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Clueless Strepsiades, Clueless Scribes?

Recovering Two Lost Jokes in Aristophanes’

Clouds (234, 380–81)

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Abstract

I propose two emendations in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*: τὰ κάρδαμα (234) should be read as τὰγκάρδια (i.e. τὰ ἐγκάρδια), and Δῖνος (“Whirl”) at 380–81 as Δεῖνος, an ordinary personal name derived from δεινός. Both passages rely on the same comic mechanism: Strepsiades mishears a technical term (medical or cosmological) as a familiar everyday word or proper name. As often happens in the transmission of comedy, some scribe who failed to see the joke “corrected” a pun into an apparent repetition of the same word. Restoring these jokes sharpens the contrast between Socrates’ intellectual pretension and Strepsiades’ comic cluelessness.

Key Words: Aristophanes, *Clouds*, Jokes, Strepsiades, Scribes

1. Introduction

While preparing a new translation of *Clouds*, I became convinced that two jokes in the famous first Socrates–Strepsiades scene were flattened in antiquity by scribes who failed to perceive their comic mechanism. Neither passage shows any manuscript variation, nor have they attracted suspicion from scholiasts, editors, or commentators, but both are better explained as puns that were subsequently “corrected” away by scribal normalization. The text we possess is intelligible, but it’s less funny than Aristophanes likely wrote it.

The scene in question (it’s the one later cited in Plato’s *Apology* 18b–c) stages a dialogue between Socrates and Strepsiades, a rustic Athenian gentleman out of his depth in philosophical discourse. Strepsiades’ characterization—earthbound, practical, linguistically unsophisticated—governs both jokes discussed here.

The Greek text cited below follows Olson (2021). Translations are my own.

2. Comic Mishearing in the Opening Dialogue

Early in the scene, Socrates explains his intellectual method while suspended in his basket above the stage (225–27):

Socrates:

I am walking on air, that I may closely **inspect** (περιφρονῶ) the sun.

Strepsiades:

So you’re up on a wooden pallet to **disrespect** (ὑπερφρονῶ) the gods?
Seriously? Why not just do it from the ground?

Here Strepsiades converts philosophical inquiry into contempt through phonetic confusion (περι- → ὑπερ-). Whether this represents naïve mishearing or deliberate parody is theatrically undecidable; in either case, the joke establishes the pattern that governs the passages examined below.

3. Passage 1 (*Clouds* 234–36): τὰ κάρδαμα → τὰγκάρδια

Socrates continues his pseudo-scientific explanation:

Socrates:

Yes, because I'd never have made precise discoveries regarding the heavenly meteorology, except by elevating my mind and mingling my subtle thoughts with kindred rarefied air. If I were searching the heavens from down below on earth, I'd never have discovered anything, for the truth is that Earth's pull necessarily draws the mind's moisture to itself. The same principle obtains in **τὰ κάρδαμα**.

Strepsiades:

πῶς φής; ἢ φροντὶς ἔλκει τὴν ἰκμάδ' εἰς **τὰ κάρδαμα**;
Say what? The mind...draws moisture...into **τὰ κάρδαμα**?

If the transmitted text is retained, Socrates refers to “cress”—rendered here as “cardamom” to preserve the English pun—and Strepsiades merely repeats the word, producing no obvious comic payoff. I propose instead that Aristophanes wrote **τὰγκάρδια** (**τὰ ἐγκάρδια**), “the internal organs” or “matters of the heart.” To preserve the pun, I render it “matters cardiological” ~ “cardamom.”

The joke then becomes transparent: Strepsiades mishears a technical medical term as a familiar household item—that is, Socrates speaks in technical abstraction, while Strepsiades hears groceries. Some scribe who failed to see the pun would naturally change the unfamiliar prior word into a repetition of the latter word, thereby eliminating the joke.

Semantically, **τὰ ἐγκάρδια** fits the context perfectly. Socrates' explanation concerns the attraction of moisture toward a center; reference to the “internal organs” or “inward parts” coheres with contemporary physiological thinking about moisture and interiority. By contrast, **τὰ κάρδαμα** (“cress,” rendered above as “cardamom”) yields no obvious conceptual or comedic payoff; it's just an inert repetition. And the reading **τὰγκάρδια** is also palaeographically and phonetically plausible. Assimilation of **ἐγκ-** to **ἄγκ-** is trivial in continuous script, and the loss of initial epsilon in crasis (**τὰ ἐγκάρδια** → **τὰγκάρδια**) is entirely regular.

4. Passage 2 (*Clouds* 380–81): Δῖνος → Δεῖνος

Later in the same scene, Socrates explains thunder:

Socrates:

When Clouds get completely saturated with water, they’re forcibly displaced and drift by necessity, and they sag under the mass of rain—again, by necessity. Then, being heavy, they bang into each other, explode, and—*crash!* Thunder. Simple as that.

Strepsiades:

But the guy who’s “by necessity” forcibly displacing them—who’s that? Isn’t that Zeus?

Socrates:

Not at all. It is...the δῖνος—the cosmological...whirl.

Strepsiades:

Δῖνος?! You must be joking! So Zeus is out, and Δῖνος is king now instead?!

The transmitted reading above is intelligible: a cosmological abstraction replaces Zeus. And the comic type can readily be paralleled by the “Outis” pun in *Odyssey* 9, where “Nobody” becomes a literal misinterpretation of the common noun “nobody.” Yet the joke here is surely stronger if Strepsiades misunderstands δῖνος as Δεῖνος, a real personal name attested in the fifth century BCE (two attestations in the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* s.v. Δεῖνος). Strepsiades then mishears the technical term as an ordinary proper name, as if he or we were to mishear the noun “eddy” as the name “Eddie.” To preserve the pun here, I translate it “*dinos*” ~ “Dino?!” Once again, a scribe who didn’t hear the joke would have every reason to “correct” the text into semantic coherence. The correction succeeds logically and fails comically.

5. The Comic Mechanism: “Geranos”

Both passages belong to a recognizable class of jokes based on phonetic misunderstanding. A close parallel appears in the “geranos” joke in Epicharmus, where a speaker mishears a word as a similar-sounding everyday term (fr. 76 Kassel–Austin; to reproduce the sound-play in English, I translate freely):

[A.] Zeus's invited me over; he's having a **pitch-in** (γ' ἔρανον) for Pelops.

[B.] Ugh! My good man, that's an awful dish, **pigeon** (γέρανος) is.

[A.] It was **pitch-in** that I said, not **pigeon**!

(ἀλλ' οὔτι γέρανον, ἀλλ' ἔρανόν <γ'> τοι λέγω.)

These jokes depend on phonetic proximity, semantic collapse, and character psychology, which is exactly the pattern we see in both passages of *Clouds*.

6. Scribal Normalization and the Loss of Comic Puns

As I argued at great length in *Funny Words in Plautine Comedy* (Oxford 2010), comic mishearings such as the two argued for here are especially vulnerable in textual transmission. A scribe who fails to perceive the pun often assumes a corruption and “corrects” the text into repetition or semantic coherence. The result is the disappearance of the joke. In my view, the mechanism is not only consistent, it is also reversible:

- Original text contains phonetic mishearing.
- Scribe fails to perceive the comic logic.
- The unfamiliar first term is “corrected” to a repetition.
- Joke disappears.
- Proper attention to the context suggests minimal emendation to restore it.

The two passages discussed here fit this pattern perfectly.

7. Conclusion

In sum, both emendations restore jokes that align not only with Strepsiades' characterization but with Aristophanes' broader comic practice. In both cases:

- A technical term is misheard as an everyday word or name.
- The humor depends on phonetic proximity and character psychology.
- Scribal normalization plausibly explains the transmitted reading.

If the readings proposed above are right, the manuscripts preserve a text that does make sense, but Aristophanes surely wrote one that was funnier. More simply, the scribe—his head in the clouds, not in the *Clouds*—never heard the jokes at all.

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