

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

TRANSLATED FOR MODERN PERFORMANCE BY

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TRANSLATORS' NOTE

Ten years ago, it would have been impossible to create the translation you are about to hear. Composed collaboratively by eight translators, writing over the past eight months from such sundry locations as South Africa, Tennessee, and California, the digital medium of 'cloud computing' was essential to our translation of one of the world's oldest comedies. Fifth-century Athens meets twenty-first century Silicon Valley. Aristophanes shakes hands with Google Docs.

From sitcoms to late-night talk shows to feature films, the majority of modern comedy is team-written. Collaborative composition suits comedy well. Comedy must cater to the majority: as spectators, then and now, we laugh with our fellow audience as much as we laugh at the comedy itself. Social composition is a natural extension of this principle. A writing-team and innovative cast blur the distinction between author and audience. Bad jokes are left on the (now digital) cutting room floor, and comedic timing is well honed long before opening night.

Aristophanes, however (the evidence suggests) composed his comedies alone. It boots little to ask whether his comedy would have improved from collaboration. Aristophanes' record of success and subsequent textual survival bear witness to the viability of his individual composition. Furthermore, from the translators' perspective, his unified text and the drama's narrative arc provide a much-needed structure for our otherwise piece-meal translation.

Thematically, the *Clouds* is the obvious Aristophanic comedy to perform in the modern academy. Featuring arguably Athens' most (in)famous character, Socrates, and skewering the excesses of intellectualism, the *Clouds* may make a modern academic audience feel oddly at home. Indeed, a number of its themes have returned to

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the fore of modern consciousness: a 'philosophical' academy is set against 'dogmatic' religion, a poor citizen is beset by calls from his creditors, and as a father and son fail to understand each other, their decisions lead to mutual ruin. Performing the *Clouds* in a university context, however, comes with no small irony. Aristophanes wrote for an Athenian audience that included intellectuals but was largely lay. The *Clouds* adopts an essentially external dramatic view of the academy—our glimpses within the walls raise more questions than they answer.

Aristophanes' characters are not as rigidly defined as the roles of *commedia dell'arte*, but their easily recognized traits help bridge the great yawn of time and space. The Greek protagonist Strepsíades, whose slippery disposition is captured in his name "Twister", is rendered in our translation as Shifty McThrifty from Modesto. A penny-wise farmer who marries rich, Shifty/Strepsíades' buffoonery is appealing to any society where rural collides with urban. Some types, however, have not fared so well. Strepsíades' son, Pheidíppides (our Diesel), was a caricature of an aristocratic youth, dedicated to the exclusively expensive (and therefore, as so often, super cool) sport of chariot racing. Though a modern polo player who maintained his own stable might have provided a closer socio-zoological analog, the comedic type would have little humor. To our rescue comes the MTV 'reality' series *Jersey Shore*, with its meat heads Michael "The Situation" Sorrentino and Ronnie Ortiz-Magro who represent quasi-ethnic, yet somehow stereotypically American, youths dedicated to the unreflective pursuit of cool. Replacing horses with cars, we translated Pheidíppides, "Frugal Horse", into the appropriately frugal (and macho) petroleum product, Diesel.

The contest between two speeches, or *dissoi logoi*, reflects in the original Greek version Aristophanes' awareness of the radical changes taking place in traditional Athenian education. The "sophists," those teachers of logic and rhetoric so thoroughly excoriated by Plato, had already for some time been wowing crowds and attracting private pupils (for a fee) by the time Aristophanes turned his comic and critical eye toward them in 423 BCE. Figures such as Gorgias, Protagoras, and Prodicus were teaching a new generation of Athenians to question old ethical shibboleths and manipulate the intricacies of language and argument for private interest. As tends to happen in the never-ending war between the generations, old-timers decried these developments and their attendant fads—sumptuous clothes, bad haircuts, sexual laxity, "foreign" influences—as a sad decline from the "good old days" when men were men, youngsters

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were well-mannered, and everyone cared for God and Country. The young, in turn, could view their elders as uncouth dinosaurs with no grasp of modern "sophistication" (derived ultimately from "sophist").

Aristophanes, however, was not such a crotchety traditionalist as to unduly glorify the halcyon days of the past. "Better Argument" (our "Straight Talk"), the representative of the old-guard, conservative form of education, has more than a whiff of "pervert" about him; despite his stuffy, proper exterior, he takes a keen interest in the goings-on of the boys' locker room. Ancient Athenian attitudes to pederasty were quite different from our own, but the effect then as now was to cast a skeptical light on the supposed purity of tradition. "Worse Argument" ("Subversive Speech"), on the other hand, translates more seamlessly as the flamboyant (and in our case, European) embodiment of all that is trendy, specious, affected, snobbish, and mercilessly avant-garde. We'll let you decide who wins the argument.

Adapted from program notes written by

Al Duncan and Matt Simonton
May 2010
Stanford, California

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Aristophanes' *Clouds* was first performed in 423 B.C. at the festival of Dionysus in Athens, where it was awarded third prize (out of three). But the Greek text which has been transmitted to our own day (and which we used for our translation) cannot be the script of the original play, since (in a part of the play we were forced to cut), Aristophanes in his own voice complains in the past tense about his play finishing in last place. The text we have must therefore be a revised version of the play circulated later by its embarrassed author; there is no evidence that Aristophanes' *Clouds* was ever given a second chance onstage. A reference to the comic poet Eupolis' play *Marikas* in the same passage makes it likely that the revised version was composed sometime after 421, when Eupolis' play was produced. The revision was apparently incomplete, since our text contains a reference to the politician Cleon, who died in 422, apparently still alive and well.

Attic Old Comedy (the fifth-century Athenian genre of which Aristophanes is the only practitioner any of whose plays survive complete) had a number of conventions, most of which we have abandoned in our production, but some of which we have kept. One of these was that all the roles were written for no more than four actors (one more than in tragedy) not counting the chorus, which explains Socrates' comically under-motivated haste to get himself offstage before the contest between Straight Talk and Subversive Speech in front of Shifty and Diesel. Another is a certain looseness about location, so that when the play opens on Shifty and Diesel sleeping in front of the McThrifty family home, we are meant to imagine that they are in fact inside. At times, Aristophanes enjoyed parodying the tragic *ekkyklema* or trolley that was used to transport before the audience the gory results of violent events that had to take place offstage. Another tragic innovation Aristophanes famously exploited for his own comic purposes in the *Clouds* was the *mekhane* or crane used to bring gods onstage in a suitably grand manner. Although

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none of our actors wear the masks that were characteristic of all Athenian drama, nor the paunches that were characteristic of Old Comedy, we have retained the equally characteristic comic *phalloi*.

The original play follows a typical Aristophanic plot-structure, in which the resolution of the problem set up at the beginning of the play (here, whether Shifty is going to be able to persuade Diesel to go to Socrates' school and there get the education that will allow him to clear his father's debts) occurs not at the end of the piece but somewhere near the middle. After achieving his chief aims, the comic hero is then at leisure to mock his enemies—in the *Clouds*, Shifty's two creditors, in scenes we were forced to cut from the play because of its extraordinary length. The play is unusually long partly because it contains a double dose of another typical feature of Aristophanes' plays, the *agon* or contest between two sides of an argument (Straight Talk vs. Subversive Speech, and later Shifty vs. Diesel). The original play also contained two *parabases*, in which the comic playwright speaks to his audience *in propria persona*—but we have had to cut both of these.

To many, the *Clouds* is interesting chiefly because of its portrayal of the philosopher Socrates, a depiction which is at odds with that presented by both Plato and Xenophon, both in general (the Platonic Socrates never accepts money for his services) and in detail (the Socrates of the Republic knows little about the technicalities of metre, and that little at second hand). In the *Apology*, Plato's version of his teacher's defense speech at the trial that would lead to his condemnation to death, Socrates complains that because of 'the play by Aristophanes' he is portrayed as someone who 'inquires into things below the earth and in the sky and makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger'. But any attributions of responsibility to Aristophanes for the death of Socrates are thrown into doubt by the twenty-four year period that intervened between the comedy and the trial, years that included a brief reign of terror by an oligarchic junta that included a number of Socrates' former students.

The political perspectives of a poet as constantly facetious and restlessly parodic as Aristophanes are always hard to pin down, and rarely more so than in the *Clouds*. In the contest between Straight Talk and Subversive Speech, for example, it is hard to decide which is the more ridiculous, the former's moralistic encomium of a pedophilic past or the latter's irresponsible urging of an unscrupulous hedonism underwritten only by casuistry. At the same time, the general ethical direction of the plot, in which Shifty learns to rue the day he tried to

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cheat his way out of debt, may seem clear, and the *Clouds*, so often the arbitrators of the play's moral contests, seem to have revealed themselves by the end of the play to be defenders of a traditional morality and the traditional gods. Such a clear moral position, though, seems to have been intolerable to our elusive playwright, and there is certainly little to sanction or admire in the pathologically violent action Shifty takes at the end of the play.

Last year, this director appeared on stage denouncing foreigners, railing against homosexuals, and attempting to purchase two underage sex-slaves dressed up as cats. Admittedly, this was all part of my role in SCIT's inaugural production of Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, but if the first concern of any director of Attic Old Comedy should be to offend everybody, I may be felt to be uniquely qualified for the job. Any offense caused by our modernizations of these products of the world's first ever democratic culture is far from senseless, however, but stems from a conviction that the most unrestrained and riotous freedom of speech is a pre-condition for a flourishing democratic society even in modern times. In a university which places laudable emphasis on mutual respect, we think it may be salutary to introduce a little mutual mockery, mockery in which no position, even one's own, is spared the exacting examination of the comic gaze. Because as Aristophanes and Socrates both knew, sometimes the first step on the journey to knowledge is to learn to laugh at oneself.

Adapted from program notes written by

*James Kierstead
May 2010
Stanford, California*

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THE ORIGINAL COMPANY

PLAYERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

| | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Shifty McThrifty | Matthew Loar |
| Diesel McThrifty | Foivos Karachalios |
| Students | Paul Gowder (Leader), Minh Nguyen, Jose Armando Perez-Gea, and Vince Tomasso |
| Professor Socrates | Tomer Perry |
| Clouds | Bianca Carpeneti, Federica Carugati, Maxine Holland, and Alana Waksman (Leader) |
| Straight Talk | Hans Wietzke |
| Subversive Speech | Matt Simonton |

PRODUCTION

| | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Director | James Kierstead |
| Producer, Props Mistress | Carolyn MacDonald |
| Costumer | Lisa Lowe |
| Choreographer | Nikita Vashi |
| Musical/Tech. Director | Al Duncan |
| Musician | C. J. Jameson |
| Set Designer | Sharon Beltracchi |
| Set Technician | Eileen Mazzochette |
| Lighting | Dan-El Padilla Peralta |

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ACT I

The McThrifty Family Home

[As the lights go up, Shifty and Diesel appear, lying on bean-bags. Although they are in front of the doors, the scene should be understood to be taking place within the house. Diesel is sound asleep; Shifty is tossing and turning. After a short while he sits up and speaks].

SHIFTY

Well fuck me! Lord Almighty, what a night! It's never-ending! Will I ever see the light of day? I heard the rooster crow some time ago. And this young man here doesn't stir from his sleep at all, but farts away the morning. So if that's the way it is, let's all wrap ourselves up and snore all day. *[He screws up his face in imitation of Diesel; tosses and turns for a while; then sits back up again].* But I can't sleep, because my poor ass is being bitten by expenses, car insurance, debts - all thanks to this son of mine. He has a fancy leather jacket, and porschizes, ferrarizes - even lamborghinizes in his sleep! And boy, am I done for when the next credit cycle comes around. The interest just keeps piling up. Well, I'd better have another look at my my credit card statements, so I can figure out what I owe and calculate the payments. *[Takes iPhone out of his pocket.]* Let's see, what do I owe? A hundred grand to Bank of America - a hundred thousand dollars to the bank?! What did I do with that? Ah, that's when I bought the Jaguar. I wish I'd just *jacked off* instead. *[Puts iPhone back in his pocket.]*

DIESEL

[talking in his sleep] Dude, you cut me off! Stay in your own lane!

SHIFTY

[Approaching Diesel] This, this is the great curse he's cast on me! Even when he's asleep, he's dreaming under the influence.

DIESEL

How fast does this baby go? Let's let her rip!

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SHIFTY

[Standing right next to Diesel now] You're ripping off your old man plenty. But what debt ran me over after Bank of America? Thirty grand to Mastercard for the leather interior and twenty-inch rims!

DIESEL

Here's the keys, bro: Fill her up, the tank's almost empty.

SHIFTY

[Right in Diesel's face] That's more than I can say for my bank account, since I had to mortgage the house to pay for your gas bills!

DIESEL

[Waking up] Yo, for real, Dad, why are you bitching and tossing and turning all night long?

SHIFTY

[Still in his face] The debt-bugs keep biting me.

DIESEL

Come on, bro, let me sleep a little.

SHIFTY

Go ahead, sleep - but bear in mind, these debts will be on your head some day! Ay yai yai! *[he turns away]* If only OKCupid had crashed before it paired me up with your mother! *[downstage, to the audience]* I had the sweetest life out in the country: dirty, unshaven, lying around wherever, milkin' the cows and shuckin' the corn. But then I married the niece of John D. Rockefeller the Third, even though I was a country boy and she was from the big city, stuck up, spoiled, zsa-zsa-gaborified! And when I married her, I laid her down on our wedding night smelling of booze, pig shit, old leather and my savings account, but she of perfume, lace, french kissing, spending dough, stuffing her face, Victoria's Secret and Sex and the City. Now, I'm not saying she's lazy: She does her fair share of cleaning. Damn right she does - sometimes I just have to say to her *[pulls empty pockets inside out]*, 'Woman, you're cleaning me out!'

Then after that, when we had this son here *[Stands near Diesel again]*, my good wife and I had one hell of a fight over his name. She kept wanting to put cars into it: like Wheel-iam or Tyre-one or Chevy; but I wanted to give him the name of his grandpa, Cheapskate McThrifty. We fought for a long time, but eventually decided to give him the name - Diesel. And she would take the baby in her arms and cuddle him and say 'When you're all grown up you'll drive your car to the city wearing a leather jacket just like your uncle John D. Rockie'. And I would say, 'When you take your beer-cans in to trade for cash, you'll be wearing a jean-vest, just like your father'. But he never listened to a word I said, but poured auto-erotica all over my savings. But now *[turns away]*...after thinking all night...I've found a single way out of this that's amazingly awesome! And if I can persuade this guy here of it, it'll save my

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ass. But first I have to wake him up. Now what's the nicest way to do it?
Let's see...Diesel! Little Dieselito!

DIESEL
What, Dad?!

SHIFTY
Come give your old dad a hug.

DIESEL
OK... [*gets up and gives Shifty a hug*] What's the situation? [*gestures to Jersey Shore washboard abs*]

SHIFTY
Son, do you love your old man?

DIESEL
Sure Dad - like my Jag.

SHIFTY
Don't ever mention that car in front of me! It's the source of all my troubles.
But if you really love me from your heart, my son, do what your old man says.

DIESEL
Do what you say about what?

SHIFTY
Change your ways ASAP, and go and do this course I recommend.

DIESEL
Well, come on - tell me what it is.

SHIFTY
You're listening, right?

DIESEL
I'm listening for f... ferrari's sake.

SHIFTY
Well, then, pay attention. See the school in this brochure?

DIESEL
Yeah. What is this, Pop, for reals?

SHIFTY
This is the Center for Universal MetaStudies and Heuristic OmniTechnology.
Guys live there who claim that the universe is all one big ball of string being
knit into mittens. These guys can teach you how to talk your way out of
anything, whether right or wrong, but only if you give them cold, hard cash.

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DIESEL

Who are they?

SHIFTY

I don't know the exact name. They're wonderful post-... meta-..., de-... constructionalists.

DIESEL

Blech! Yo, those guys are tools! You mean those pasty posers who can't afford shoes, like Dr. Socrates— [*Diesel starts to get dressed to leave*]

SHIFTY

Hey, shut up! Don't say anything dumb. If you care at all about your dad's daily bread, let go of the steering wheel and become one of these guys.

DIESEL

No, not even for a new leather interior. [*Puts his leather jacket on*].

SHIFTY

C'mon, I'm begging you, my dear boy, go and learn!

DIESEL

What classes do you want me to take?

SHIFTY

They claim that they offer two kinds of discourse: Straight Talk, whatever it is, and Subversive Speech. They claim that one of these two discourses, the Subversive, comes out on top even when he's saying things that just ain't right. So if you learn this bad-boy kind of arguing for me, I won't have to pay even a single penny of the debts I now owe because of you!

DIESEL

As if! I don't have time to spend all day indoors and shit—I gotta keep my tan! [*Put his shades on*].

SHIFTY

No, goddamnit, you won't burn through any more of my money if I can help it - you or your horse-powered Ferrari! I'll throw you the hell out before that!

DIESEL

Well, uncle Rockefeller won't let me lose my horse-power. [*Picks up his car-keys*] I'm gonna split and I don't give a damn what you say. [*Exit Diesel*]

SHIFTY

I'm not gonna take this lying down! By God I'll just have to go to that institute and learn stuff myself! I'm a senile old man who needs a brand new bag - I've got to get going. [*He runs off; lights go down*]

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ACT II

The Center for Universal Meta-Studies and Heuristic Omni-Technology

[Lights go up before Shifty comes onstage]

SHIFTY

Why am I hanging back? Here I am at the Center for Universal Meta-Studies and Heuristic Omni-Technology. Why don't I just knock on the door? Hello!

STUDENT

[Opens the door] Who's there?

SHIFTY

Shifty McThrifty, from Modesto.

STUDENT

Go to hell! You're an idiot for banging on the door like a dumbass. You aborted our lecture!

SHIFTY

Forgive me! I'm from the hills! Please, tell me about this here abortion.

STUDENT

[Sticking nose up in the air and sniffing] I only talk to other students.

SHIFTY

C'mon—tell me. I'm a prospective of the department!

STUDENT

I'll tell you, but you have to keep it a secret. *[Comes out of the building, cautiously, closing doors behind him]* Professor Socrates just asked us how many flea-feet a flea jumps. You see, a flea just bit Professor Gumbrecht and landed on Socrates' head!

SHIFTY

How did he measure it?

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STUDENT

It was genius! He took the flea and dipped both of its feet in wax. He measured the distance with the little wax Ugg Boots.

SHIFTY

Goddamn, that's some fine thinkin'!

STUDENT

Well what do you say about this brain-wave?

SHIFTY

What? Come on, spill the beans!

STUDENT

Gumbrecht, of the Gnational University, asked him for his theory about whether gnats buzz through their mouths or through their buttholes.

SHIFTY

And what did he say about gnat?

STUDENT

He said that the gnat's intestine was narrow, and that by virtue of its narrowness the wind necessarily progressed straight to the aforementioned butthole; and that subsequently, since the ass itself had the property of hollowness, and was moreover situated adjacently to the sigmoid colon, it was made to resound by the sheer power of the exiting wind.

SHIFTY

So the ass of a gnat is like bag-pipes! Oh the intestinal intelligence, the lucky fuck! How easy it must be for a man who has inside knowledge of a gnat's insides to win a court case!

STUDENT

But just a few days ago he was robbed of a brilliant idea by a bat!

SHIFTY

What do you mean?

STUDENT

While he was tracking the course and orbit of the moon a bat shat onto his face from the roof.

SHIFTY

I would pay to see Professor Socrates with bat's poop in his eye.

STUDENT

And last night we didn't get any dinner.

SHIFTY

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Well I'll be damned. So what did you cook up in the end?

STUDENT

Instead of laying the table he laid down his MacBook and opened Wireshark and used it to hack into the stimulus funds.

SHIFTY

And here we are going gaga over Steve Jobs! Hurry up and open up the Center, quick as you can, and let me get a look at Professor Socrates! I want him to be my advisor! Open the door! *[Tries to force the doors open while Student tries to resist; eventually Shifty opens the door but both he and the Student then fall to the floor some distance apart. A trolley then comes out through the door; on it are the other Students, examining instruments and making notes on clipboards; dishevelled].* Holy shit! What sort of filthy hippies are these?

STUDENT

What are you gaping at? What do they look like to you?

SHIFTY

They look like a bunch of Gitmo detainees. *[The students get off the trolley and wander around looking at the ground attentively]* Why the hell are they all looking at the ground?

STUDENT

They're studying subterranean phenomena.

SHIFTY

Bullshit! They're examining their marijuana crop. Forget about it guys! I know where the good stuff is. But what are they doing so bent over?

STUDENT

They're recording the currents in the earth's mantle.

SHIFTY

And why are their brown eyes staring at the sky?

STUDENT

They're being taught ass-tronomy. But go on in so he doesn't find you out here.

SHIFTY

Not yet though, not till I give them a little something of my own. *[Thrusts his phallus forward once or twice]*

STUDENT

But they're not allowed to spend too much time outside.

SHIFTY

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Fuck me, what is this? Tell me.

STUDENT

This is astronomy.

SHIFTY

And what do you call this?

STUDENT

Earth studies.

SHIFTY

What's the point of that?

STUDENT

To, erm, study the earth.

SHIFTY

Oh, for individual property rights?

STUDENT

No, we study it, like, holistically.

SHIFTY

You sound so smart! What a democratical and serviceable contraptionism!

STUDENT

[Student Leader brings up a Google Maps on his iPad.] And here is a map of the world. Look, this is the San Francisco Bay.

SHIFTY

What are you talking about? I don't believe you, I don't see any gay-bars.

STUDENT

Dude, this it totally San Francisco!

SHIFTY

So where are all my homies in Modesto?

STUDENT

There! You can see the peninsula, stretched out long and thin. *[Tugs on his phallus]*

SHIFTY

Yeah, flattened in the 60s, by all the hippies coming to the Haight. But where's Russia?

STUDENT

Here it is, right here.

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SHIFTY

Damn, that's fucking close to Alaska! We should think about moving them a little farther away.

STUDENT

Not happening.

SHIFTY

By gum, you'll be sorry!

[Socrates appears on the scene, above.] But in any case who's that hanging around?

STUDENT

The man himself.

SHIFTY

What man?

STUDENT

[In a hushed, reverent tone] Professor Socrates.

SHIFTY

Hey Socrates! Can you holler at him for me?

STUDENT

Do it yourself. I'm busy. *[Exit, followed by other students]*

SHIFTY

Yoo hoo, Socrates! Socky-boy!

SOCRATES

Why are you calling me, you construct of social practices inscribed upon a body?!

SHIFTY

First of all, tell me what the hell you're doing?

SOCRATES

I'm walking on hot air and deconstructing the heavens.

SHIFTY

And you have to demolish heaven from an outpost in the sky, and not in the classroom?

SOCRATES

Yes! For I would not have observed the meteorological phenomena accurately unless I had done fieldwork in the air, reaching a thorough understanding of

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the intellectual context and so being able to conceptualize the ether. If I had remained in the classroom and attempted simply to observe them from the ground up, I would never have been able to do so. For the classroom environment desiccates my creative juices, my fluid intellect - and also the watercress.

SHIFTY

What are you talking about? Your intellect sucks the juices out of watercress?! Come on down, now, Socratty-watty, come down to my level, and teach me what I'm paying all this tuition for!

SOCRATES

[Comes down, faces Shifty] And what are you paying all this tuition for?

SHIFTY

To learn how to speak in court. I'm an innocent victim of repossession and foreclosure because of my compound interest, you see.

SOCRATES

How did you get into so much debt without realizing it?

SHIFTY

This *auto*-immune disorder has been *tire*-ing me out - it's hard to swallow. But give me one of your two types of argument, the one that'll get me off without paying anything back. Whatever price you ask, I swear I'll pay it - by God I will.

SOCRATES

What sort of deity are you swearing by? God won't get you very far around here.

SHIFTY

What do you swear by? The greenback, like on Wall Street?

SOCRATES

Do you really want to know the truth about God?

SHIFTY

Damn right I do.

SOCRATES

And to connect to the Clouds, our true deities?

SHIFTY

I sure do!

SOCRATES

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Have a seat [*motions towards a bean-bag chair; Shifty looks surprised*] Of course, we have gone beyond hierarchical school desk formations and now employ these sites for interactive learning.

SHIFTY

[*Sitting down on bean-bag*] Alright, I'm sitting...

SOCRATES

Now put on this blindfold.

SHIFTY

A blindfold? Professor Socrates, please don't haze me like those Greeks in Sigma Chi.

SOCRATES

Come on, we do this to all incoming freshmen! [*Going round behind Shifty and putting on the blindfold*]

SHIFTY

And why is this good for me?

SOCRATES

You'll become a power-point pro, a real high-class chatterbox, the cream of the crop. Just hold still.

SHIFTY

By God, you won't fool me. I don't want to get creamed!

SOCRATES

The old fart must keep quiet, listening to our prayer:
O Lord who art the shit, incalculable Air,
Bright Sun who art so lit, and Clouds who are so fair,
Who pack a thunderous hit, and lightning when you dare,
On yonder mountains sit, and to this thinker appear!

SHIFTY

No, please, not yet, not yet! Let my cover my hair!
Cali's not usu'lly wet—you caught me unprepared!

SOCRATES

If jungles are your fit, visit more arid air.
[*invoking Clouds*] For this old man please quit your mid-Pacific lair!
Although he's got no wit—please won't you have a care
To heed this holy writ, and answer to my prayer!

CHORUS

[*Sung to the tune of Jimmy Cliff's The Harder they Come*]
O Clouds, let's rise and show the neb'lous image
We sucked up from our Dad, the old Pacific

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On redwood-braided peaks of lofty mounts,
So that we may behold far-distant haunts.

For as long as the sun don't shine
We're going to sing and dance here, in time;
Because the harder you call, the lower we fall,
One and all.

SOCRATES

[Spoken as music plays quietly in the background]
O, most majestic Clouds, clearly you heard my call!
Hear all their voices loud, in holy-rolling thrall!

SHIFTY

[Stands up, impressed and frightened]
I give you all respect, your Honorses, a place apart,
and I can give an answer to your thunder - my own fart!
That's how much I quiver in their presence - quite a bit!
So whether now's the time or not - I've got to take a shit!

SOCRATES

Stop messing around, and stop acting like you're in one of those Greek comedies *[wink, wink]*. Silence! For something great, a swarm of gods, is stirring.

Chorus

[Sung]
Rainettes, let us form ourselves a rally
And get on down to bright Silicon Valley,
To see the geek-graced land of Steven Jobs,
Where inf'nite web-searches are being logged.

For as long as the sun don't shine
We're going to sing and dance here, in time;
Because the harder you call, the lower we come,
One and all. *[Song ends]*

SHIFTY

Jesus, Professor Socrates! I'm begging you—tell me who these chics are?
They're not Charlie's Angels, are they?

SOCRATES

Preposterous! They're clouds, goddesses and great for all of us without nine to five jobs. They make us theorists and critics and scientists! They give us –isms and –ologies!

SHIFTY

Ah hah! So that's why my heart went all oo-google-ee when I heard them singing! I already can't wait to compute subtlety, laser-dissect consciousness,

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

deconstruct structuralisms and understand understanding! I'm dying to see them right now up close—with nothing... um, in between us [*he means naked, nudge, nudge*], if it's alright.

SOCRATES

Then look over there! You didn't believe they were really goddesses, did you?

SHIFTY

Hells no—I thought they were all fog and cannabis smoke.

SOCRATES

'Hells no' you didn't know - but then again, how could you? You didn't know they gave out research grants to tons of academics, CNN pundits, Dr. Phils, emo trust-fund poets, rap video choreographers - all of us guys with the jet-setter, pie-in-the-sky mind-set. They support these bums because they all get high as clouds.

SHIFTY

Ah hah! So that's why Keanu Reeves got a part in "A Walk in the Clouds?" Cause I thought everyone knew that that guy couldn't act - but I know you knew that, Socrates. And the Rolling Stones' "Hey you, get off of my cloud"... it all makes sense now! And Cheech and Chong's "Up in Smoke" - so, basically, if you honor the Clouds, pretty soon you're poppin' Krystal in stretch Navigators.

SOCRATES

All because of these Clouds. Isn't that fair?

SHIFTY

But explain me this, then. If they really are clouds, why do they look like women? 'Cause those ones up there sure don't!

SOCRATES

Well then—what do they look like?

SHIFTY

I don't know really... they kinda look like giant wads of cotton candy.... But not at all like women, dammit. I mean—these clouds have... [*miming more feminine parts*] noses!

SOCRATES

Alright then—but answer just a few questions for me.

SHIFTY

Okay professor Socrates - go ahead and shoot.

SOCRATES

Have you ever looked up and seen some clouds that look like a mountain lion or a unicorn or a hawk or a rabbit?

SCIT TRANSLATION

SHIFTY

Of course - but what's the deal?

SOCRATES

Clouds can become anything they want!

So if they see an aging starlet

Opting for surgery over diet

—like Demi Moore chasing Ashton Kutcher—
they mock her boy-love by becoming a cougar.

SHIFTY

What if they catch sight of a man launching stealth-jets,

and starting whole wars just to line his own pockets,

even though as for WMDs, there ain't any?

I mean a real Rumsfeld or a Dick-eating Cheney?

SOCRATES

To expose them publically, the clouds immediately morph into hawks—or
snakes.

SHIFTY

Ah, I see! So the other day, one must have spotted a womanizer, a prostitute-
fucker, a serial liar, because I swear that I saw a cloud turn into a Tiger!

SOCRATES

And now - since they've seen Ryan Seacrest - they've all turned into women!

SHIFTY

It's an honor to meet you, goddesses! And now, my divine divas, help a guy
out, and let a great song rip—a real thunder-cracker.

CHORUS

[Sung to the tune of ABBA's Chiquitita]

Oh hello our emeritus friend,

you have mastered several degrees,

and you are also,

the best language-coach in legalese.

Tell us everything that you want,

you're our favorite Doctor Professor,

—Hawking is cool,

though we think he's only a guesser.

How you bumble round Palo Alto,

In your patchouli and old clothes,

and for us you're proud,

though you have no shoes for your toes. *[Song ends]*

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

SHIFTY

Holy cow, what a set of pipes on her! That was awesome—amazing—apotheo-sick!!!

SOCRATES

That's because they're the only real divinities: the rest are bullshit.

SHIFTY

C'mon now - doesn't the name Jesus H. Christ mean anything to you? I mean, he's Jesus, c'mon!

SOCRATES

What do you mean, Jesus? Don't be a fool - that was Mel Gibson.

SHIFTY

What the hell? Who's the truth, the way, and the light? Who structures the whole cosmos and gives the world meaning? Tell me that, first off.

SOCRATES

These Clouds do! And I'll teach you, with imposing proofs. *[Clears throat and gets in elenchus mode]* So, whenever you want to know something - to have true and clear meaning - who do you ask first? Wikipedia? Google? AskJeeves.com? That's Cloud-computing, my simple friend, and it couldn't happen without these goddesses. Tell me this: do you get six million answers in ten milliseconds when you visit AskJesus.com?

SHIFTY

Dammit! You argued that one real good. And to think I used to believe that Jesus would spell out all my answers in my alphabet soup! So, say that Cloud-computing gives our lives meaning and all... but what about the afterlife? If not Jesus, who is the way to heaven?

SOCRATES

These ladies here hold the keys to the pearly gates.

SHIFTY

How's that? You're a damned, un-American atheist!

SOCRATES

[Walking behind shifty toward the Clouds to demonstrate] Hardly! See, they don't just hold the keys—they are the gates themselves! Isn't heaven up in the sky? Well then, just like Tetris, these clouds, when they fill up with lots of water, slowly fall and are arranged to form giant, puffy skyscrapers for our souls.

SHIFTY

Okay.. who structures the clouds to form that eternal city in the sky? Isn't that Jesus playing cloud Tetris up in heaven?

SCIT TRANSLATION

SOCRATES

Not at all—it's all done by Dawkins now!

SHIFTY

Dawkins? Well, that rapes my brain with a silicon dagger! So Jesus is gone, and now instead Dawkins is in control? But you still haven't explained how these divine clouds can be regular clouds too. Where does thunder come from, for instance?

SOCRATES

Didn't you hear me saying earlier that when they're full of water, they fall into each other, Tetris-style? Well, that can't happen in silence—it's thunderous!

SHIFTY

Yeah, but c'mon, who's really gonna believe that?

SOCRATES

I'll teach you with something you can understand from your own experience. You've probably stuffed yourself with hot wings and Doritos at your annual Super Bowl party, right? But then, sure enough, you've got indigestion, and suddenly, a rumble grumbles through... *[touching Shifty's belly]*

SHIFTY

Hells yeah, I know what you're talking about! Man, it's crazy! It shakes me up, just like thunder. That barbecue sauce floats around and croaks something awful, all gentle at first, "gurgle, gurgle", but then it really lays it on, "guuuuurgggggle", and when I go take a shit, whooo wee! Man, then it really thunders, "KABOOOM!". Its just like these clouds!

SOCRATES

Consider this: you let out such great farts from such a teensy tummy. How could the boundless sky help it but to thunder greatly?

SHIFTY

Ah! So that's why the Mrs. always says my farts could split the sky in two! But where does lightning come from, then? It zaps us like bugs, and roasts any one who lives to tell about it like a s'more. Isn't that just God striking down those extorting executive assholes who play golf in a storm?

SOCRATES

What, seriously? You nincompoop! What next, speaking in tongues and faith-healing? If God really strikes assholes, then why isn't Bernie Madoff or Tim Geithner or Rush Limbaugh a charred pile of shit? On the other hand, why is God constantly striking his own steeples and minarets, yes, even our own illustrious Hoover tower, or even the redwoods on Mount Tam? Surely a redwood at least is not an asshole...

SHIFTY

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

I don't know - but you're sure good at arguing. Ok, then—what's a thunderbolt?

SOCRATES

When the Santa Ana winds rise up into the sky, they sometimes get trapped in these Clouds, just like a balloon. And thus, it necessarily follows, the wind breaks out from them in a violent “shhhroom” on account of the pressure disparity. It ignites spontaneously on account of the rushing force!

SHIFTY

Jesus! The same exact thing happened to me last Memorial Day! I was manning the grill and had put on some foot-long spicy franks. The skin on one was tough and got bloated up, so when I grabbed it with the tongs, the bastard popped like a zit, spitting grease in my eye. It burned my fucking face!

CHORUS

[Stepping forward one after another]

#1: You, a man with a great appetite for the wisdom that we bestow,
You'll be famous in Silicon Valley, with all America in tow,

#2: If you're mindful and a thinker and ready for the long hours
Of standing, and walking, and crawling on all fours

#3: If you don't mind the cold and can bear to tee-total,
With no Wheaties, no gym, or anything yokel,

#4: Then you'll learn how to get things, like any man who's smart,
To win in act, mind, and speech, by using war's art.

SHIFTY

Well if it's sleepless worry and a tough guy that's needed,
With a stomach that's iron and rarely well-fed,
Never fear, cause you've found the right guy
Who, when it comes to these things, you can easily ply.

SOCRATES

Then you really will hold no god before these we honor: Dawkins and the Clouds and the Tongue - these three?

SHIFTY

I'll tell any of them and all of them to talk to the hand! I won't go to church or donate to the Salvation Army - none of that!

CHORUS LEADER

Now tell us - don't be shy - what we can do for you? You won't have any bad luck if you honor and worship us and try to be right-minded.

SHIFTY

SCIT TRANSLATION

Your Honors - I just want this teensy-weensy thing, y'know, nothing big: I want to be the most persuasive speaker in America - by a long, long, long shot!

CHORUS LEADER

You got it - we can do that! So, from this moment on, nobody will win more major legal cases than you!

SHIFTY

No, no - no Supreme Court shit for me, thank you very much. That's not what I want. I just want to be shifty when it comes to the law—and get out from under the credit card companies and banks!

CHORUS LEADER

Whatever you desire—it'll be taken care of. What you're after isn't difficult. But, don't be shy. Dedicate yourself over to our ministers here.

Shifty

I believe you - I'll do these things! I have too - my credit has crunched me for those Beemers and Lamborghinis and this marriage that's fucked me!

[Sung to the tune of Cake's The Distance]

Now I give them this body of mine
for beating, starving, water-boarding all the time.
They can burn me, and freeze me, and do what they please
Make this man shit, make him fall on his knees.

If that's what it takes to get me out of this debt
Make me head honcho, make my speeches adept.
Daring, and blaring, with smooth legalese
I'll talk my way out, drink this life to the lees.
A living loophole, I'll fuck in fine print,
Make the banks sweat, that'll be my new stint.
A liar, a cheat, the freshest O.J.
Call me what you want, girl, you know it's okay.

You can grind me to pulp, but I won't go away
I've studied with the Thinkers, starting today.
You can grind me to pulp, but I won't go away
I've studied with the Thinkers, starting today.

CHORUS AND SHIFTY

'Cause he's/I've got the courage, he's/I've got the need
He'll/I'll know it all (know it all), know it all and he/I will be freed.
Cause he's daring, and blaring, with smooth legalese,
He'll/I'll talk his/my way out, drink this life to the lees.
He's/I've got the courage. (Oh yeah, oh yeah). *[Song ends]*

SHIFTY

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

What's next for me?

CHORUS

#2: All's for the best! For the rest of your life, you'll live the best of all possible lives with us.

SHIFTY

I'll really see all that someday?

CHORUS

#3: Indubitably! Throngs will set up tent villages around your home! They'll want to consult with you and talk about appeals and class action corporate suits - only stuff worthy of your intelligence.

CHORUS

[To Socrates]

#4: So give it a shot, give the old man a starter lesson in whatever you want. Set his mind in motion and test his IQ.

SOCRATES

[Walking around Shifty] Ahem: now, declare to me your traits like you would declare illegal goods or terrorists to a homeland security officer. This way, when I know them, I can draw up fresh plans to infiltrate and attack.

SHIFTY

What the hell? Are you planning to attack my cavities from behind?

SOCRATES

No... I just want to ask a few short questions. Do you have a good memory?

SHIFTY

Well shit, yes and no. If somebody owes me something, I've got a great memory. But if I'm the sad sack who owes somebody, I'm great at forgetting.

SOCRATES

Well then, are you a naturally eloquent speaker?

SHIFTY

Eloquent, no. Fraudulent, yes.

SOCRATES

How can you learn, then?

SHIFTY

Don't worry about it - I'll be fine.

SOCRATES

Alright, then, let's try this: when I throw you some smart piece of cosmology, snatch it up right away.

SCIT TRANSLATION

SHIFTY

What the hell? Am I supposed to eat wisdom, Kibbles-n-Bits style?

SOCRATES

[Aside] This guy's a first-class imbecile! I'm afraid that you, old man, need a good whoopin'. Tell me now—what would you do if someone punched you in the face?

SHIFTY

I'd get punched in the face. Then, after a little time had passed, I'd gather up some witnesses. And then right away I would take the whole thing to court!

SOCRATES

Alright then. It's getting hot in here... so take off all your clothes.

SHIFTY

Have I done something wrong?

SOCRATES

No, but we make it a habit to be naked inside.

SHIFTY

Hey man, I'm no shoplifter. Besides, I could've brought my trench coat if there was anything I wanted to steal inside.

SOCRATES

Take it off! Why are you talking? Quit your yacking and follow me in. And make it snappy! *[In the meantime, Shifty removes his shirt, trousers, and shoes, giving them to the Clouds]*

SHIFTY

Okay, okay! *[Takes off jacket]* But tell me this now. If I really give it the old college try and study hard, which of your students will I be like?

SOCRATES

You'll be just like Stephen Hawking.

SHIFTY

Oh God no! I'll be a bionic man!

PROFESSOR SOCRATES

Quit your yacking and follow me in. And make it snappy!

SHIFTY

Let me get out my crucifix, since I'm scared to go down here. It's like some Transylvanian crypt!

SOCRATES

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

Get a move on! Why are you loitering at the door?

[Exeunt Shifty and Socrates into the Center]

CHORUS LEADER

[Rapped to the beat of GZA's Pencil]

By the name of the god of drama and wine,
Dionysus, I will speak in a language divine
I will speak only truth to the ASSEmbled crowd
I'll accuse yo'in a voice that is painfully loud.

Our comedy 'd been absent from this place for long
And we'd long been desiring to put forward this song
We expected this place that exudes education -
I mean Stanford - would rejoice in our comic vibration.

But for drama that brings words from the ancient past
your predictions implied it was over at last
and our poet who wrestled with G-Dubya in his prime
was forgotten 'n' his plays here they were not worth a dime.

It was last year that you finally repented
and the Acharnians were welcomed and our poet respected
So this year if you listen to our gentle abuse
for the rest of your days you'll show wisdom profuse.

[Re-enter Socrates, agitated]

SOCRATES

Finger-bangin' Feuerbachs! Never have I ever dealt with such a red-necked,
root-brained, rub-a-dub rutabaga! Oh, the only cloud he understands is the
flatulence floating around his pants. Every idea that I drop into that
cavernous cranium of his just rattles and rolls right out his nostrils, covered in
snot. Ugh. I'll call him outside. Maybe the light of day will clear the fog in
his head. Shifty, where are you? Come out here! *[Enter Shifty]* Right. Let's
try a new lesson—something you haven't already failed to learn. How about
poetry? We can discuss measures, verses, rhythms—

SHIFTY

Let's talk about measures. Fuck me if I don't need extraordinary measures .
[Demonstrates with his phallos]

SOCRATES

That's not quite what I mean. Tell me, which do you find to be the most
beautiful measure: the trimeter? the tetrameter? the pentameter?

SHIFTY

What? The only measurements I like are 36-24-36.

SCIT TRANSLATION

SOCRATES

Ugh. If you continue to speak in this way, they'll stone you in court.

SHIFTY

What? You wanna get stoned? I knew you college guys knew how to have a good time.

SOCRATES

[With a sigh] Never mind measures for now, let's try rhythms.

SHIFTY

"Rhythms"? What the hell are those? Will they help me get out of debt?

SOCRATES

Firstly and more importantly, understanding rhythms will make you an eloquent and witty conversationalist. In fact I've charmed many a grad student with my rhythms: I know anapests: bah-bah-BAH! *[Fists air on final beat]* Trochees: BAH-bah-BAH-bah! *[Beats the air with phallus in time with the rhythm]* And I really stress to impress with my more complicated lyric rhythms: bah-bah-BAH-bah-BAH-bah-BAH-BAH! *[Thrusts forward his pelvis in time with the rhythm]* The TA loves it when I massage each syllable and swirl my fingers for emphasis.

SHIFTY

You're talking a mile a minute now. What do you mean by "rhythms"?

SOCRATES

Rhythms - you know, beats!

SHIFTY

Beets! Well, why didn't you just say so! I know all about beets—know how to grow 'em, pickle 'em, slice 'em, can 'em. Mmm, tasty red pickled beets! I fuckin' love 'em. We used to sell 'em off the farm, too, growin' up, but believe me, we'd have to sell a butt load of beets to pay off what I owe.

SOCRATES

Just beat it! *[Aside]* If he's the proletariat, I'll have to reassess my neo-marxist views.

SHIFTY

Listen, So-crates, I don't see no point in learnin' all this bullshit about measurin' and "rhythmsin"...

SOCRATES

Well, what do you wish to learn?

SHIFTY

I want to learn about that there Subversive Speech that you guys go on about.

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

SOCRATES

Ah, very well. But first you must learn other things, such as...which animals are female.

SHIFTY

Well I already know that shit cuz I live on a farm: we have a cow, a mare, a nanny-goat. And we got a guard-dog - a pitbull. When you put lipstick on one of those I think they call it a Sarah Palin. And for a while we had us some llamas...

SOCRATES

Aha! Observe what you have done! You called a female llama a "llama", but you also call the male the same thing.

SHIFTY

What? What the fuck are you talking about now?

SOCRATES

See, you use the word "llama" to identify both the female and the male of the species.

SHIFTY

Dammit you're right! Well, what should I call 'em?

SOCRATES

Call the male "Llamar" and the female "Llamolly".

SHIFTY

"Llamolly"! Haw! I swear by the Air that that sounds good. Better than whisky in the jar.

SOCRATES

See! You err again!

SHIFTY

What? How?

SOCRATES

Allow me to deconstruct and reconstruct: what you signify by "jar" is an object that receives - it is a receptacle, and socio-historically gender-conceptualized as feminine. But just as the verbalization "Llamar" signifies a male concept, the enunciation "jar" must also signify a male concept. *[Shifty looks baffled]* You're using a manly name for a girly thing.

SHIFTY

How do you mean, I'm usin' a manly name for a girly thing?

SOCRATES

In the same way that we say Tom Cruise.

SCIT TRANSLATION

SHIFTY

Ha ha, yeah, who knows how that guy gets his jollies.

SOCRATES

Indeed. And “jolly” is just the word we seek! For just as Lllamar is male and Llamolly is female, let jar be male, and jolly be female.

SHIFTY

Lllamar—llamolly, jar—jolly. It’s kind of fucked up, but I think I’m getting the hang of it. What about Tom Cruise?

SOCRATES

Perhaps let’s leave that one to “don’t ask, don’t tell”. But it is still necessary for you to learn the genders of names, that is, which are male and which are female.

SHIFTY

But I know which names are ladies’ names.

SOCRATES

Tell me then.

SHIFTY

Well, you got Marlene, Lucille, Charlene, Condoleeza...

SOCRATES

And which names are male in gender?

SHIFTY

Tons of ‘em. Bill, Gary, Larry, Craig...

SOCRATES

Shifty, not so swiftly! You have erred again!

SHIFTY

What do you mean—what gender are they?

SOCRATES

Ha! You tell me what gender Larry Craig is!

SHIFTY

Well, hell. Come to think of it, I’m not even sure he knows. But really, Socrates, what’s the point of learning all this shit—it ain’t news to nobody!

SOCRATES

If you do not see the utility in these basic semantic exercises, however will you appreciate the intricacies of Kristeva? It’s simply no use teaching you. Go there! Sit on your beanbag!

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

SHIFTY

What? What should I do there?

SOCRATES

Spend an hour ruminating on your own problems, you brainless bovine.

SHIFTY

An hour? No, please, not there with all the fleas!

SOCRATES

I'm afraid there's no other way. *[Exit Socrates]*

SHIFTY

Fuck me! Those fleas are gonna chow down on my ass like it's a honey-glazed ham! *[Sits on the beanbag. After a moment starts writhing in pain.]* Lord, they're eating me from the inside out—this is a lesson in enema-entomology! *[He settles down, and his face takes on an expression of intense thought. After a few moments, the Clouds enter.]*

CHORUS

[Sung to the tune of Justin Timberlake's Rock Your Body.]

Don't be afraid to contemplate (Shifty you'll find a way)

Wrap your mind around it, in every way. (Shifty you'll find a way)

If you do get stumped we'd better hear you say (Shifty you'll find a way)

That you'll keep on thinking, 'til the break of day.

Shifty *[leaping up for his solo]*

Oh shit, now this is it

These bugs are in my bed

I'll do whatever it takes

It itches, I wish I was dead

'Cause they're so fucking small

and chomping on my balls

all up in my asshole

makin' me squirm and roll

then you tell me just to forget about it

When my money's gone, and my face looks like shit!

I said my life is gone—where the fuck are my shoes?

Since I got nothing I got nothing to lose!

CHORUS

Don't be afraid to contemplate (Shifty you'll find a way)

Wrap your mind around it, in every way. (Shifty you'll find a way)

If you do get stumped we'd better hear you say (Shifty you'll find a way)

That you'll keep on thinking, 'til the break of day. *[Song ends in dancing and partying]*

SCIT TRANSLATION

SOCRATES

[Suddenly entering] What the hell are you doing? *[Clouds scatter, exiting]*
Aren't you thinking?

SHIFTY

Meee? Of course!

SOCRATES

And what have you been thinking about?

SHIFTY

Whether the fleas will leave any of me behind!

SOCRATES

Go fuck yourself.

SHIFTY

But sir, I am right fucked already! Dang. If only I could find some slippery thought here on this beanbag.

SOCRATES

[After a while] Well, what have you got?

SHIFTY

Nothing.

SOCRATES

Nothing at all?

SHIFTY

Nothing at all, except my boner!

SOCRATES

Put that thing away, for the love of Lacan! And while you are at it, think of something, quick!

SHIFTY

Think about what? You tell me, Socrates.

SOCRATES

In your own words, tell me what you want?

SHIFTY

You've heard what I want a million times! My debts—I don't want to pay them to nobody!

SOCRATES

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

[Calmly, like a yoga teacher] Sit on your beanbag. Cut loose your unconscious, let it rise. Look into yourself and discern the proper paradigmatic modalities...

SHIFTY

Goddamnit! The fleas are back in my pants!

SOCRATES

Keep still! And if one of your schemes is found lacking, toss it aside and move on. And then stir it up with the spoon of your mind, and serve it with the ladle of thought.

[Socrates tries to sneak away, but Shifty runs up to catch him]

SHIFTY

Oh Socky, sweetie.

SOCRATES

What now, old man?

SHIFTY

I have a cunning plan.

SOCRATES

OK....

SHIFT

Here's how it goes...

SOCRATES

How?

SHIFTY

Bring Sarah Palin down for a hunting weekend with Arnie. Knowing those two, they'll carpet bomb the entire forest and there will be no trees left!

SOCRATES

And how exactly does this help you?

SHIFTY

No trees, no paper, no credit card statements, no credit card bills, no me paying!

SOCRATES

What if they call you?

SHIFTY

[Thinks for a second] I'll unplug the phone!

SCIT TRANSLATION

SOCRATES

Good! But I'll throw you another hard one: If some \$50,000 fine is entered against you, tell me how you would hush it up?

SHIFTY

Hmmmm...*[as if he is on to something]* HMMMMMMM.... *[abandoning all pretense to figuring out the answer]* I don't know. There must be an answer somewhere....

SOCRATES

Don't keep tripping over your own thoughts, but relax your mind into the air, like a Frisbee soaring in space...

SHIFTY

EUREKA! You'll agree that I have the most brilliant hush-up for that fine.

SOCRATES

Like?

SHIFTY

You've been "online", haven't you? Where they have all those tubes that carry the porn and cute pictures of kittens?

SOCRATES

You mean the Internet?

SHIFTY

That's it! What if I unearth one of those internet tubes, and when Mr. Mastercard charges me for the fine, I swoop down and grab the bill as it goes through the tube? There'll be no record!

SOCRATES

By Foucault's pendular penis, you're a genius!

SHIFTY

[Stroking his phallus] God am I feeling good- I just got rid of a \$50,000 fine!

SOCRATES

OK then- try this one on for size.

SHIFTY

What?

SOCRATES

You're the defendant. How would you weasel out of a case that you are going to lose, since you don't have any witnesses?

SHIFTY

[Feeling overconfident] Pah! Easy.

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

SOCRATES

Tell me then.

SHIFTY

I will. Before the judge bangs his gavel, I would run off and hang myself!

SOCRATES

You're talking nonsense.

SHIFTY

For God's sake, no I'm not! Nobody can sue me if I'm dead!

SOCRATES

You're a moron. Get out of here! I'll never teach you again.

SHIFTY

Why not, Socrates?

SOCRATES

You forget whatever you learn right away! What did you first learn just now? Tell me.

SHIFTY

Let's see....what did I learn first? What? What was it?

SOCRATES

Go to hell. You are the dumbest and densest old poop I have ever seen! *[Exit Socrates]*

SHIFTY

Damnit! What's going to happen to me now? I'm doomed unless I learn some word-acrobatics! Oh Clouds, please advise me! *[After a moment, the Clouds enter.]*

CHORUS LEADER

We will. Do you have an adult son? Send him to learn instead of you.

SHIFTY

[Sarcastically] I do have one fine son, but he refuses to learn. *[Shrugs shoulders]* What can I do?

CHORUS LEADER

And you allow this?

SHIFTY

He's big! And bulky! And he's descended from those Rockefeller peacocks! But I'll go get him—if he refuses, there is no way that he is staying at my home. *[Exit Shifty]*

SCIT TRANSLATION

CHORUS

[Sung to the tune of Lynyrd Skynyrd's Simple Man]

Don't you sense that, before too long
Good things will come, from us alone.
This guy is ready—he's the man!
He'll do whatever you want at your command.

And now you spotted your biggest fan,
You'll take as much, as much as you can stand.
Don't wait too long—you must be fast,
Opportunities like this one just don't last.

He'll be a subtle kind of man,
Cause he can learn stuff better than you can
Yes he'll be a subtle kind of man,
And learn to say things that you won't understand. *[Song ends]*

[Lights go out]

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

ACT III

The McThrifty Family Home

[Shifty and Diesel on stage. Lights come up]

SHIFTY

By Gumbrecht's gums, you are not going to mooch off me anymore! Go and eat off of Rockfeller's doorstep, if you have to!

DIESEL

Yo, pops, what's your deal, bro? God, you're acting crazy!

SHIFTY

See, see. God! He's no more real than Heidi Montag! To believe in God at your age!

DIESEL

What's so funny about that?

SHIFTY

That you're a child and you think such old-fashioned things! All the same, come over here and I'll show you something. You'll learn to be a real man - but don't tell anybody else.

DIESEL

Okkkay....What is it?

SHIFTY

Did you swear by God just now?

DIESEL

Yeh.

SHIFTY

Ok, let me show you how education can make you a better man: Diesel, there is no God.

DIESEL

SCIT TRANSLATION

Then what is there?

SHIFTY

Dawkins has staged a coup and rules in his place.

DIESEL

Bull-shit. You're an idiot, yo.

SHIFTY

It's true, you know!

DIESEL

Who says so?

SHIFTY

Socrates the Evolutionist and Gumbrecht, expert at flea prints.

DIESEL

How stupid do you have to be to believe those windbags? That's retarded, bro.

SHIFTY

Shaddup. And don't say anything disrespectful about these brilliant men, who save money by not getting haircuts or wearing deodorant or even taking showers, while YOU spend my money like I was already dead! But hurry up—go learn, on the double!

DIESEL

Those people can't teach me anything. Not anything useful anyway.

SHIFTY

Seriously? All of mankind's wisdom! You'll learn how ignorant and block-headed you really are! Now wait here a minute! *[Exit Shifty into house. After a short while, two stuffed owls, one with phallus, one with pink skirt, are thrust out of the half-opened doors. Shifty is puppeteer, making them talk and play with each other.]*

DIESEL

Damn, what should I do? Dad's gone senile! Should I take him to a home or get him committed?

SHIFTY

[Coming all the way out of the house] Come and look. What do you normally call this? Tell me.

DIESEL

An owl.

SHIFTY

Good! And what about her?

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

DIESEL

An owl.

SHIFTY

The same for both? Stop it, and start calling this one a owl, and that one owl-ette; and combined they're a pair of hooters.

DIESEL

Owlette? Hooters? Is this what you have learned since you've been hanging out with these shitbirds?

SHIFTY

And so much more! But whenever I learn something I forget it right away, cause I'm so old.

DIESEL

And that's why you lost your clothes?

SHIFTY

They're not lost - I just de-constructed them!

DIESEL

And where'd you put your shoes, you idiot?

SHIFTY

President Obama made me share the wealth! But come on, shoo, let's go. Be a scoundrel, do it for papa. I know I did the same for you, when you were just a babbling six year old. When I cashed my first fraudulent disabilities claim, I bought you a toy truck with the money!

DIESEL

You're gonna regret this! [*Lights go out.*]

SCIT TRANSLATION

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

ACT IV

The Center for Universal Meta-Studies and Heuristic Omni-Technology

SHIFTY

Attaboy! [*Shouting and knocking on the door*] Ooooooh, Soocraateeeeees. I brought you this son of mine—I managed to convince him even though he put a fight.

SOCRATES

[*Opening the door*] He's just a kid, he doesn't know the ropes around here.

DIESEL

Take your ropes and go hang yourself, numbnuts!

SHIFTY

What the hell? Are you cursing your teacher?

SOCRATES

Awww! [*Pinches Diesel's cheeks*] He said "wopes." What baby-talk, and spitting all over his bib too! How will he ever learn adjudication or appropriation or pontification? Still...for a cool ten grand I did teach Sarah Palin...

SHIFTY

Don't worry: just teach him. He's a philosopher by nature. In fact, when he was a tyke just this tall [*indicates with phallus*], in his room he doodled houses with crayons and constructed pirate ships out of Legos and wheelbarrows out of Tinker-toys. He even rolled out snakes with clay, whatever length you liked [*toys with phallus*]. Just make sure he learns both the Arguments - Straight Talk, I guess, and Subversive Speech, the one that beats Straight Talk every time. And if he can't have both, at least teach him Subversive Speech.

SOCRATES

He will be taught by the discourses themselves. Unfortunately, I left something on the stove, gotta go. [*Exit Socrates*]

SHIFTY

[*Shouting*] Just make sure he can win every time!

SCIT TRANSLATION

[Musical flourish. After a pause, Straight Talk emerges from the door. He turns around.]

STRAIGHT

[Speaks in an upper-class English accent] Get out here! Expose yourself to the spectators! (Not that you need any encouragement for that.)

SUBVERSIVE

[Sauntering out haughtily, speaking in an über-intellectual French accent]
Go wherever you like. I'll destroy you that much more in front of a crowd.

STRAIGHT

You destroy me? And you are...?

SUBVERSIVE

Speech itself!

STRAIGHT

Subversive Speech!

SUBVERSIVE

Oh, but I'll best you, even though you claim to be Straight Talk!

STRAIGHT

By what clever move?

SUBVERSIVE

I'll invent bizarre new thoughts.

STRAIGHT

Well, those certainly are in season, thanks to this brainless bunch *[gestures to the audience]*.

SUBVERSIVE

[Appealing to crowd] *Au contraire*, they're quite clever.

STRAIGHT

I'll smash you good!

SUBVERSIVE

And how, pray tell?

STRAIGHT

[Chin up and proud] By saying what's good and just!

SUBVERSIVE

My reply will put all that into a tailspin: For I deny outright the existence of 'Lady Justice'!

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

STRAIGHT

She doesn't exist, you say?

SUBVERSIVE

Well now, where is she?

STRAIGHT

[Piously] She resides in heaven!

SUBVERSIVE

If there's any justice in heaven, then why is God not punished for killing his own son?

STRAIGHT

[Gagging] Yeck! There it is! The filth comes out! Someone get me a barf bag.

SUBVERSIVE

You're a doddering old dolt.

STRAIGHT

You're a shameless sodomite.

SUBVERSIVE

[Feigning blushing and coyness] A rose, he calls me!

STRAIGHT

And a blustering buffoon!

SUBVERSIVE

Music to my ears!

STRAIGHT

And you beat old ladies with your stick!

SUBVERSIVE

You don't know it, but you're showering me with gold.

STRAIGHT

You would've considered it acid rain in the good old days!

SUBVERSIVE

Ah, but now it is my crowning glory!

STRAIGHT

[Getting in the other's face] You insolent—

SUBVERSIVE

You obsolescent—

SCIT TRANSLATION

STRAIGHT

It's because of you that none of the young people want to mind their manners.
But someday Stanford will wake up and see how you teach them to be
imbeciles.

SUBVERSIVE

You're so terribly crusty.

STRAIGHT

Oh, you're a success now, for sure. But you used to be a penniless post-doc,
playing the role of the Starving Bohemian, living on a meager diet of Derrida
and ramen noodles.

SUBVERSIVE

Ah, what wisdom...

STRAIGHT

—what madness!—

SUBVERSIVE

...you bring to mind!

STRAIGHT

And crazy is the university that gives you tenure, just so you can turn around
and corrupt the undergraduates!

SUBVERSIVE

Well, it won't be you who teaches this young man, Methuselah.

STRAIGHT

Oh yes I will, if he's to turn out all right and not spout a bunch of empty
jargon!

SUBVERSIVE

[Gesturing out to Diesel]

Come here, let him rant and rave.

STRAIGHT

You'll be in a world of hurt if you lay a hand on him. *[Squaring up to
Subversive Speech.]*

CHORUS LEADER

[Stepping between them]

Stop this fighting and arguing!

You present the things you used to teach to alumni,
and you can argue for the postmodern way.
And once he's heard your claims and made his choice,
he'll enroll with one of you.

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

STRAIGHT

All right, I'll do it!

SUBVERSIVE

Count me in, too.

CHORUS LEADER

Come then, who will speak first?

SUBVERSIVE

I'll yield time to him. But no matter what he has to say,
I'll mow him down with my trendy discursivities and intellections,
and to top it all off, if he so much as utters a peep,
he'll be stung all over his face and eyes by my thoughts like a swarm of bees!

CHORUS

#2: *[to Subversive Speech]*

Now, trusting in your hyper-sophisticated words and ideas,
the neologizing work of your mind,
you shall reveal which one of you is the better speaker.

#3: Now the ultimate test of wisdom lies before us,
a contest of great importance for those dear to me.

#4: *[to Straight Talk]*

But thou, who hast crowned the men of yore with fine characters,
Unleash thy voice howst thou seest fit and speak thy true nature!

STRAIGHT

Very well, I'll tell you all about the good old days,
I was at my peak in righteousness and modesty held sway.

First of all a child should never peep, but pay attention!
And march these hallowed halls in line, in absolute submission!
And so would go the groups of youths, all gathered here together,
come rain, or snow, or sleet, or hail: in any kind of weather!

They'd learn by heart the songs of old, and without any joking,
Like grabbing ass, or tea-bagging, or any penis-poking!
"Yankee Doodle," "Green Berets," "The Star Spangled Banner!"
All in the good-old fashioned way, as was their fathers' manner.

But if one spouted poppycock or other balderdash,
such as your modern "Jay-Z" does with all his wretched trash,
we'd beat him down and wear him out and censure his abuses,
That would teach those whippersnaps to slight the ancient Muses!

Now when the boys all gathered in the gym in tiny shorts,

SCIT TRANSLATION

to exercise their bodies in the fine pursuit of sports,
they kept their thighs together then, with nothing there to view,
or else they'd show their naughty bits to onlookers—

SUBVERSIVE

—like you!

STRAIGHT

And when they finished with their work, they'd often hit the showers,
To wipe away the toil and sweat of several grueling hours.
But if they left an imprint of their bodies on the glass,
they wiped it clear lest some old queer go crazy for that ass!

They never shaved their pubic hair below the happy trail,
yet let it grow like fluffy wool upon their genitalia.
They never spoke to older men with voices soft and sweet,
nor cast flirtatious eyes at them when strolling down the street. [takes out
handkerchief and wipes his brow before continuing.]

And when it came to eating meals, they showed their proper manners:
no stealing from an older man or filching his bananas.
they held themselves to proper standards best as they were able:
no slurping, no burping, not even a chirping, and no putting feet on the table!

SUBVERSIVE

You're as old-fashioned as a pageant, full of moths (more likely maggots) pep
rallies and Veterans Day—

STRAIGHT

—and wasn't that the stuff, I say!

It was my brand of education, reared the greatest generation!
But you would have them wrap themselves in all the finest clothes,
So that they spoil the old routines at all the halftime shows.
It kills me when I'm forced to watch the drink-besotted band,
who party better than they play and spoil the Stanford brand.

And so, young fellow, taking all this into calculation,
Rally to my side and choose the better education.
And you will learn to hate the bathhouse, and the wretched co-op,
and shrink from doing shameful things and blush when you are shown up,
and offer up your seat whenever elders pass in school,
and honor thy parents and keep up appearances,
Modesty must be the rule!

Keep your hands off strippers and the cheaper fornication:
bamboozled by a bimbo's tit you'll lose your reputation.
Never speak a word against your dad or call him "geezer,"
or pay him back for raising you by locking him in the freezer!

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

SUBVERSIVE

[Aside, to Diesel] If you give your time to him, I promise you, by God, they'll say you're one of Palin's kids and call you a retard.

STRAIGHT

What a strapping lad you'll be from going to the gym,
And shunning all the balderdash you'd learn in school with him.
You won't attend the MLA and join their conversation,
their "euro-phallo-logo-centric-Marx-interpellation."

You'll run your laps around the quad beneath the shady palms,
and wear your letter jacket with your gentlemanly chums.
You'll smell of Old Spice, orthodoxy, Aqua Velva, too,
and love the feel of the outdoors when springtime is in bloom.

And if you do these things I say, and keep your focus all the way,

[Musically] You'll...have...the...
chest of Superman, and a golden-colored tan,
shoulders stout, a silent mouth,
buttocks thick and one cute prick!

But if you go down this same way, that all the youngsters choose today,
[Musically, again] You'll...soon...have...
pasty, flabby skin, puny arms and shoulders thin,
a chest that sags, a tongue that wags,
a rump that's disappearing and a great, big... theory. *[Gestures at Subversive Speech's phallus]*

He'll teach you to think all that's bad is good,
and you won't love the good like you ought to should!
And in addition to this lobotomy,
he'll infect you with Foucault's sodomy!

CHORUS

#2: *[to Straight Talk]* Practitioner of wisdom of the finest, famedest sort,
how pleasant was the modesty that bloomed on your report!

#3: Whatever others care to say, you all were blessed in your day!

#1: *[To Subversive Speech]* And now you've got to speak your piece, you subtle-sounding man,
he came off looking pretty good, so try as best you can!

#4: You've got to use the fiercest of your clever lucubrations,
to overcome this fellow and avoid humiliation.

SUBVERSIVE

Sacrebleu, my misty friends, I thought you'd never ask:

SCIT TRANSLATION

I've been here bursting at the seams to take his thoughts to task!
That's why among sophisticates I'm called Subversive Speech:
I teach you to "problematize" your ideology.
And this will prove more valuable than any banker's bonus:
to learn to speak subversively and vanquish your opponents!

Now test the education this old codger calls his own -
I'll prove him wrong on every point and send him packing home.
First of all, you said that young men can't cavort with whores.
What exactly was the reasoning behind this rule of yours?

STRAIGHT

It makes a man a cretin and a total waste of space!

SUBVERSIVE

Just hold it there! I think I've caught you right around the waist!
Tell me now, were you to judge our nation's finest men,
which one would be your final pick among the Presidents?
Showing off your knowledge, say who's your profile in courage.

STRAIGHT

Well, when you put it just like that, my answer's J-F-K!

SUBVERSIVE

—a man who fucked a prostitute or seven in his day!

STRAIGHT

This is why the football fields are empty all day long,
but leather bars and disco clubs are always going strong.

SUBVERSIVE

And then you seemed to lay the blame on comp lit seminars,
but I think they're just peachy keen, and here is why they are:
Cause if they're oh-so bad for you, we shouldn't have seminaries, too,
And "seminal" is a word we prize, to mark out things as old and wise!

Moving on, let's take the tongue, which you said young men should keep
dumb.
And then there's blessed rectitude - between that and the tongue, that's dumb
times two.
Since when do you see a man succeed, sticking to this dated creed?
Let's have an example, don't be shy—repudiate me if I lie.

STRAIGHT

George Washington, when a boy of three, couldn't lie when he cut down the
cherry tree!

SUBVERSIVE

A crappy tree might work for him, but that's not what I'd call a win.

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

Consider now old Goldman Sachs -- thanks to sleaze they have... gold in their sacks!

STRAIGHT

Well, now, didn't Guy Ritchie manage to bag Madonna for a wife through his modesty?

SUBVERSIVE

Yeah, and then she left his ass. He wasn't hardcore enough, and he didn't like rolling in the bedsheets all night long. A woman just loves getting nailed. But what would you know, Father Time?

You gotta trust me, kiddo, it's a simple calculation—
you don't have to be very smart to figure this equation:
The perks of being "chaste" can all be counted on one hand,
but all of life's real pleasures will so cruelly be banned!
Boyfriends, girlfriends, gambling, feasting, booze, la dolce vita!
A life without those luxuries is surely incomplete-a.
Now think about the urges that you'll want to act upon:
let's say you screw the Chancellor's wife, but wouldn't you know - you're caught!
But if you learn my bag of tricks, a touch of legal rhetoric
will win your case without a hitch, and you can go back to scratching that itch.
Wine and women all day long, and in the evening dance and song!
And if someone tries to shackle your schlong, you tell them you've done
nothing wrong:
Just cite our very own Tiger Woods, who even though he had the goods,
couldn't keep his tiger in his pants—a *fortiori*, what's our chance?

STRAIGHT

But what if he listens to you and ends up in prison, and they give him the "shower treatment" and he's made someone's "bitch"? How's he going to prove he's not a "homo-butt-pirate-cock-jockey"?

SUBVERSIVE

And if he is, what's so bad about that?

STRAIGHT

How could he suffer anything worse?!

SUBVERSIVE

What do you say, then, if I beat you on this point, too?

STRAIGHT

I'll shut my mouth for good. But come on, how do you mean?

SUBVERSIVE

Tell me now, where do we get our lawyers?

SCIT TRANSLATION

STRAIGHT

[After much reservation] From the homos.

SUBVERSIVE

I agree! Well then, where do we get our Hollywood actors?

STRAIGHT

[Slowly conceding] From the butt-pirates.

SUBVERSIVE

Very good! But where do we get our politicians?

STRAIGHT

From the cock-jockeys!

SUBVERSIVE

Don't you get it, your argument's through! Now look at this audience here.

STRAIGHT

Oh, yes, there they are!

SUBVERSIVE

What do you see?

STRAIGHT

A sea of homos, by God! As far as the eye can see! Here's one, and I know this one, and here's a long-haired Nancy over here!

SUBVERSIVE

So what do you say?

STRAIGHT

I am defeated! Oh, my fellow fruits! I'm coming over to your side! *[Takes out and dons a gimp-mask and gag-ball, and exits through audience.]*

SUBVERSIVE

So how's it going to be? You want to choose this guy for your son, or shall I teach him to speak on your behalf?

SHIFTY

Teach him! Instruct him! Train him so well that he can argue little lawsuits out of one side of his mouth, and talk big business out of the other at the same time!

SUBVERSIVE

No worries! Now, take this bright and industrious young man inside.

DIESEL

Pale and fucked is what I'm going to be.

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

[Exeunt omnes. Lights go out. Shifty enters as lights come up.]

SHIFTY

[Looking at his iPhone] The 17th, the 18th, 19th, and the 20th. Then there is the day I fear most of all, that gives me goose bumps and makes me sick to the stomach: the 21st. When my Mastercard, Visa, American Express, and Discover payments are due. All of the credit cards that I owe money to have sworn to ruin me by ravaging my credit score and obliterate me. Even though I have only asked for fair and reasonable terms: “Hey buddy, don’t take that right now,” “delay this payment for me” “excuse that payment.” Unfortunately they claim they’ll never get the money back, and they insult me and call me unfair, and threaten to sue me! But let them sue me *now*—I don’t give a damn—if Diesel has learned to speak persuasively, that is. I’ll go right now and knock on the door of the Center. Hello in there! *[Knocks]*

SOCRATES

[Opening the door] Hello, Shifty.

SHIFTY

And hello to you. *[Takes out an apple]* But take this first—one must pay respect to the teacher. As for my son, tell me if he has learned that argument, the one you brought out just now?

SOCRATES

He has learned.

SHIFTY

Good, by King Connivance!

SOCRATES

So you can win whatever lawsuit you want.

SHIFTY

Even if there are witnesses when I charge the credit card?

SOCRATES

All the better; even if a thousand are there!

SHIFTY

[Sung to the tune of The Gold Digger’s Song (We’re in the Money)]

I’m in the money! I’m in the money!

So long to credit cards and all that’s douchey debt!

I’m in the money! I’m in the money!

Hear that you creditors? You all can kiss my ass!

[Now sung to the tune of Ray Charles’ I’ve got a Woman]

’Cause I’ve gotta Diesel, here in my house, that’s good to me,

I’ve got a Diesel, here in my house, that’s good to me (ohhh yeahhh!)

SCIT TRANSLATION

He gets my money, when I'm in need, he's a bastard - to my enemies!
I've got a Diesel, edumacated, by Socrates! *[Song ends.]*

Now call him for me! Bring him on out! Oh my son, oh my child, come out,
heed your papa's words!

SOCRATES

Here he is now.

[Enter Diesel with academic makeover on trolley pushed by Students.]

SHIFTY

Oh, oh, sonny! How happy am I to see your pale skin! Now you're so obviously contrarian and ready to refute! I see the national urge to sue fast-food chains blooming on your face, that "I burnt my tongue on your coffee" look, that "I didn't see that 'Liquids may be hot' sign" look, even when it's right in front of your nose. I know it all too well. Yes, that shifty American glance is stamped all over your face. But now save me, since you are the one that has destroyed me.

DIESEL

And what is scaring you?

SHIFTY

The 21st! The telephone rings all day, and the creditors won't let me get a word in!

DIESEL

They won't let you get a word in?

SHIFTY

Yeah, and they keep shouting at me!

DIESEL

The credit card companies will lose. They can't deny you your right to free speech!

SHIFTY

Free speech?

DIESEL

Your first amendment rights. Or are you not failing to pay your credit card bills to protest the credit card companies' unfair loaning practices and involvement in third-world debt?

SHIFTY

Buttawhat? Protest? Third-world debt?

DIESEL

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

Because if you are, your not paying is a form of protest, and hence protected by the first amendment.

SHIFTY

Is this constitutional?

DIESEL

Of course. Most people don't understand the point of the first amendment.

SHIFTY

And what is the point?

DIESEL

Ol' Jefferson was by nature a lover of the people...

SHIFTY

And what does this have to do with credit card debt?

DIESEL

...so he made sure that 'Congress shall make no law' forcing us to believe what we don't want to. And I don't believe that I should have to pay off my debts!

SHIFTY

Good! Oh Stanford students, you morons, why do you sit there and take it while we run off with your 36 grand-a-year? You are just rocks, numbers on a spreadsheet, mere sheep, empty husks of Starvin-Student burritos. As for me and my son, we're free! [*Lights fade out; exeunt omnes*]

SCIT TRANSLATION

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

ACT V

The McThrifty Family Home

BANK EMPLOYEE

Should one ever abrogate something that one owns? No, and much less so a bank! I wish I had declined this man's consumer-loan application then rather than going after him now—what a hassle! And on top of everything, he's my neighbor - but nevertheless, this is also a matter of principle! Excusing his debt would be an embarrassment to our country! [Knocking on the door] I hereby summon Shifty McThrifty!

SHIFTY

[Opening the door] Who's there?

BANK EMPLOYEE

Yet another credit cycle is over!

SHIFTY

How can a cycle be over - it has neither beginning nor end by definition, and it keeps revolving ad infinitum!

BANK EMPLOYEE

You borrowed a hundred grand for the purchase of a Jaguar motor vehicle.

SHIFTY

[To the audience] Hear what this man is saying! A motor vehicle! You all know I despise motor vehicles!

BANK EMPLOYEE

You committed yourself to paying back your debt when you borrowed!

SHIFTY

Well my son did not then possess the power of eloquence which cannot be defeated!

BANK EMPLOYEE

And you think that this makes you exempt?

SCIT TRANSLATION

SHIFTY

Obviously—I am reaping the fruits of this applied knowledge!

BANK EMPLOYEE

I'll take you to court! You will have to put your hand on The Good Book!

SHIFTY

What book would that be?

BANK EMPLOYEE

The Holy Bible!

SHIFTY

I detest the Western canon - a bunch of dead white males! [Turning to the employee's belly] Goodness. Screw the credit cycle, this is a credit sphere!

BANK EMPLOYEE

Don't make fun of me now!

SHIFTY

The resemblance to our planet earth is uncanny!

BANK EMPLOYEE

You will not trample on me, my beliefs and my principles like this!

SHIFTY

OMG! He does not know how funny he sounds! Dear man, we intellectuals do not have such concepts as "beliefs" and "principles!" We have deconstructed them!

BANK EMPLOYEE

No doubt you'll regret this in good time! So give me a final answer before I go: Are you going to pay the Bank of America back or not?

SHIFTY

Don't worry. I will respond with clarity and precision.

[Exit Shifty]

BANK EMPLOYEE

[To audience] What the hell is he going to do? Is he going to pay me back?

[Re-enter Shifty with the feminine stuffed owl]

SHIFTY

There you go. You, the Bank of America employee—what do you call this?

BANK EMPLOYEE

This? An owl.

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

SHIFTY

And you demand that I pay you money? I am not going to pay a single buck to a person who would call this owlette an "owl"!

BANK EMPLOYEE

So your answer is no?

SHIFTY

As far as my ideological subjecthood allows me to judge - no. So are you please going to disappear from my front door?

BANK EMPLOYEE

I'm leaving. But I will see you in court.

SHIFTY

Well I'm sorry in advance for the transaction fees that you'll waste on top of the hundred grand! Although this might be a bit too strict of a punishment for saying "owl". *[Closes the door behind him.]*

[MasterCard employee enters]

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

Oh my oh my!

SHIFTY

Where are these heartbreaking cries coming from? Could it be that I am visited by the tears of Glenn Beck?

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

You wish to know who I am... I am an unfortunate man.

SHIFTY

Then you are excused.

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

Oh cruel gods! Oh whims of fortune, who brings down corporations! Oh Markets, how you are wasting me away!

SHIFTY

How have you been affected by this mysterious turmoil?

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

Please don't mock me sir, just tell your son to pay back the money he owes. Otherwise I might get fired.

SHIFTY

Please elaborate on the nature of this money.

SCIT TRANSLATION

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

The money we lent him.

SHIFTY

Oh I see now. I feel sorry for you then.

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

We need liquidity. We need cash. Please pay what you owe.

SHIFTY

Poor you, you are talking nonsense—trapped in a world of ungraspable utility.

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

I'm not talking nonsense, I just ask for what you owe us!

SHIFTY

I am afraid there is no cure for your illness.

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

Why?

SHIFTY

The problem lies within your brain. It is inherent.

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

You're going to court if you don't pay up!

SHIFTY

Please tell me. Do you think that every time it rains, the water is different? Or is it the same water that was rained down before and has been summoned up again by the sun?

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

I don't know and I don't care.

SHIFTY

How can you then deserve to be paid if you ignore the questions of nature?

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

Look, if you can't pay the whole amount, at least make a minimum payment and give us the interest.

SHIFTY

What sort of being is this thing you call interest?

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

None other than the way in which the amount of money you owe, as time goes by, grows bigger by the day and by the month!

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

SHIFTY

Good explanation. Now tell me, do you think that the sea is now bigger than it was just before?

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

It always looks about the same to me. How could it grow?

SHIFTY

Well then if the sea does not grow, despite the fact that rivers pour into her, how can you demand that your money grows? So prosecute yourself away from my house! Boy, get me my gun!

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

[To the audience] You are my witnesses to this!

SHIFTY

Go on! Run like a Dodge Viper!

MASTERCARD EMPLOYEE

This is assault!

SHIFTY

Are you leaving? *[Pointing a rifle]* This bullet has your name on it! Ha there you go! I knew you were a racer.

[Shifty goes indoors, Chorus enters from wings]

CHORUS

[Sung to the tune of Pink Floyd's Money]

Not nice, not anymore,

Desiring money, doing what you should abhor.

Money! You old sod,

Here's a story we think you should be told.

About a dad who got beat up and then wished his son
Had been deaf and dumb.

Daddy, he had a wish

for his young son to get smart and make him rich;

But when son become slick

He beat his old man up with a massive stick.

Yes, poor daddy got beat up, and he wished his son
Had been deaf and dumb. *[Song ends]*

SHIFTY

[Bursting out of house] Ah! Fuck! Friendly neighbors, fellow-citizens, fellow tea-baggers! Help me out here, in any way you can—I'm having the bejeezus

SCIT TRANSLATION

beaten out of me! Holy fuck! My head! My jaw! Oh you scumbag, you're beating up your old man?

DIESEL

That was one shot baby! One shot! *[Diesel fists pumps in the air as in Jersey Shore]*

SHIFTY

Do you all see how he just admitted that he's beating me up?

DIESEL

Damn straight.

SHIFTY

Scumbag, asshole, low-down good-for-nothing thief!!

DIESEL

Say all you want, and then some! Don't you know I love hearing abuse like that?

SHIFTY

Broke-backed ass-hole!

DIESEL

Sprinkle me with rose-petals!

SHIFTY

You're beating up your old man?

DIESEL

I swear, I'll demonstrate I had the right to beat you up.

SHIFTY

Oh scummiest of scumbags, how could you ever have the right to beat up your own father?

DIESEL

I'll show you - and win the argument.

SHIFTY

You'll win the argument?

DIESEL

Yep, easily. Choose which side you want to argue.

SHIFTY

What do you mean which side?

DIESEL

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

Straight or subversive?

SHIFTY

By God, I really have taught you cheat people with words, my boy, if you're about to convince me that it's okay and fair for a son to beat his father!

DIESEL

Oh, I think I'll convince you, and once you're done listening you won't have jack shit to say in return!

SHIFTY

Let's hear what you have to say, then!

CHORUS

#2: Your task, old man, is plainly to persist
against the wiles of your antagonist.

#3: If he were still young and shy and diffident,
You could take him on, and be more confident.

#4: But he is bold, and his verbosity
Lends strength to his brash unscrupulosity.

#1: But first of all you need to say how this ruckus began.
I'm totally convinced as well you'll do the best you can.

SHIFTY

You're goddamn right I'll tell you how it started. As you know, when entertaining, karaoke's my favorite. I asked the boy to sing something classic, Elvis perhaps. And right away, he says to me, "How old-fashioned - playing guitar, singing and drinking, like cowboys around the camp-fire."

DIESEL

Right then and there I ought to have kicked you up and down, for asking me to sing a song, as if I were your pet canary...

SHIFTY

Word for word that's what he said, and that Elvis couldn't sing. So, I kept my cool, but only just, and suggested some Dylan in his place. Again, I asked him to sing and he replies, "Dylan, well, it seems to me, he's foremost among musicians... *[dramatic pause]*

most full of shit,
most without sense,
most inclined to
vain pretense"

SCIT TRANSLATION

Well, you can imagine my heart was thumping. And so once again I bit my tongue and told him to sing a tune, a chart topper he knew - some real clever ditty.

Right away he launches into this Lady GooGoo [*Diesel rolls his eyes*], something about "poke her face," "fuck her face!"

I couldn't take another moment and immediately stood up, pelting him with insults and dirty, filthy names. Well, as you might expect, from then on, we lobbed one name after another, until he leaped up and stomped me, wailing on me, choked, and crushed me!

DIESEL

And how could it be otherwise? Leave Lady Gaga alone! [*Threatening Shifty with his fist*]

SHIFTY

Why don't you leave me alone! You gonna hit me again?

DIESEL

Fucking right I will, and rightly so.

SHIFTY

How rightly? Me, the man who raised you? You little shit, the man who listened to you as a baby, and still understood you? When you said "dwink", I knew it was drink. And if you said "mama", I came bottle in hand. And you couldn't finish saying "dookie" before I took you out the door, holding you at arm's length. But just now, while strangling me, and me hollering and wailing that I had to take a dump, you filthy asshole, you wouldn't carry me outside but choked me till I dookied in my pants!

CHORUS LEADER

Your turn, you dealer,
pusher of fresh words
find a way to sway us
make your words kosher.

DIESEL

How sweet it is, using new-fangled and clever ideas, to be able to scorn established customs. Because when I had a taste for cars alone, and I was a proper guido, I couldn't string even three words together. But now that my father himself has put a stop to that, I am one with slick ideas, talk and contemplation. For example, I know how to demonstrate the rightness of father-beating.

SHIFTY

Well, I'm hitting the road then. Better for me to pay for gasoline than be beaten black and blue.

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

DIESEL

I'll pick up my argument where you interrupted. First, answer me this: when I was a child, did you beat me?

SHIFTY

I did. With the best of intentions, and out of concern.

DIESEL

Tell me then, is it not equally right, and equally from the best of intentions, for me to beat you, since it's out of concern? Why should your body be immune from abuse, and not mine? "Man is born free", after all. "The children weep, do you think their father shouldn't?" You will tell us that it's tradition, to perpetrate such acts on children, especially out here in the country! My reply is that old men become children all over again. It's even more appropriate for geezers to weep than kids, since their antics are less to be tolerated.

SHIFTY

But it's against the law for a father to suffer like that!

DIESEL

So? Wasn't it a man like you and me who came up with the law in the first place? He persuaded his peers by argument. Why should I be less able to pass a new law in the future for my children, to wit: beating their fathers. We'll have an amnesty for child abuse committed before the law was passed, and we won't give compensation for the beatings we plan to lay on dads. Consider roosters and other animals, how they fight their fathers. And how do they differ from us? They don't vote or pass laws, that's all.

SHIFTY

Why don't you peck your own shit then, if you're going to mime a rooster so totally... and sleep in a coop?

DIESEL

Not the same, my good man, not at all, as Professor Socrates would agree.

SHIFTY

[Near tears] ...In that case... don't hit me... if you do, you'll regret it...

DIESEL

Oh? And why?

SHIFTY

Because... since I'm allowed to beat you, you'll be allowed to beat your son, when you have one.

DIESEL

And if I don't? I'll have suffered for nothing, and you'll die laughing.

SHIFTY

SCIT TRANSLATION

My friends... he seems to speak the truth. It seems I'll have to admit he has a point. It serves us right to be whipped, if we don't behave.

DIESEL

Ah, now consider this next proposal.

SHIFTY

I'm done for.

DIESEL

No, not at all. More likely it will ease your suffering from the beat-down you just took.

SHIFTY

Explain. How will you help me with this?

DIESEL

I'll beat mom - just as I beat you.

SHIFTY

What?! What did you say?! No - that's much different, much worse!

DIESEL

And what happens if I beat you using Subversive Speech, and convince you that it's right to beat one's own mother?

SHIFTY

...What else but, but... if you did such a thing, nothing would save you from the pits of hell, along with Socrates and his Subversive Speech. It's your fault, Clouds, that I suffered this! I put all my affairs in your hands!

CHORUS LEADER

Only you and you alone are to blame, Shifty, by yourself shifting to the dark side and wicked deeds.

SHIFTY

And why didn't you tell me this earlier, instead of misleading a poor old hick like me?

CHORUS LEADER

We do this every time we recognize someone in love with crime. We plunge him into disaster until he knows how to stop being an a-hole.

SHIFTY

Oh God! This is terrible....(pauses to contemplate) but fair! I shouldn't have tried to remove the charges I made. But dear son, come with me and destroy that douchebag Socrates, who cheated us.

DIESEL

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

I couldn't possibly betray my teacher, bro!

SHIFTY

Oh yes you could. Remember the Lord's words: "Honor thy father."

DIESEL

Look at that! "Honor thy father!" So 1950! As if God and Jesus exist!

SHIFTY

They do!

DIESEL

No they don't! Dawkins staged a coup and rules in god's place!

SHIFTY

No he hasn't. I thought he had, because of this bumper sticker [*Christian fish with legs reading 'Dawkins' instead of 'Darwin'*]. What an idiot I was to believe you, a mere hood ornament, like an actual god!

DIESEL

You can go on ranting and raving like a madmen out here for all I care! [*Goes back into house*]

SHIFTY

Lord, what insanity! I was a raving idiot when I left Jesus out in the cold because of Socrates. [*Takes out crucifix and holds it up*] But oh Lord Jesus, old friend—don't be angry at me—I hope I didn't rub you the wrong way—but please forgive me—I was out of my mind with their nonsense. But now be a counselor to me: should I get my revenge by suing them? Or do you have a good idea? [*Pauses for a moment as if listening to Jesus' response*] You're right—forget lawsuits, I should *burn down* that damn center for universal meat-slapping and hogwash on tits! [*Maniacal laughter, exits as lights fade out*]

SCIT TRANSLATION

THE CLOUDS OF ARISTOPHANES

ACT VI

The Center for Universal Meta-Studies and Heuristic Omni-Technology

SHIFTY

Somebody bring me some gasoline and a lighter! Today somebody in there will get a taste of my justice, no matter how slick they are! *[Pours gasoline on center]*

STUDENTS

[From inside]

AUUUGGHH!

SHIFTY

And now for some fireworks! *[Goes up above]*

STUDENT

#1: Dude, what the hell are you doing?

SHIFTY

What am I doing? What does it look like I am doing? I am engaged in discursive practices with the rafters of your school!

STUDENT

#2: HELP! Who's this about to torch our dorm?

SHIFTY

Me! Whose clothes you stole.

STUDENT

#3: You'll destroy the whole center!

SHIFTY

That is precisely the point!

SOCRATES

You there! What the hell are you doing on our roof?

SCIT TRANSLATION

SHIFTY

I'm just walking on hot air and deconstructing the heavens!

SOCRATES

Oh God, I think I am going to cry!

STUDENT

#4: And I'm going to be burned to a cinder!

SHIFTY

And what piece of learning made you wrong God and Jesus, and instead gander at the butt cheek of the moon? Now the Day of Judgment is upon you!

[He holds the lighter to the gable of the Center as the Clouds look on aghast.

Just as he is about to touch flame to wood, the lights go off.]