

NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

AN UNNOTICED GECKO JOKE IN ARISTOPHANES' *CLOUDS* 169–74

In Aristophanes' *Clouds* a student of Socrates introduces Strepsiades to the curriculum, research interests, and methods of the school of Socrates. After praising Socrates' ingenuity, however, the student unexpectedly announces that Socrates was recently deprived of a great thought by a gecko (*Nub.* 169–70): πρῶην δέ γε γνώμην μεγάλην ἀφηρέθη / ὑπ' ἀσκαλαβώτου. Puzzled, Strepsiades asks for details, and the student explains that a gecko (γαλεώτης) dropped its bodily waste onto Socrates from the eaves of the school while Socrates was gazing upward, open-mouthed, and absorbed in astronomical observations (171–73):¹

ζητοῦντος αὐτοῦ τῆς σελήνης τὰς ὁδοὺς
καὶ τὰς περιφοράς, εἴτ' ἄνω κεχηνότος
ἀπὸ τῆς ὀροφῆς νύκτωρ γαλεώτης κατέχεσεν.²

As he was observing the moon's paths and
revolutions, open-mouthed, at the sky,
from the roof, at night, a gecko shit on him.

Previous commentators have noted that Socrates' encounter with the gecko continues the scatological joke introduced by the discussion of the gnat's buzz (156–64), and that it parodies the well-known story of Thales of Miletus, who is reported to have been so engrossed in his astronomical research that he lost track of his surroundings and fell into a well (*Pl. Tht.* 174A). These observations are surely correct. Strepsiades explicitly mentions Thales later in this scene (180). And yet this passage is remarkable, for it seems that Socrates, while engaged in his astronomical researches, presumably in a part of the school open to the sky, somehow got himself into a position that allowed a gecko to defecate on him. Aristophanes' audience could easily understand how this happened and appreciate the full significance of Aristophanes' joke.

The gecko that is involved here is almost certainly the so-called Turkish gecko (*Hemidactylus turcicus*), a nocturnal creature that lives in the roofs, crevices, eaves, and walls of buildings.³ The most striking feature of this gecko, however, is its back,

1. There is no indication that Strepsiades fails to understand either of the student's designations for the creature, or that for him at least ἀσκαλαβώτης and γαλεώτης denote anything other than the common spotted gecko.

2. For a discussion of ὁδός and περιφορά in astronomical contexts, see K. J. Dover, *Aristophanes "Clouds"* (Oxford, 1968), ad loc. These words do not seem to have technical meaning here.

3. For general discussion of various species of geckos, see F.-W. Henkle and W. Schmidt, *Geckos: Biologie, Haltung und Zucht* (Stuttgart, 1991); C. Mattison, *Lizards of the World* (London, 1989); H. Seuffer, *Geckos* (Minden, 1985); revised English edition, *Keeping and Breeding Geckos* (Neptune, NJ, 1991).

which is speckled with light spots that resemble a field of stars.⁴ The student's account, as interpreted by the audience, would suggest that Socrates, while plotting the course of the moon against the background stars, was led toward the starry gecko. Confused or astonished, he opens his mouth. The word κεχηνότος ("gaping") is commonly used to indicate eager expectation about an event or discovery (the γνώμην μεγάλην of which Socrates was deprived).⁵ Thus, the point of the joke, which is richly appreciated by Strepsiades (174), is that Socrates' seemingly brilliant observation of a new constellation is nothing more than the inability to recognize a gecko when he sees one, and to get out of the way of its falling excrement.⁶

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4. Ovid derives the gecko's name, *stellio*, from this striking feature (*Met.* 5.460–61): *aptumque colori / nomen habet variis stellatus corpora guttis*.

5. LSJ, s.v. χάσκω, 2.

6. I am grateful to my colleagues and friends, John Rauk and Philip Gorman, for their helpful comments and suggestions. I owe special thanks to my fourth-semester Greek students, whose curiosity and enthusiasm for Aristophanes led to these observations.

ΠΟΛΛΗ ΑΓΡΟΙΚΙΑ: RUDENESS AND IRONY IN PLATO'S *GORGIAS*

Plato's vivid mimesis of apparently trivial verbal interactions is often ignored in scholarly accounts. In the *Gorgias*, an examination of Socrates' manners, good or bad, and the way εἰρωνεία or irony functions in his confrontation with two different but equally refractory opponents will demonstrate the link between Socrates' convictions and his dialectical technique.¹ The social dynamics of courtesy and rudeness also help to explain and may even justify behavior by Socrates that has seemed rude to some and certainly is uncharacteristically aggressive and direct.²

Polus, characterized from the beginning as rude and cynical, is treated more severely than almost any other interlocutor in Plato; and, in the process of bringing him to heel, Socrates uses a particularly stinging sort of teasing. Callicles, who appears well-mannered in the beginning, is eventually subjected to an equally painful treatment, as Socrates pulls him through a lengthy refutation of his amoralist thesis. Because Callicles displays greater social sensitivity than Polus, and in particular because he is himself a master of ironic and parodic discourse, his duel with Socrates illuminates the mingling of mockery and seriousness in Socratic irony.

Polus begins (*Grg.* 461C4) by accusing Socrates of πολλή ἀγροικία ("complete crudeness") for having embarrassed Gorgias in the preceding argument. Ἀγροικία, being crude or "countrified" in behavior, as opposed to "citified" (ἀστεῖος), suggests a naïveté that leads one to violate the standards of polite intercourse. Socrates' reply

1. See Vlastos 1991, 21–29 on the historical development of the terms εἰρωνεία and irony. I will use "eironeia" or "ironic" (see discussion pp. 51–52 below) to distinguish the modern word from its Greek ancestor.

2. See Kauffman 1979 and later Arieti (1991, chap. 5; 1993). Arieti does not cite the article by Kauffman. Arieti argues that we see Callicles moving from friendliness and courtesy to surly rudeness; and this reaction is directly provoked by the rather cruel jibes directed at him by Socrates.