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MIDWIFERY AND THE *CLOUDS*

Julius Tomin[1] has recently questioned the new orthodoxy, stemming from Burnyeat's impressive article,[2] that Socratic midwifery is not genuinely Socratic. I understand that many will feel the need to question Burnyeat's position, but I am unhappy that Aristophanes' comedy has once again been thought to give support to the view that Socrates had been known as an intellectual midwife. Thus my response will concentrate on our understanding of *Clouds*, and in particular on the key passage at 135ff.

Some preliminary remarks about the issue may be helpful. It is counter-productive to insist on a choice between just two possibilities: the identification of the intellectual midwife described by Plato (*Tht.* 149a–151d) with the historical Socrates, and his identification with Plato. We must surely bear in mind the possibility that Plato had invented the midwife analogy as an aid to the understanding of the historical Socrates, *but* as a result of his own teaching experience. Those who find the analogy particularly appropriate to their own view of Socrates do not have to insist that it was used in his own lifetime, nor that he applied it himself. The onus of proof would seem to lie with those who regard the analogy as totally inappropriate for Socrates, since material on Socrates' general character and conduct seems to have been fairly authentic even in dialogues like the *Symposium* and *Phaedo* where much of the doctrine attributed to Socrates cannot safely be regarded as Socratic. Plato was able to use chief speakers other than Socrates wherever he intended to present material which seemed alien to the spirit of the man he remembered, and in any case the doctrinal content of the *Theaetetus* could have been effectively presented without any use whatsoever of the recurrent midwife-theme.

A further way in which one may avoid extreme positions is by acknowledging that the midwife analogy is appropriate to some, but not all, of Socrates' activities. The destructive side of Socrates was visible in his interrogation of would-be experts, and we do not expect him to be practising midwifery on Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Protagoras, and so on. A dialogue like the *Protagoras*, however, shows us a tremendous contrast between the way in which Socrates tackles young men like Hippocrates and the way in which he sets about refuting those who wish to teach the lad. Some of the difference between the Xenophontic 'Socrates' and his allegedly 'early' Platonic counterpart may be explained by the fact that Plato's questioner is usually battling with the experts, while Xenophon's is inclined to be helping his friends to an understanding of correct conduct. The midwife analogy is supposed to apply only to Socrates' dealings with the young – those young enough to be 'pregnant', and needing encouragement and assistance at the 'birth'.

The midwife analogy attracts special attention because of the minute detail in which the comparison is followed up, and because it recurs so often in the *Theaetetus* (149aff., 157cd, 160cff., 184ab, and 210b–d). When Socrates is compared with Daedalus, Marsyas the satyr, a stinging sea-creature, or a gad-fly[3] we are less inclined to quibble about the simile's appropriateness, or to bother about whether the

[1] 'Socratic Midwifery', *CQ* 37 (1987), 97–102.

[2] 'Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration', *BICS* 24 (1977), 7–16.

[3] *Euthphr.* 11b–e, cf. 15b; *Symp.* 215bff.; *Meno* 80a–c; *Ap.* 30e; one might also compare the Thracian-doctor theme at *Charm.* 156d–158c, 175e–178b.

comparison is Plato's own or not. Their validity is felt to be less questionable because they occur in works which are thought to have preceded the *Republic*, whereas the *Theaetetus* is usually dated after 369 B.C. Why did it take Plato so long to introduce his readers to such an important analogy, which allegedly revealed the theory behind Socratic 'teaching'? Had he had no previous use for it?[4]

The presumption that the analogy was first used by Plato after 369 B.C. is unsafe. There is not unanimous agreement that the events referred to in the opening laudatory dedication to Theaetetus[5] are the events of 369,[6] and, even if they are, this is not a *terminus post quem* for the dialogue as a whole. A different prologue was known to the anonymous commentator on the work,[7] one which made no reference to the wounded Theaetetus, beginning instead with a request to a slave to bring the book about Theaetetus (and no doubt continuing with remarks about the 'dramatic' form in which it had been written).[8] The existence of a second, briefer prologue in antiquity suggests, if it was genuine,[9] that there had at some time been some revision of the work. A revision is also suggested by the recurrent self-criticism early in the

[4] Plato's ability to make use of an analogy like this might depend crucially upon what he hoped to achieve in particular dialogues. Do we find earlier dialogues which would have benefited from it? It would need to be a work which illustrated Socrates' techniques for eliciting the ideas of young men of ability. It would have been most at home in the *Charmides*, which does in fact employ its own model for Socratic teaching, not unrelated to midwifery (Tomin, art. cit. 99–100), but not entirely compatible with it either. In any case the *Charmides* would have been overburdened by a second elaborate model; the *Meno* could not have used it for similar reasons. The *Theaetetus* deals with a young man of great ability (144ab), upon whom one might have expected the 'art of the midwife' to work. As an art which distinguishes true from false 'offspring' (150a9–c3, 150e6–7, 151c3–d3), it might have particular relevance to the topic of knowledge itself; but then it does not distinguish true from false *qua* midwife's art.

[5] Why the introduction is sometimes seen as a dedication to the Megarians I cannot understand; the dedicatee is on the stretcher.

[6] See H. Thesleff, *Studies in Platonic Chronology. Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 70 (Helsinki, 1982), pp. 154–5.

[7] ed. H. Diels and W. Schubart, *Berliner Klassikertexte* ii (Berlin, 1905), column 3.28ff. I refrain from assuming that this was the original prologue, or even that there had been a prologue originally. Euclides' claim to have checked his original recollection of the conversation with Socrates 'as often as I came to Athens' (143a3), itself in conflict with the imminence of Socrates' death at the end of the dialogue, sounds like an admission of frequent updating of the work. The other prologue may therefore be the product of an intermediate stage. Its function may have been to introduce the dramatic form of the work, expressing Plato's disenchantment with narrative form (as spoken by Socrates!), a disenchantment readily understood if Plato had recently written the bulk of the *Republic*. If Theaetetus had died in 369 B.C., then the occasion would have given Plato a motive for replacing the earlier dramatic introduction with a more appealing one, eulogizing Theaetetus.

[8] The fact that the spotlight falls upon the book must mean that some facet of the book is to be discussed. There would appear to be two possible reasons for the reference to the manner of recording the conversation: (i) that at the time this manner was not to be expected of Plato, or (ii) that it was not to be expected from Euclides. I find it improbable that *Tht.* in any version was the first dramatic dialogue, or that Plato was implying real aversion to the narrative form in any pre-*Republic* version (see n. 7), but in writing that work he may well have come to regret having begun it in narrative fashion. It may be a factor that Euclides probably wrote narrative dialogues (Thesleff, op. cit. pp. 59–60), but there is no guarantee that Euclides spoke the alternative prologue. Plato's middle-period public may have become used to narrative form, necessitating some explanation of the return to dramatic dialogue; that would place the alternative prologue late in the middle period, but earlier than *Phdr.* or the latter part of *Parm.* (137cff.).

[9] It is difficult to believe otherwise. The alternative prologue must have been earlier, since neither Plato nor his followers would have substituted so blunt a prologue, which anon. *Tht.* calls ὑπόψυχρος, for the extant one.

section on perception (162de, 164c–166d),[10] and possibly by the existence of long digressions such as the ethical one at 172b–177c and the one on false opinion at 187d–200c. It is not difficult to imagine an earlier, trimmer, more 'Socratic' *Theaetetus*, consisting of an introduction, rejection of definition in terms of a plurality of instances (cf. 146c–148b), the midwifery episode, some of the material on sensation and Protagorean theory (perhaps lacking most of 162–183, where Theodorus is principal interlocutor), the refutation of the equation of knowledge with right opinion, and the subsequent failure to amend that definition by requiring the addition of an account. Such a work would have had a greater resemblance to a 'Socratic' definition-dialogue.[11] It could have been written in the 380s, thus explaining any alleged corroborations of the midwifery-theory in Xenophon.[12] I am not prepared to assume that such an *Ur-Theaetetus* had existed, but we know too little about Plato's methods of composition and 'publishing' to be able to assume that no version of the work appeared before 369 B.C. The other prologue is likely to have preceded the extant one (see n. 9), and the argument for a post-369 date is based entirely upon the extant prologue. Stylistic considerations do not demand so late a date.

Problems of dating also bedevil our assessment of the evidence of *Clouds*, since the revised extant version cannot reliably be dated. It would, however, be difficult to believe that it was written more than eight years after the original performance in 423 B.C., because it was in the nature of old comedy to satirize the contemporary scene. The version satirizes politicians such as Hyperbolus, and the dramatic productions of the immediate post-*Clouds* period. Thus, if one finds there an allusion to Socratic midwifery, one would not have to insist that Socrates was known publicly as an intellectual midwife by 423 B.C., but one would probably be obliged to assume that he was known as such by 415. If that was not known, then the allusion would have been wasted on Aristophanes' audience; if it was known, then one would have to explain how Plato can depict Theaetetus' surprised reaction to the midwifery idea in 399 B.C., just before Socrates' trial (210d).

I must preface my remarks on *Clouds* 135ff by some discussion of Socrates' mother. I do not find it difficult to believe that she had acted as a midwife, nor even that her name had been Phaenarete, 'astonishingly appropriate' though it is. What I want to question is whether there was any class of professional midwives in Athens at this

[10] This self-criticism views some of the tactics employed by Socrates earlier as δημηγορία (162d), πιθανολογία (162e), and more importantly ἀντιλογία, which is here and elsewhere associated with pursuing argument κατὰ τὸ ὄνομα (164c7, 166c1; *Rep.* 454b6) and with same/different puzzles (166bc, *Rep.* 454b–d, *Phdr.* 261de). *Antilogic* comes under attack at *Phd.* 90bc (cf. 101e) and is treated sarcastically at *Lys.* 216a, so that Plato could not have employed its tactics without reservation after the early middle period. If the criticism of these tactics were indeed a later addition, then the earliest version would have to have been pre-middle-period; our comparative passages suggest a late-middle-period revision, probably coinciding with the need to use *Tht.* as a plank in the Academy's *Rep.*-based education-programme: introducing the accomplished mathematician (*a*) to dialectic, and (*b*) to his present unfamiliarity with knowledge proper. That programme is continued by *Sph.* and *Plt.*, which introduce (among other things) more advanced dialectical methods.

[11] Such dialogues tend to be briefer than the extant *Tht.*, and to exhibit no major digressions. They begin with one or more instances of the definiendum, proceed to an attempted definition which fails to capture the *merit* which must attach to it ('the God-loved', 'a sense of shame', 'endurance', 'perception'), and move onto a seemingly more fruitful discussion where the thoughts of 'Socrates' or a third party play a significant role (*Euthphr.* 12a–d, *La.* 194c, *Chrm.* 161bc, *Tht.* 201cd).

[12] Hence the postulation of an early version would be sufficient to allow one to believe that X. *Symp.* is indebted to (*Ur-*)*Tht.* for the notion of Socratic match-making, avoiding Tomin's criticism on this score (pp. 100–1).

time. Even if there had been, Plato's term μαῖα could scarcely identify a woman's profession. It was a delightfully non-technical term, though used quite obviously in the sense of an attendant-at-birth at *Lysistrata* 746, where a reluctant colleague of the heroine feigns labour in order to return home. Even here the words οἴκαδε μ' ὡς τὴν μαῖαν...ἀπόπεμψον suggest that the lady who performs the service could be a member of the would-be patient's household, perhaps even a slave.[13] That an experienced female attendant was expected to be at the birth may be seen also from Euripides' *Electra* and *Ion*.[14] One would gather from Plato that the most difficult part of their duty was the cutting of the umbilical cord[15] (unless the match-making claim is to be taken seriously, 149d10); and we gather from Clytemnestra in the *Electra* that they also looked after cleanliness. Few women who had been through child-birth would have been totally unsuitable for the task, hence Clytemnestra's surprise that none of the neighbouring women had been sufficiently *friendly* to attend her. The reason why the term is non-technical, being used to address mothers, foster-mothers, and old women in general,[16] is that the task was non-technical. A mother could be expected to be present at her daughter's labour in order to comfort her,[17] and may well have performed the duties of the 'midwife' at times. Many terms of a more technical nature are to be found in the medical literature, but these tend to be role-terms rather than indications of a profession.[18] If there is any truth at all behind Hyginus' story of Hagnodice (*Fab.* 274), then nothing remotely akin to a female obstetrician was known in Athens prior to the late fourth century.[19]

The status of a μαῖα is important. If Socrates' mother had performed an unusual and highly-skilled service, then it was likely to have been alluded to; he was likely to have been known as the 'midwife's son', and to have attracted comparison with a midwife. Otherwise the comparison would only have been made by somebody concerned to find the right model for his teaching, and there would have been no great

[13] On slaves as midwives in antiquity see S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York, 1975), pp. 191–2. It is perhaps easier to envisage slaves performing such services for Athenian women, than to suppose that the latter would be readily available to treat slaves.

[14] *El.* 1128–33, *Ion* 948–9.

[15] It is dangerous, however, to assume from this humorous passage that midwives would themselves have considered this to be more important than the comfort and advice which they gave both to those in labour and perhaps to women experiencing other problems peculiar to their sex. To an extent the role of a female in cutting the cord is confirmed by the use of the feminine article with the noun ὀμφαλητόμος, whose most important occurrence for our purposes is at Hp. *Mul.* 1.46. There the writer attributes many instances of the failure of the chorion to emerge to the ignorance (ἀμαθία) of the female cord-cutter, who severs the umbilical cord before the appearance of the after-birth and fails to retain the end of the cord. The term suggests that some 'midwives' *did not know what they were doing*, rather than that they lacked some special obstetric knowledge. Gentle traction applied to the cord is nowadays used to ensure the emergence of the afterbirth with minimum problems. If it had been normal to employ professional midwives for the delivery of a child, then one might have expected it to be common knowledge among them that the cord should not be allowed to disappear.

[16] See *H.Dem.* 147, Ar. *Eccl.* 915, E. *Alc.* 393, *Hipp.* 243; a referee kindly points out that the term ἰατρός is also not particularly suggestive of a distinct profession, and that one cannot assume the existence of a recognizable professional group of ἰατροί in the Athens of 420 B.C. (whatever the term 'profession' could have meant if applied to the period). But if there is any doubt about the existence of a profession of doctors, how much more doubt ought there to be about a profession of midwives, in so far as they would have had to offer their services to a sex with a tradition of mutual self-help and comparatively little financial means.

[17] See E. *Alc.* 317–19.

[18] See P. Herfst, *Le Travail de la femme dans la Grèce ancienne* (Utrecht, 1922), p. 55.

[19] See S. B. Pomeroy, 'Teknikai kai Mousikai', *AJAH* 2 (1977), 51–68, especially 58–60.

humour to be elicited from references connecting Socrates with midwife-like operations. Even Plato, it seems, was not so much concerned that Phaenarete was a midwife, but rather that she was a jolly good one (149a1–2).

In these circumstances there is no way in which the audience would have taken the reference to a brain-wave miscarrying at *Clouds* 137–9 as being in any way connected with Socrates' mother. Only if Socrates had himself acquired the reputation of an idea-midwife would the audience have seen the 'miscarriage' notion as being related to the real-life Socrates. Socrates has not yet appeared in the play, and the brain-wave has not been associated with one of his 'obstetric' patients. Thus only an exceptionally famous connexion with midwifery could have caused Socrates to be brought to mind purely by the mention of a miscarried idea. Socrates would already have to have been widely known as an intellectual midwife, presumably of the sort described in the *Theaetetus*.

Unfortunately *Clouds* 137 does not suggest *intellectual* midwifery at all, for such midwifery terminates in discovery; miscarriage prevents discovery (150e4). The miscarried brain-wave of 137 is already 'discovered' (ἐξηυρημένη), so that the line which allegedly alludes to Socratic midwifery (rather obliquely) by the single word ἐξήμβλωκας simultaneously obscures that allusion by another word. The φροντίς which miscarried was not an idea, but a *plan being executed.* Socrates has asked Chaerephon how many flea's feet a flea can jump, and Chaerephon (cf. 831) had made flea-slippers out of wax, and *was then measuring* (imperfect, 152) the distance in flea-feet with flea-slippers. One can quite understand how such a delicate experiment could be upset by the sudden pounding on a door, and one should not be misled by the φροντ- term (used for its special relevance to the φροντιστήριον) into imagining that it is some mental process which has gone astray.[20] Furthermore it is not some young pupil of Socrates (the natural 'obstetric' patient) who has suffered the miscarriage, but rather Socrates' co-cogitator Chaerephon; nor had Socrates played any recognizably 'obstetric' role. In short, if Aristophanes had alluded to Socratic midwifery at 137, then he had obscured the allusion in the same line and failed miserably to follow it through; all subsequent detail tends to detract from it. Perhaps he would not have minded this, once the audience had already laughed at the joke; but I am suggesting that they would not have done so, or not for the reasons alleged.

In our first encounter with the cogitorium on stage, was the poet trying to allude to known and previously ridiculed facets of Socrates' philosophical method? Or was he rather seeking to present a bizarre extension of the Presocratic use of biological analogy? If Socrates was already known as some kind of 'midwife', then he was presumably introducing his school with a variation on a familiar joke. If Socrates was not so known, the school is introduced with a particularly grotesque and unexpected metaphor at which the audience would instantly laugh; they would recognize it as the kind of nonsense which they would expect from philosophers, but without any reason for associating it with one rather than another. If one examines Socrates' entries one sees what Aristophanes would favour; at both 223ff. and 627 the humour is created by use of the unexpected. The former case may be called 'burlesque', in that the bizarre language relates to known other-worldly traits in the person parodied; 627

[20] The next φρόντισμα (155) turns out to be a statement of doctrine rather than a theory or discovery, while the final brain-wave in the series is again a technical operation (177–9); when these facts are added to the fact that thought-processes cannot miscarry once the discovery has been made, we have strong evidence that the φροντίς at 137 was never meant to indicate just an intellectual activity.

begins with an oath that not even an audience familiar with Socrates' goddesses could have expected. The oath may have been related to Presocratic thought,[21] as also to Socrates' penchant for unusual oaths,[22] but it is unexpected nevertheless. There is a similar effect when Strepsiades enters and swears by Mist at 814. Thus we might have expected the cogitorium to be introduced with a new and original joke rather than with familiar humour.

There is a further argument, perhaps more damning, which jeopardizes any attempt to see the intellectual midwife in the *Clouds*. This is the argument from missed opportunity. At 478–80 Socrates uses slightly odd language when considering the technical means by which he will attempt to teach Strepsiades; the latter thinks that he is about to be treated like a city under siege. The humour would certainly not have been reduced if Socrates had used obstetric language, and if Strepsiades had deduced that he was going to be delivered of a child. The context would have been far more apt for an allusion to Socratic midwifery than 137. More telling is 694ff. Here Strepsiades is actually confined to bed in order that he may devise his own solutions to his problems: quite the right context in which to be delivered of his own intellectual offspring. He even undergoes considerable discomfort (699–725). But when there is some response on the part of his reproductive organs (734), there is no hint that he is bringing anything to birth. He receives advice from Socrates which might be compared with that of the midwife (740–5, 761–3), and it even involves the *severance* of thought (740); but though the thought is supposed to journey out of the body into the air (761–2), the cord must remain uncut (763). The scene is ideal for a parody of Socratic midwifery, but it fails to eventuate. This failure ought to be explained by all who claim that Socrates was already known as an intellectual midwife at the time of the play. One could of course suggest that 699ff. was from the original version, while 135ff. belonged to the revised play, though the reverse is probably true.[23] Or one could claim that the obstetric references once found at 694ff. had been excised in the

[21] See K. J. Dover, *Aristophanes, Clouds* (Oxford, 1968), *ad loc.*, for the possible Pythagorean connexion. Other possible Presocratic influences are Anaximenes and the ever-present Diogenes of Apollonia.

[22] One thinks primarily of the Socratic oath 'by the Dog', though not confined to Socrates; this oath is found in a particularly unusual form at *Gorg.* 482b5. Lucian has 'Socrates' swear by the plane tree (*Vit. Auct.* 16, cf. *Phdr.* 230b), but he may be imitating the unusual oaths of the *Clouds*.

[23] On the two versions of the play see now T. K. Hubbard, 'Parabatic Self-Criticism and the Two Versions of Aristophanes' *Clouds*', *C.Ant.* 5 (1986), 180–97. The parabasis assumes that the play is substantially the same as that which had previously been presented (though Hubbard, art. cit. 184, is instructive), and one can assume that there had been comparatively little revision up to that point. After the parabasis (i) the audience's interest needed to be maintained by changes in the plot, and (ii) substantial popularizing must have been undertaken to avoid the fate of the first play: in particular the new play indulges in a host of vulgar tricks, probably plagiarized, which the parabasis said were foreign to the original version – mockery of physical characteristics (1237–8), violence on stage (1297ff.), incendiary conclusions, and presumably the use of a special phallus *in the scene in question* (734). Like the *kordax* (*V.* 1493), the play gives prominence to the gaping anus, verbally at 1083–1100, and perhaps directly when Right's cloak is removed at 1102–4. Whether Right, or, as Hubbard suggests (p. 190), Strepsiades, actually danced a *kordax*, cannot be known. Hypothesis I testifies that the extant *agon* is very different from the original one. Little material after the parabasis is clearly common to both plays, though 1417 is attested for *Clouds I* too. That would appear to confirm that there had been a father-beating scene in it, and those who wish to take seriously the connexion between the charges against Socrates and *Clouds* ought surely to postulate some such scene in the *performed* play. Also early, one suspects, is the seemingly parabatic material at 1115–30; while the huge gap and incomplete responsion between strophe at 700–6 and antistrophe at 804–13 suggest that the poet has reused lyrics around a reworked and expanded dialogue: *the scene in question*.

revision. But justice can only be done to Aristophanes by admitting that he had no knowledge of the midwife-role of Socrates up to and including the time of revision.

If we exclude the possibility that Aristophanes knew of some kind of Socratic midwifery, then we must either abandon the idea of a relationship between *Clouds* and the midwifery episode of the *Theaetetus*, or be content to postulate some Platonic 'debt' to the notion of brain-waves miscarrying. Certainly Plato knew the play well enough in at least one of its versions,[24] and the student's striking metaphor (taken out of context) might just have seemed to him to offer some insight into philosophic learning, Socratic or otherwise. However, Plato has worked out such a full theory of philosophic match-making, conception, pregnancy, miscarriage, and labour – adding to it the particularly odd idea of true and false embryos – that he must have passed far beyond any literary 'precedents'. It would mean nothing for the understanding of the passage that some germ of the theory had earlier been prompted by a line of Aristophanes.

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[24] *Ap.* 19bc, 23d, *Phd.* 70bc, 99b, *Euthd.* 277de, 285cd, *Rep.* 488e–489c; cf. *Crat.* 401b7–8, *Parm.* 135d5, *Plt.* 299b6–8, *Phdr.* 270a.