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List of characters

STREPSIADES	*an ordinary Athenian*
PHEIDIPPIDES	*his son*
STUDENT	
SOCRATES	
CHORUS	*Clouds*
STRONG	*the stronger argument (Right)*
WEAK	*the weaker argument (Wrong)*
PASIAS	*first creditor*
AMYNIAS	*second creditor*
OTHER STUDENTS	

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Setting the scene: the problem (1–132)

Greek tragedy is populated with the heroic figures of a remote and mythical past, like Oedipus, Agamemnon, Electra and Antigone, with occasional appearances by the gods. Greek comedy shared the same stage and the same festivals (see pp. 120–3), but it is very different. It is about the ordinary Athenian, usually faced with a down-to-earth problem for which he finds an extraordinary solution. So, the 'hero' of Greek comedy is, for the audience, 'one of us'. Strepsiades has a number of ordinary, even timeless, problems, including a disobedient and extravagant son and not enough money to go round. The play opens with a long soliloquy (1–78), occasionally interrupted, in which we hear Strepsiades worrying about his financial difficulties.

1 Strepsiades Many of Aristophanes' names are chosen for a reason. Strepsiades is related to the Greek word for turning and twisting. We first see Strepsiades tossing and turning on his bed (see also 36, **'Initiation'**, p. 20, 434, 1455).

2 what a night! In an open-air theatre it isn't possible to convey darkness, so Strepsiades has to make it clear what time of day it is. There are no stage directions in the surviving plays, but clues to staging are found throughout the text.

The Peloponnesian War

Athens had been at war with Sparta since 431 BC. War could offer hope to slaves because of the possibility of finding refuge with the enemy, particularly when the Spartans actually invaded Attica, the territory around Athens, as they did most summers after the outbreak of war. Most of Aristophanes' 'ordinary' heroes seem to own at least one household slave, like the **boy** (18).

Verbal creativity

One thing lost in translation is the richness and variety of Aristophanes' language, which encompasses low-life idiom, for example **farts** (9), double entendre and puns, parodies of tragedy (see 23 and note) and newly created or unusual compound words. **Encocooned** (10), an invented word, and **snore, snuggled** (12), an alliterative description, try to capture two rare, long compound words in the original Greek.

Metaphor

Strepsiades is literally being bitten, as we later discover, by bed-bugs, but he speaks as if it's his expenses that are 'biting' him and **coming to get** him (18); one item on his list, **fodder** (13), seems surprising until we learn the cause of his debts.

17 end of the month Strepsiades' problem is debt brought on by his son's activities. Strepsiades is trying to keep up with the interest payments on his debts, due at the end of each lunar month. He sees little hope of clearing these, never mind the debts themselves.

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STREPSIADES Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.
Lord Zeus, what a night!
In-ter-min-able. Will day never come?
I'm sure I heard the cock ages ago,
but the slaves are still snoring. It's not like the old days. 5
I hate this bloody war for lots of reasons.
And here's one: you can't even punish your own slaves.
Look at this fine young man here.
He doesn't lie awake at night – he just farts away,
encocooned in his five blankets. 10
Well, if that's the way you want it, let's all have a good
snore, snuggled in our beds.
But I can't sleep. Poor old me, bitten to bits
by expenses and fodder and debts,
and all because of this son of mine here, with his long hair
and his horses – he rides them, he races them, 15
he even dreams about them! As for me, it's all over:
I can see the moon bringing on the end of the month.
Interest payments are coming to get me. Boy, light the lamp
and bring out the accounts. Let's see just how many people
I owe money and work out the interest. 20

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21 Twelve minas A mina (or mna) is 100 drachmas. Accounts of the building work on the Parthenon show us that a drachma is a day's pay for a skilled workman; 12 minas might therefore represent several years' pay.

23–4 racer . . . erased Aristophanes uses puns throughout his works and sometimes they prove hard to translate. In this case the Greek for the **racer** Strepsiades bought is 'branded with a *koppa*'. This sounds like the Greek verb 'I struck (out)' ((*ex*)*ekopēn* = **erased**).

- Try to think of a better pun to replace the words 'racer' and 'erased'.
- Was the comic John Cleese right to recommend the following three rules to writers of comedy: '1. No puns. 2. No puns. 3. No puns'?

23 Alas, ah me! (*oimoi talās*) An exclamation of suffering common in tragedy. A similar shift to a tragic tone is suggested by **cometh** (30).

Chariot-racing

Strepsiades' soliloquy is briefly interrupted by his son's dreams of horses and racing chariots. In rocky terrain like Greece, horse-rearing was the preserve of the wealthy and chariot-racing an expensive and highly prestigious activity. The aristocratic Alcibiades boasts of the international acclaim his private entry of seven chariots in one Olympic Games brought to Athens (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 6.16).

34 send in the bailiffs Strepsiades is afraid that his property will be taken in lieu of his debts. In Athens the official in charge of such matters was the *dēmarch* (translated **bailiff**, 37). Athens was divided into 139 local administrative units called demes, each presided over by an annually elected *dēmarch*.

41 matchmaker Since young Athenian males and females lived separate lives, an older woman might help organise a suitable (or, in this case, unsuitable) match.

46 Megacles The name, which literally means 'very famous', was well known in Athens, associated with the powerful Alcmaeonid family (see note on 800). The most famous Megacles was the father of Cleisthenes, the creator of democracy in Athens, and the great-grandfather of Pericles and Alcibiades.

47 a country boy and an up-town girl The rural economy in Attica was based around growing olives, figs and grapes, and rearing bees for honey and sheep or goats for meat and fleeces. **Perfume** and **saffron** (51) suggest exotic imports.

54–5 banging away . . . too thick Strepsiades' new wife is not economical in her use of wool for weaving clothes, but there may be a double entendre suggesting a demanding sexual appetite.

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Now then, let me see. What do I owe? Twelve minas to Pasias.
Twelve minas to Pasias? What was that for? Why did I . . . ?
Oh, it was that racer I bought off him. Alas, ah me!
Better if I'd erased my own eyes with a stone!

PHEIDIPPIDES Hey, Philon, that's a foul! Stay in your lane. 25

STREPSIADES That's it. That's just it. That's what's ruined me.
Even in his sleep he's away at the races.

PHEIDIPPIDES How many laps in the next race?

STREPSIADES Enough to have driven your father round the bend.
Now, which debt cometh after Pasias'? To Amynias, 3 minas, for 30
a chassis and two wheels.

PHEIDIPPIDES Let her have a roll, then take her home.

STREPSIADES Well, my lad, you've certainly rolled me out of all I had.
I've got fines pending and they're threatening to send in the bailiffs.

PHEIDIPPIDES Dad, what's your problem? 35
Why this tossing and twisting all night long?

STREPSIADES I've got a bailiff in my bed, biting me under the bedclothes.

PHEIDIPPIDES Do let me get some sleep. There's a good chap.

STREPSIADES Go on, then. You enjoy your nap, but don't forget that
one day all these debts will be yours. 40
Oh, sod it. A curse on the matchmaker who set me up
with your mother. If only she'd died first!
Mine was a blissful country life, a mouldy old life, nothing fancy,
take us as you find us, teeming with bees and sheep and olive cakes. 45
And then I married the niece of Megacles, of the line of Megacles,
a country boy and an up-town girl.
She was classy, she was fancy, her grandmother's granddaughter.
And on our wedding night, I lay down with her
smelling of goats, figs, fleeces and the good life, 50
and she of perfume, saffron, deep kisses,
expensive appetites, Aphrodite and sex.
I'm not saying she didn't do the business. She was always
banging away at her loom. And I used to make my point,
showing her my cloak, 'Look, woman, you're laying it on too thick.' 55

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59 thick wick Strepsiades' thoughts are interrupted again, this time by his house slave bringing unwelcome news. Olive oil was a staple local product used for cooking and lighting as well as food and soap. Strepsiades unfairly blames his slave for his lack of economy (a thick wick burns more oil), giving an opportunity for physical humour as the master beats his slave (see **'Slapstick'**, p. 102).

62 what to call him His mother prefers a name which emphasises her aristocratic background by the reference to a horse – ((*h*)*ippos*), like the modern name Philip (*phil-ippos* = lover of horses), whereas his father prefers something more thrifty (*pheido-* = thrift, see 134 and note). The name Pheidippides is the compromise choice and an oxymoron, since horses don't come cheap.

70 Acropolis This steep rocky outcrop in the heart of Athens had been recently adorned with the building programme of 446–438 BC masterminded by the great political leader Pericles (213). This included the frieze on the Parthenon, the great temple dedicated to Athene, representing the Panathenaic procession (see 306n). The illustration below is from this frieze and shows young men riding horses as part of the four-yearly festival. Pheidippides' mother imagines her son as one of these men, either in the procession itself or celebrating a victory in a chariot race, like that won by Megacles at Olympia in 436 BC. Her son's **fine cloak** (70) would have been dyed with saffron.

71 Phelles The name, meaning 'stony ground', is also referred to in *Acharnians* 273. Pheidippides' father's aspirations are humble in the extreme.

76 a brilliant, miraculous idea Most of Aristophanes' comedies start with what has been termed a Great Idea, often zany. For example, in *Peace* the hero plans to feed up a giant dung-beetle so that he can fly to heaven and conclude his own personal peace with Zeus. We are kept in suspense over the next 40 lines while Strepsiades gradually reveals his great idea for getting out of debt.

Horsemen from the frieze on the Parthenon, 438–432 BC, British Museum.

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SLAVE We've run out of oil for the lamp.
STREPSIADES Oh, sod it. Why did you light the thirsty lamp?
Get over here, I'll give you something to cry about.
SLAVE What have I done?
STREPSIADES You used the thick wick, thick wit.
Well then, afterwards, when this fine son of ours was born, 60
to me and her ladyship,
we had a right row about what to call him.
She wanted to get a horse into his name,
Xanthippos or Charippus or Kallippides.
And I wanted to call him Pheidonides after his granddad. 65
It took us a while but, in the end,
we compromised and called him Pheidippides.
So, she would take this son of hers in her arms and cuddle him
and say, 'When you're a big boy, you'll drive your chariot to the
Acropolis, just like Megacles, in your fine cloak.' 70
And I'd say, 'When you drive your goats from Phelles,
just like your dad, dressed in your leather jerkin.'
But he wouldn't listen to a word I said.
His horse fever has infected everything I have.
And so, all night long I've been thinking of a way 75
and I've found one – a brilliant, miraculous idea.
If I can just persuade him, I'm saved.
But first I've got to get him up.
Now, what's the nicest way to wake him? Let me see.
Pheidippides, dear little Pheidippidindins.
PHEIDIPPIDES What, dad? 80
STREPSIADES Kiss me and give me your hand.
PHEIDIPPIDES There. Now what is it?
STREPSIADES Tell me. Do you love me?

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The gods

The existence, or non-existence, of the gods is a key theme (see **'The nature of the gods'**, p. 20). Throughout the play the characters refer to the gods as a normal part of their language. Earlier, Strepsiades appealed to **Lord Zeus** (2) as god of the sky and here Pheidippides appeals to Zeus' brother, **Poseidon** (83), god of the sea and of horses. When this upsets his father, he changes to **Dionysus** (91), god of wine and theatre, in whose sanctuary this play was originally performed.

94 Thinkstitute Strepsiades' plan involves sending his son off to a place of higher education. Although children were given a basic schooling (see **'Education'**, p. 74), teaching beyond the age of 14–15 would generally have been informal. Aristophanes invents a name for this new-fangled institute devoted to higher thought from the Greek *phrontizein*, 'to think'. *Phrontisterion* now means college in modern Greek.

95 like a barbecue lid The image is of an oven with a dome-shaped cover, pre-heated with charcoal, then used to bake bread. This analogy is the first sign that Socrates and his pupils are perceived as being involved in scientific enquiry (see p. 16). Since the sixth century BC Greeks had been asking questions about their world. Periclean Athens had attracted thinkers from far and wide, some of whom were ridiculed for their ideas. Hippon of Samos was targeted for just this theory in a comedy by Cratinus (see **'Rivals'**, p. 42); Aristophanes attributes the same idea to Meton, caricaturing the Athenian astronomer (*Birds* 1000–1, 414 BC).

97–8 win an argument . . . right or wrong Another element in the new teaching is developing the ability through rhetoric and forensic skill to win an argument or a lawsuit. It is this skill that interests our hero. The problem, which will be explored thoroughly in the play, is that it is potentially an 'amoral' activity.

101 fine, upstanding worriers Strepsiades begins by describing the academics in terms usually reserved for aristocrats (*kaloi-kagathoi* = **fine, upstanding**), but the **worriers** are engaged in intellectual rather than physical battles.

103 pale faces and bare feet These effete students spend time inside, like the white-armed women represented on Greek vases, rather than working the land or exercising outdoors.

104 Chaerephon Chaerephon was Socrates' most famous companion, who asked the Delphic oracle whether anyone was wiser than Socrates (Plato, *Apology* 20e–21a; Xenophon, *Apology* 14). Aristophanes calls him 'the bat' (*Birds* 1269, 1564). See also 144–6, 156, 1465.

108–9 Leogoras' finest pheasants Leogoras was connected by marriage to Pericles and was famously wealthy. The pheasant was an exotic import, named after its place of origin, Phasis, to the east of the Black Sea.

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PHEIDIPPIDES Yes, by Poseidon, god of horses.
STREPSIADES Don't give me that 'god of horses' stuff.
That god is the cause of all my troubles. But, son, 85
if you really do love me with all your heart, do as I say.
PHEIDIPPIDES Do what?
STREPSIADES Change your ways. Right now.
I want you to go and study.
PHEIDIPPIDES Study what? Tell me more.
STREPSIADES So you'll do it? 90
PHEIDIPPIDES Yes, by Dionysus.
STREPSIADES Then, look over there.
Can you see, right there, that door and that house?
PHEIDIPPIDES I see it. What exactly is it, dad?
STREPSIADES That is the Thinkstitute for those of great intellect.
There dwell men who claim that the sky is like a barbecue lid. 95
It covers us, and we are the coals.
If you pay them, they'll teach you to win an argument
whether what you say is right or wrong.
PHEIDIPPIDES Who are they?
STREPSIADES I don't actually know their names 100
but they are fine, upstanding worriers.
PHEIDIPPIDES Bollocks. They are a bunch of rogues. I know that lot.
You mean those charlatans, with their pale faces and bare feet,
like Chaerephon and that wretch Socrates?
STREPSIADES Shh! Quiet! Don't be a fool! 105
If you care at all about your father's daily bread,
give up the horses and join them.
PHEIDIPPIDES No way, by Dionysus, not even for Leogoras'
finest pheasants.
STREPSIADES Go on. Please! Just for me, my dear boy. 110
Go and get an education.
PHEIDIPPIDES And what do you want me to learn?

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Two arguments

The idea that each argument has two sides was part of a systematic analysis of the structure and use of language by sophists like Protagoras (see **'Sophistry'**, p. 54). For example, the statement 'Cannibalism is wrong' could be countered by the statement 'Cannibalism is not wrong'. The former would be the Stronger Argument, but it could be challenged by its weaker counterpart if, for example, in another society cannibalism proved to be an honoured custom (see **'Pheidippides' second argument'**, p. 110), or perhaps if it were set against a worse alternative course of action. This new thinking, based on an understanding of moral relativism rather than moral absolutes, proved disturbing to many and the implications are explored later in the play (see especially 1445–6).

116 obol A small Athenian coin (see *A Note on Money*, p. vii).

120 the knights This term was formalised in the sixth century BC when Solon divided Athenian society into four property bands. The Knights (*hippeis*) were the second highest class in terms of wealth and prestige, so called because they could afford to equip a horse for battle. In 431 BC, the cavalry numbered 1,200, including mounted archers (Thucydides 2.13). Aristophanes' play *Knights* (424 BC) takes its title from its Chorus, whose social superiority is matched by a sense of duty: 'we think it right nobly to defend our city and our native gods, asking for nothing in return except that, in times of peace when we rest from our toils, you don't begrudge us our long hair and glittering appearance' (*Knights* 576–80). Pheidippides shares this upper-class obsession with long hair (typical of the Spartans), good looks and horses.

121 by Demeter Strepsiades' oath gives a hint as to the direction his thoughts are taking, since Demeter was goddess of corn and the harvest. See also 455.

126 I don't care about you any more! Pheidippides' parting words echo the retort of an Athenian aristocrat in Herodotus' *Histories* (6.129–30). After getting drunk and dancing away his marriage prospects to the daughter of Cleisthenes, tyrant of Sicyon, he said, 'Hippocleides doesn't care' (*ou phrontis*). Pheidippides' words in Greek are *ou phrontiō*.

Change of scene

It was usual in Greek tragedy for the action to have 'unity of time and place' – that is, for the action to take place on a single day in one location. This play, like other Aristophanic comedies, involves frequent changes of time and scene.

- ○ Consider the requirements for staging this first scene (1–126).
- Do you identify more strongly with Strepsiades or his son?
- How would you describe the relationship between them? Compare them with any other father/son comic duos you can think of.
- Is Strepsiades' request reasonable? Does his plan make sense?

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