

Aristophanes, (approximately, 460-380 BCE), was an Athenian playwright who was widely popular in Athens. His plays parodied actual political figures in way that resemble today's sketch comedy genre, for example, "Saturday Night Live" or "Monty Python" skits. The reference below is taken from Ian Johnston's essay "On Satire in Aristophanes," which is the introduction to the translation of *The Clouds* by Aristophanes that we will be reading. The play was first produced in Athens in 423 BCE and first published in 417 BCE. Read the first three pages of Johnston's essay, from which the passage below is excerpted. Then read the questions that follow just beneath the excerpt. Be prepared to answer these questions in class tomorrow.

The ability to tell jokes well, however, is an enormous social asset, primarily because it's the quickest way to get the group's attention, to consolidate the feeling of a group as a group, and to transform any disunity or irritation into a pleasant, non-threatening, shared social experience. Many people, like myself, learn early in life that telling jokes or transforming potentially threatening situations into jokes is an enormously powerful survival tactic. If you can make someone who is threatening you laugh with you, then you have transformed the situation from one of danger to yourself into one of a shared moment of understanding of your common humanity.

1. Johnston refers to the "set-up" character, writing that in comedy shows like Abbott and Costello, it is the "set-up" character who is paid more than the actor who delivers the punch line. In *The Clouds*, which character is the "set-up" character?

2. In the passage above from Johnston's essay, he writes, "The ability to tell jokes well, . . . is the quickest way to get the group's attention." In the opening scene of *The Clouds*, how does Aristophanes get the audience's attention?