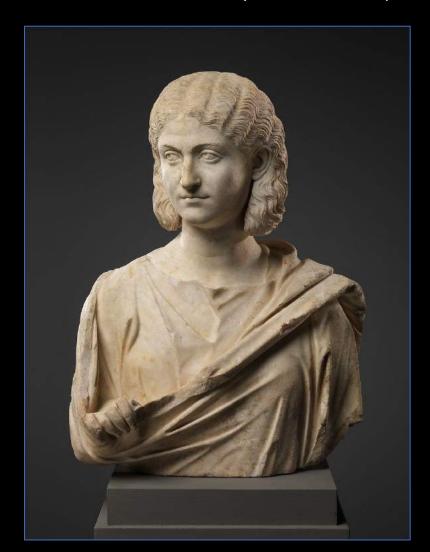# Who's/Whose Socrates?

Discovering the Romans (CL 20)

Winter Quarter 2022
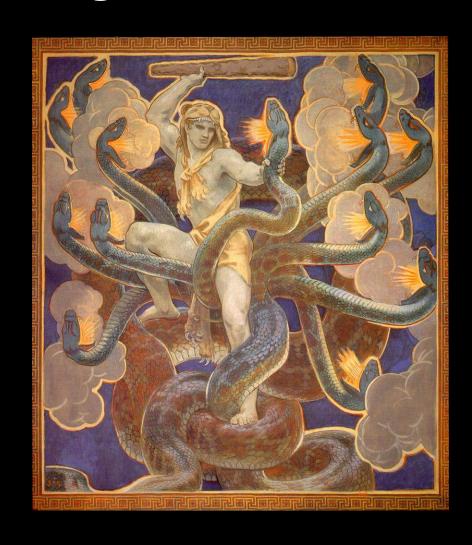
Dr. Zachary Borst

Classical Mythology (CL 30)

Spring 2022

Professor Kathryn Morgan

Does Socrates Exist Today?
Who Is/Are He/She/They?

Meeting Socrates – Twice!

- This week (week 8) in section: Aristophanes' *Clouds*
- Aristophanes: writing in the late 5th century BCE
- "First" appearance of Socrates in literature

- Later (weeks 9 or 10, depending on section day): Plato's *Apology*
- Plato (4th C BCE), the author of numerous philosophical dialogues, in which Socrates appears as a/the main character

The Usual Source: Plato

"It's said that Socrates dreamt he saw a young swan on its knees, which at that moment spread its wings and, crying out sweetly, flew away. The next day Plato was introduced to Socrates, who said that this was the swan from his dream" (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Ancient Philosophers,* vol. 1, 2nd-3rd C CE/AD).

"Then, when Plato was about to compete in a contest with a tragedy, he heard Socrates speaking before the Theater of Dionysus, and he decided to set his own poetry on fire" (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* vol. 1, 2nd-3rd C CE/AD).

Charisma – and Irony

Socrates: "How wonderful it would be if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise … I would consider it the greatest prize to have the chance to lie down next to you, Agathon. I would soon be overflowing with your wonderful wisdom. My own wisdom is of no account — a shadow in a dream — while yours is bright and radiant and has a splendid future."
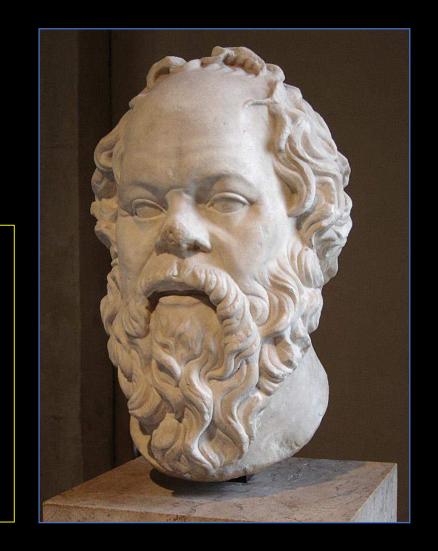
(*Symposium*, 175d-e, trans. Fowler).

MAKE PEOPLE LIKE YOU

Mr. Elusive

"Everything about Socrates is exaggerated, *buffo*, a caricature; everything is at the same time concealed, ulterior, underground."

— Friedrich Nietzsche,

Twilight of the Idols

The Problem of "Biography"

- Socrates never produced any written work of his own.
- Whatever we know or think we know about Socrates comes from other authors, namely:
- Aristophanes (5th C BCE)
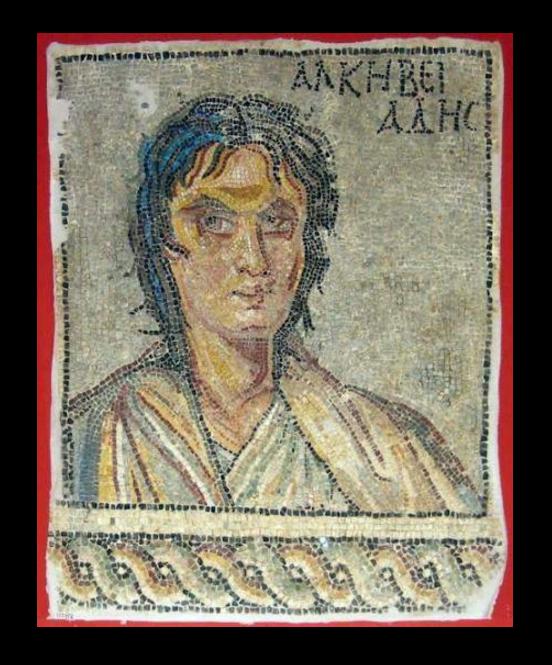- Plato and Xenophon (both 4th C BCE)

Basic "Biography"

- 470s [?] – 399 BCE
- Likely from a generally well-off family
- Son of a stonemason and midwife
- Served as a hoplite soldier in the Peloponnesian War
- Executed by the city of Athens in 399 BCE for "not believing in the city's gods and for corrupting the youth"

Michael Stuhlbarg, *Socrates* (by Tim Blake Nelson, April 2019, New York City)

Socrates the … Philosophical Soldier?

Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* (219e-220b): "Socrates surpassed everyone else in bearing hardships … It was his endurance of winter that I most recall: he walked out in that weather, clad in just such a basic coat that he always wore, and he made his way more easily over the ice barefoot than the rest of us did in our shoes. The soldiers looked askance at him, thinking that he despised them." (Trans. Fowler)
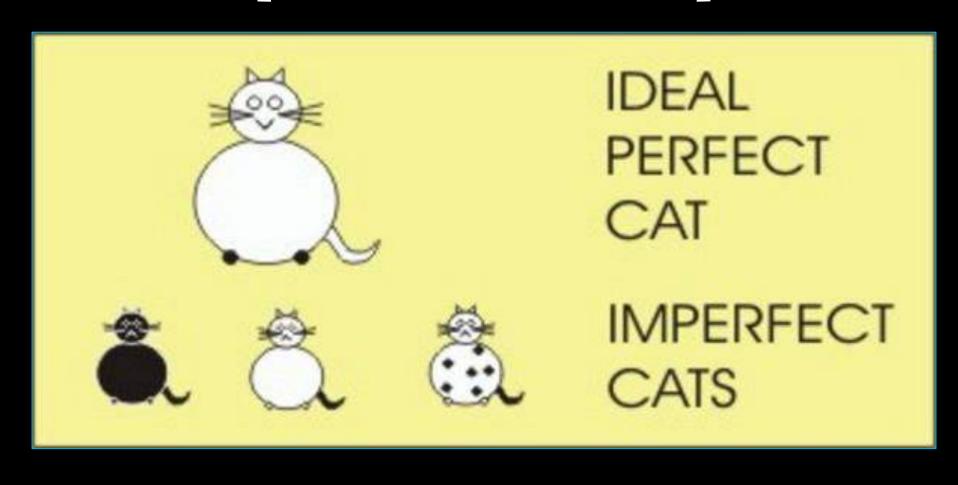
True Beauty is More than Skin-Deep

Alcibiades: "Look at Socrates! Isn't he just like a statue of a satyr? You know the statue I mean; you'll find them in any shop in town. It's a satyr sitting, his flute or his pipes in his hands, and it's hollow. It's split right down the middle, and inside it's full of tiny statues of the gods." (*Symposium* 215b)

The Inner Core

"I don't know if any of you have seen him when he's really serious. But I once caught him when he was open like Silenus' statues, and I had a glimpse of the figures he keeps hidden within: they were so godlike — so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing — that I no longer had a choice — I just had to do whatever he told me" (216e-217a).

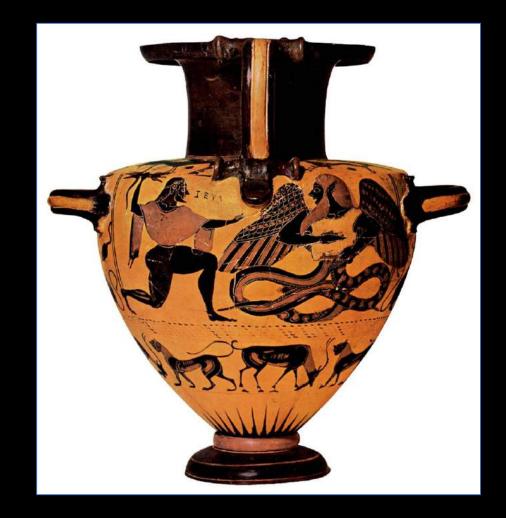# True Beauty → The Forms
[More Next Week]

Philosophy makes me drunk

"If I were to describe for you the extraordinary effect his words have always had on me (I can feel it this moment even as I'm speaking, you might actually suspect that I'm drunk! Still, I swear to you, the moment he starts to speak, I am beside myself; my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face, even the frenzied Corybantes seem sane compared to me — and let me tell you, I am not alone" (Symposium 215e).
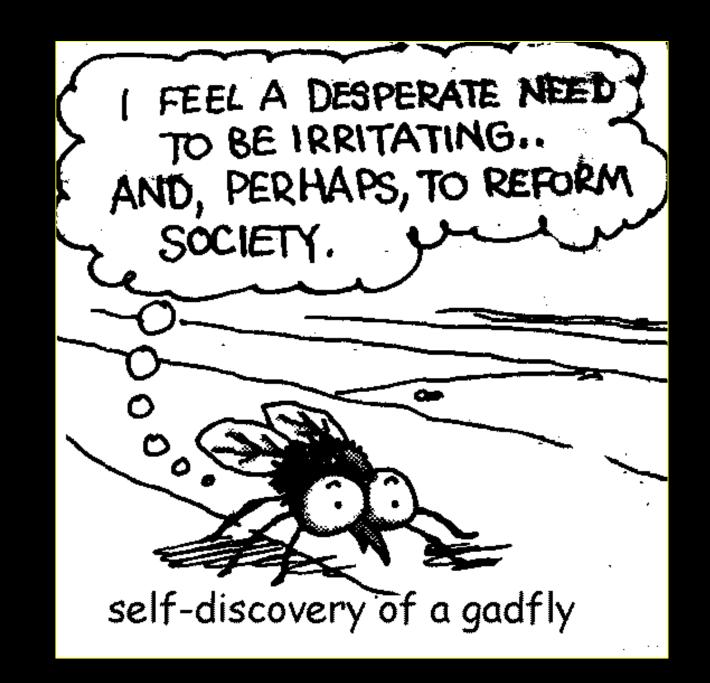
I'm a monster!

"I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that: Am I beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a gentler, simpler animal with a share in a divine and serene nature?"

(Plato, *Phaedrus* 230a, trans. Nehamas & Woodruff, adapted)

I'm a gadfly!

Atopos & Aporos

a-topos

hard to place, unclassifiable, weird

a-poros

without resource, without a way
forward, perplexed

   → *aporia* = the intellectual condition
of being perplexed, without a
     way forward

LOST

I'm a Stingray!

"As for me, if the stingray makes itself numb while it numbs others, I am like it. For I don't make others *aporos* while I myself am free of *aporia*, but above all else I myself am *aporos* and in this way I make others *aporos*, too. Even now I don't know what virtue is and yet you, perhaps, did know it before touching me but now are like one who doesn't know" (Plato, *Meno*, 80c-d, tr. Bartlett).

Alcibiades as Snake-bitten by Socrates

"And you know what people say about snakebite — that you'll only talk about it with your fellow victims: only they will understand the pain and forgive you for all the things it made you do. Well, something much more painful than a snake has bitten me in my most sensitive part — I mean my heart, or my soul, or whatever you want to call it, which has been struck and bitten by philosophy, whose grip on young and eager souls is much more vicious than a viper's and makes them do the most amazing things" (Symposium 218a-b, trans. Nehamas & Woodruff).
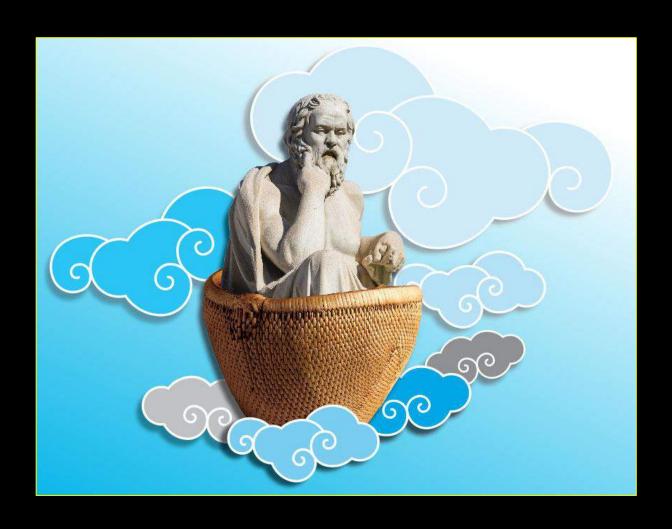
Does Socrates Exist Today?

Old Comedy

Aristophanes' *Clouds*

423 BCE (and again, revised, 420 BCE)

Classic example of "Old Comedy": lampoons a public figure for his being "different" from the norm; also focuses on domestic life

Socrates in the *Clouds* (literally!)

Strepsiades and his son Pheidippides

"The Thinkery" = "Pondertorium"

Nous – "mind"
Aether – "sky, atmosphere"

Example: (paraphrase) "I should be able to beat you up, Dad! Why? Because Zeus beat up his father!"

Socrates … the Sophist?

Socrates: "You see, these clouds are the only true gods. Everything else is utter nonsense."
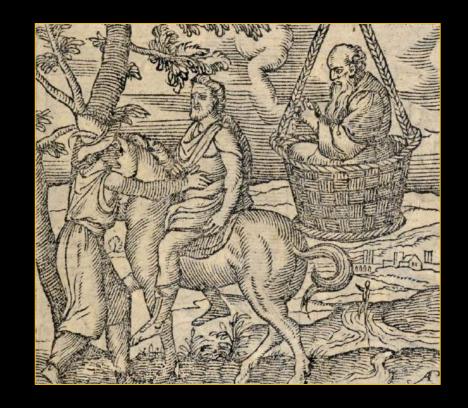
Strepsiades: "What about Zeus? How can Olympian Zeus not be a god?"

Socrates: "Zeus? Don't be absurd! Zeus doesn't exist."

Strepsiades: "What are you saying? Who is it that makes rain, then?"

Socrates: "Why, the clouds of course! Does it ever rain without clouds? No. And you would have thought that Zeus could make it rain on his own if he so desired, without clouds."

(*Clouds*, lines 364-72)

Socrates … the Corrupter of Old Men?

Socrates: "You know how to beat time with your fingers?"

Strepsiades: "By Zeus, I do!"

Socrates: "Tell me about it."

Strepsiades: "Well, when I was a young lad, it was this …" (*pulls out his phallus and begins to stroke*)

Socrates: "Gods! You are nothing but a village idiot!"

Strepsiades: "You're the idiot! I don't want to learn any of this stuff [about music and rhythm]."

Socrates: "Well, what DO you want to learn?"

Strepsiades: "The other thing, you know (whispering): The Wrong Argument."

Socrates: "That's an advanced class." (*Clouds*, lines 652-8)

Philosophy in Comedy?   *Elenchos*

Inferior Argument: "Justice doesn't exist."

Superior Argument: "Don't be ridiculous."

Inferior: "Well, where is she then?"

Superior: "She resides with the gods on Olympus."

Inferior: "Well then, if Justice lives on Olympus, / why hasn't Zeus been punished for locking up his father, mmm?"

Superior: "You're just spewing vileness! Urghh! Get a bucket, someone!"

Inferior: "You're a doddering old relic!" (*Clouds*, lines 903-8)

Some Questions as you read *The Clouds*

- What is the purpose of education?

- What "wisdom," if any, does Socrates teach?

- What societal values does the play implicitly or explicitly endorse?

- What would we think of Socrates if *Clouds* were our only evidence? Who is (Aristophanes') Socrates?