal affection, specifically how mothers show their affection for their children: "She rears and cares for it, although she has not received any good thing, and the baby neither recognizes its benefactress nor can make its wants known to her: still she guesses what is good for it and what it likes, and seeks to supply these things...putting up with toil day and night, not knowing what return she will get," (*Memorabilia* 2.2.5, trans Loeb). Again, the emphasis is placed as much on the mental process of understanding the child's needs as it is on the physical process of caring for those needs. Xenophon also explicitly poses the question that is central to our understanding of Strepsiades and other Aristophanic fathers: what sort of reward will a parent receive for their efforts?

Through the comparison of these sources, I hope to show that Aristophanes used the figure of Strepsiades to engage in a broader philosophical discussion about the nature of family relationships. However, if we are to consider this a function of a character type, it will be

necessary to briefly identify other works in which the character is similarly employed. A short consideration of Aristophanes' *Banqueters* and *Wasps*, and their connection with the *Clouds*, will conclude the paper.

Bibliography

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