

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ARISTOPHANES

The dramatic imagination: comedy. We are at a turning point in our review of Greek drama. We have spent three weeks on tragedy, and now are turning to a week on Aristophanes (455-385 B.C.), the premier Greek comedian. Are we still dealing with the same dramatic imagination we introduced with Aeschylus? Yes and no.

We are still dealing with public performances, held at major religious festivals in Athens, in the Theater of Dionysus. The same intense competition for prizes, the same lively and personally involved audience. But from the first glance we note a change in the kinds of theme presented. With Aristophanes we find no mythical titles, no actions based on 'slices from Homer's feast,' and total involvement with contemporary issues—the folly of war, the vagaries of the legal system in Athens, the mundane dimensions of rivalries between competing dramatic poets, the practice of 'selling wisdom' in public (the practice imputed to the Sophists.) We have seen dramatists concerned with 'actual events'—*The Persians* of Aeschylus, for example—or with contemporarily relevant events—the practice of Euripides—but with Aristophanes and Greek comedy we see the veil of the mythical totally stripped away. You may want to pursue the historical background of this genre difference, which will take you into theories of the kinds of dance festival tragedy and comedy split off from, in Archaic Greece. (That byway of historical investigation will bring you to the door of the satyr play, the 'extra play' the tragedian would insert into his trilogy as an entertainment, and in fact a conduit back into another kind of bumptious and erotic rural archaic past.) The secret to the peculiar *reality-driven* character of Greek comedy may lie hidden in the archaic roots of the genre.

Is the comic drama 'conservative'? Yes. Another trait of Greek comedy is implicit in the historical suggestions of the previous paragraph. Comedy, while dealing with the foibles of the real present, works from a position of assured value, generally the rightness of the old ways, and sees the present as falling away 'comically' from the standard occupied by the comedian: who believes in old fashioned wisdom, the traditional dispensation of justice, the dignity of the creative artist as derived from the Homeric model. Greek comedy, like comedy in general, looks down from a confident view point. How else can you mock?

The Clouds (423 B.C.) takes aim at precisely the 'public selling of wisdom, or argumentative skill,' of which the Sophists were accused. In fact Socrates, who was in no way guilty of such 'public selling,' is the butt of the joke in this drama about an ambitious farmer, whose son has racked up a huge debt, and whose dad is facing an angry law court. The son is sent to Socrates' 'Thinkery,' a thought-house where one learns not only to forget about the traditional values of the Athenians, but how to trick the law courts, and pull the wool over juries' eyes. The ensuing turmoil is hilarious, but not innocuous, for in fact the bias against Socrates, which we see the results of in Plato's *Apology*, is being established right here in this play, written a quarter century before Socrates' death. There could be no more compelling argument, that comedy bites hard into the social fabric—in contrast to tragedy, which generates discoveries in mythical outreach.

Lysistrata (411 B.C.). The downward spiral of Athenian political life, toward the end of the exhausting Peloponnesian War, the growing influence of women in social life, and the delights of bawdy sex: all these conditions converge to support this hilarious/biting comedy. Basically, the women of Athens are fed up with war, and with male ineptitude, and in a series of moves take over the Acropolis, the sacred center of Athens, and read the riot act to their husbands. No sex until the war ends. The way this torture plays out is as phallic and uproarious as Athenian public amusement could be, joining serious points to outrageous fantasies.

The Frogs (405 B.C.). Dionysus, the god of the theater for the Athenians, is disgusted at the low quality of dramatic presentations in Athens, Sophocles and Euripides having died the previous year. He decides to descend into Hades and to bring back Euripides, his favorite poet. However when Dionysus arrives in

the underworld he finds himself in the midst of hubbub and a literary duel between Euripides and Aeschylus, over which is the better poet. In the end Dionysus returns from Hades with Aeschylus, but what brings down the house is not that outcome, but the subtle/raucous debate, between Euripides and Aeschylus, over which is the better poet. It is this debate that I stress, *the subtleties of literary points aired to a delighted citizen audience!*

Reading

Four Plays by Aristophanes: The Clouds, The Birds, Lysistrata, The Frogs; translated by Arrowsmith, Lattimore, Parker (New York, 1994). (Why not read all four plays?)

Discussion Topics

Are you too amazed that Aristophanes (in *The Frogs*) can display, in the highest spirits and to the evident delight of his audience, debates on subtle literary points, illustrations of this or that tragedian's stylistic skills or foibles? Does this not imply a literate audience, and one for which the experience of the theater is a central entertainment? Have we any similar collective experience in modern cultures? What about televised national sports events? As for the theater itself, has it lost its central power, in the Industrialized West?