ARISTOPHANES AND THE DEFINITION OF COMEDY

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Prologue

I Aristophanes' comic writing is exhilarating and surprising; complex, perhaps disconcertingly; much written about in recent years; much illuminated; effectively undervalued; misread, because much of the discussion, much of the illumination, even, is off-centre. Aristophanes is one of the world's great writers: *discuss*. In the pages that follow, I propose to do precisely this: to define Aristophanes' literary greatness, and to do so by focusing on the issue that seems to me to lie at the heart of his work: the definition of comedy.

And whose definition would that be? My title has a multiple point. In the first place, Aristophanes' work may be seen to have something of a defining force for posterity in its realization of comedy and the possibilities of comedy. Then again, Aristophanes himself gives every sign of a preoccupation with the question: what *is* comedy?—or, perhaps, what *should* it be? And again, my own attempt to deal with these two related topics leads me to try to shed some light on Aristophanes' question—at least, his first question—in a wider perspective. That is, both through explicit arguments in Chapters 2, 7, and 8, and implicitly through the book as a whole, I hope to add something to the theory of Comedy (with a capital C) myself.

A writer whose work can support such questions, and a writer whose work has itself a defining quality for posterity, must be a great writer indeed: *discuss*. One returns, then, and inevitably, to the first aim of this book (inseparable, as it seems to me, from the other): the elucidation of the quality and qualities of Aristophanes' writing. In search of this elucidation, the book will be literary-critical in the strictest sense. We may need to discriminate between Aristophanes and others, and—inseparable again—we shall certainly need to consider where his own strengths and weaknesses lie and why some of his moments, his inclinations, his plays, are more satisfying than others. In this connection let

me make clear that I do not share, and see no reason to share, the coy embarrassment about value judgements that permeates the modern (and especially postmodern) academy. Such embarrassment is in some ways peculiarly characteristic of classical studies, where a curious convergence has taken place between traditional historicist philology (which tries to take values for granted) and post-structural relativism (which tries to take them to pieces). While I have learned a great deal from spokesmen and spokeswomen of both persuasions, I take both of their underlying philosophies to be misguided. I have discussed some of these issues elsewhere.[1] Suffice it here to note that judgements of value are implicit in every consequential act of reading a literary work—if only because reading it commits us to some kind of provisional decision that it is, or should be, worth reading, *and* because judgements of value are implicit in all acts of interpretation (without which reading is impossible), *and* because the whole notion of 'literature' is (as theorists like Eagleton and Macherey rightly insist) inextricably implicated in notions of value,[2] *and* because (as classicists, above all others, must be aware) the literature available to us is almost always pre-sifted on one or other evaluative ground. The question is only: should we tolerate issues of value to lurk beneath the surface (or surface randomly)—or should we subject them to the open scrutiny they deserve?

I take it as axiomatic, furthermore, that literature, from Homer to Gabriel García Márquez, is a continuum and literary experience, in turn, a whole, such that one inevitably does—and should relish the fact that one does—interpret one point on the continuum in the light of another. Dispassionate historicism (whether old or quasi-relativist new)[3] is indispensable, but as a means, not an end. For a writer like Aristophanes—for a writer who, as we say, 'matters'—it is not enough. Generally, it is minor and limited art that invites discussion in purely historical terms. Art and artists that count for more have something challenging to say to generations and cultures beyond their age, and demand wider

[1] Esp. in 'Pindar meets Plato: theory, language, value, and the classics', in S. J. Harrison (ed.), *Texts, Ideas, and the Classics* (Oxford 2001) 26–45.

[2] See e.g. P. Macherey and E. Balibar, 'Literature as an ideological form', in R. Young (ed.), *Untying the Text* (London 1981) 79–99, and T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford 1990).

[3] On which see, briefly, my remarks in M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford 1996) 3–4.

perspectives for their interpretation. Indeed it is such art and such artists that help to create the wider perspectives in the first place. It does not follow, however, that the artists in question are uniquely equipped, or even especially well equipped, to interpret the products of their own creativity; and here, as elsewhere, it is a fact of life that authors' intentions (where known or recoverable) are interesting to know, but that interpretations based on them (or on speculations about them) are—if this is their sole claim to authority—arbitrary.[4]

A great and *challenging* writer: *discuss*. All significant artists must be challenging. They change us (whoever 'we' may be) by challenging us. They surprise us into enlarging our categories of experience—which, in Aristophanes' case, includes the experience of comedy itself. The challenge, in his case, is implicit in the problematic of definition.

This book is aimed at readers with an intelligent interest in Aristophanes and readers with an intelligent interest in the possibilities of comedy *tout court* (and I hope the two categories will often coincide). It contains, as will have become obvious, a fair amount of theorizing—though not necessarily theorizing of a very fashionable kind: Kierkegaard figures in my bibliography as well as Bakhtin, Adorno as well as Aristotle, Leavis as well as Derrida. I do not assume familiarity with any particular theory, however. Nor do I assume any knowledge of Greek (though Chapters 3 and 4, in particular, focus on issues of, or bound up with, language). Nor do I assume familiarity with the minutiae of Greek culture or literature or with any technical particulars of Greek dramatic form or theatrical history or dramaturgy. Parts II

[4] In A's case, one must be esp. vigilant against regressive 'logic' like (premise), 'one of his aims must have been to entertain and impress spectators who were not especially intelligent or learned', so that (conclusion) we had better 'reject some over-subtle interpretations which modern scholars have put forward from time to time' (an infelicitous opening salvo in a generally valuable book: D. M. MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens* (Oxford 1995) 3). Any work is or means whatever its relationships prompt it to be or mean—where 'relationships' subsumes relationships between elements of the work, relationships of its elements with the linguistic and other external codes presupposed, and relationships between the work (or its elements) and other works—including works not yet composed (cf. T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the individual talent', in *The Sacred Wood* (London 1920) 47–59). Interpretations (subtle or otherwise) should be rejected as and if incompatible with these relationships—not on the basis of some extra-interpretative diagnosis of a work's level. Works can, of course, operate on more than one level in any case. On intentionalism, see further below, p. 42 with n. 1.

and III of this Prologue contain some relevant material in the form of a summary résumé and a chronological chart, which, between them, should assist the reader who finds any of the chapters that follow less than self-explanatory. However, I do assume that those who come to this book will probably come with some sense of what an Aristophanic comedy is (as also with some sense of what literature is and does), and my account of Aristophanes is certainly not comprehensive, if only because I do not provide systematic expositions of individual plays, nor am I equally concerned, even, with all of the extant eleven, but primarily with the Old Comedies—the first nine of the eleven—in which the characteristics and qualities that concern me most are most evident.

Aristophanes as a *writer*: here too there is something to discuss, especially against the background of important recent work on the oral and performative modalities of classical Attic culture and drama.[5] Aristophanes is poet, playwright, writer. Unlike 'poet' or 'playwright', however, 'writer' suggests the modern condition of writerly self-consciousness and mission, which seems to me precisely to give the word a special aptness as applied to Aristophanes—'so may I be victorious, so may I be thought a true artist'[6]—notwithstanding the undoubted importance of orality and performance in Aristophanes' Athens. Drama, needless to say, is more than words: the words of drama imply performance, and (in the case of ancient Greek drama) performance in a very particular theatrical space and context. It does not follow, though, that an emphasis on words is illegitimate or inappropriate. It seems to me, rather, a wholly necessary and appropriate complement to the current—and, in itself, welcome—stress on the stagecraft and the semiotics of drama as performed. The reason why Aristophanes still matters to us as a living force—the reason why he is of more than merely historical interest—is his words. The

[5] See e.g.: R. Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge 1992); G. Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge 1996); O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford 1977); D. Wiles, *The Masks of Menander* (Cambridge 1991); S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (eds.), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge 1999).

[6] *Nub.* 520, tr. Sommerstein: cf. below, p. 46. In case it needs saying, rejection of intentionalism does not entail signing up to the post-structuralist prejudice—summed up in M. Foucault's classic, but flawed, 'What is an author?' (e.g. in J. V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies* (Ithaca, NY 1979) 141–60)—that author-talk is factitious and that discussion of authors' achievements is 'therefore' inappropriate.

words are, after all, what survives; words have an element of stability that theatrical performance—even a single original performance—must always lack;[7] the Greeks themselves ranked words ahead of other competing or associated media (ahead of music, ahead of spectacle);[8] and if, in Aristophanes' particular case, one wanted confirmation of the propriety of focusing on a verbal text, one could find it in the incontrovertible fact that, unlike most Greek dramatists that we know of, Aristophanes himself preferred to write the book and leave the producing/directing to someone else.[9] And if calling Aristophanes 'a writer'

[7] And performance (if known) is no less subject than words to variability of interpretation. There is at least one area, though, where inference about 'the' production is bound to be determinative on any reading of the words: ascription of lines to speakers, which is sometimes unclear now but must have been unambiguous once (for a straightforward instance see Sommerstein on *Nub.* 1105). On the general questions at issue here, see further: Taplin, *Stagecraft*, 1–60; D. Wiles, 'Reading Greek performance', *G&R* 34 (1987) 136–51; S. Goldhill, 'Reading performance criticism', in I. McAuslan and P. Walcot (eds.), *Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1993) 1–11; S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1986) 281–6.

[8] Wiles, *Masks*, 210: 'Aristophanes wrote in an age which valued the author above all other theatrical artists.' Words and music: see esp. Pratinas, 1. 6–7 *PMG* (*τὰν ἀοιδὰν κατέστασε Πιερὶς βασίλειαν· ὁ δ' αὐλὸς | ὕστερον χορευέτω· καὶ γάρ ἐσθ' ὑπηρέτας*), and Pl. *Rep.* 398d (*τήν γε ἁρμονίαν καὶ ῥυθμὸν ἀκολουθεῖν δεῖ τῷ λόγῳ*). Both passages imply the normal, as well as normative, privileging of words in the classical period. Words and spectacle: contrast the cultural prestige of word-artists (poets, orators, philosophers) with the limited recognition of visual artists. In classical, as in later, Greece, visual art is essentially seen as a craft, without a Muse or inspiration (cf. P. A. Murray, 'Poetic genius and its classical origins', in Murray (ed.), *Genius: The History of an Idea* (Oxford 1989) 22–5). This contrast is one-sidedly articulated, but not invented, by Aristotle, for whom the theatrical 'visual design' (*opsis*: on the term see M. S. Silk, 'The "six parts of tragedy" in Aristotle's *Poetics*', *PCPS* 40 (1994) 109 with n. 7) notoriously comes bottom in importance out of the 'six parts' (*Poet.* VI). One might very pertinently add Aristotle's own gloomy admission that most Greeks (*οἱ ἄνθρωποι*) regard the poet-composer (*poiêtês*) as composer of words in verse (*metra*) (not, as Aristotle himself would wish, as composer of 'fictions', *muthoi*: *Poet.* 1 and IX).

[9] See below, p. 17. A's reasons were not necessarily the same at all times. The simplest explanation is spelled out at *Eq.* 515–16: he found directing tough. Most critics and commentators explain away the tendency by recourse to special factors, e.g. those only applicable, if at all, to certain stages of his career. Note esp. the *fable convenue* that he was too young to put on plays when he began writing them: see e.g. the discussion (with bibliog.) in MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens*, 34–41); contrast the welcome simplicity of A. Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, tr. J. Willis and C. de Heer (London 1966) 426–7. In the history of Greek drama as a whole, we might see here a significant step in a development away from a stereotypical original *Gesamtkunst*, where an Aeschylus wrote *and* directed *and* acted, towards increasing specialization, with the professionalization of acting another major development here. By not directing his own plays, A is in any case subverting the special (authorial) significance of the first production. Further

makes him sound a bit like figures, even, of the modern writerly age like Brecht or Beckett, like T. S. Eliot or Lorenz Hart, like Woody Allen or García Márquez—then, well and good: these are all, incidentally, among the figures of the modern age—among various figures of various ages—to whose work we shall be appealing, for one reason or another, in the discussions to come. In associating Aristophanes in this way with modern writerliness, one should not, indeed, dissociate him from his fellow poets of the Attic Old Comedy and his primary situation within the culture of the Athenian city-state, the *polis*. Of course it is important to have a sense of his membership of the Old Comic club,[10] and (among much else) salutary to consider how much of the portfolio of demonstrable Aristophanic qualities was actually unique to Aristophanes in his time. On this last limited point, indeed, we must report (on admittedly limited evidence) that there is no sign elsewhere in Old Comedy of his underlying dynamic—of which his preoccupation with tragedy is one, main, diagnostic feature.[11] And (on the larger issue) the fact that Aristophanic art, like all art, is a product of a particular culture and is implicated in the particularities of its institutions, social and political, in no way exempts us from the challenge of coming to terms with its relationships and its significance on a bigger stage.

II After which, it is only appropriate to say something about Aristophanes' immediate context—literary, cultural, social, political—as part of the promised résumé. Aristophanes is the best-known poet of the Old Comedy, which (like the other forms of Attic drama, tragedy, satyr-play, and later versions of comedy itself) is a verse form, performed by masked actors and chorus. 'Old Comedy' itself is an ancient but inexact term, which roughly

evidence of A's own orientation towards the written word may be found in the presumption that he sanctioned the circulation of the unperformed (and 'unperformable'?) *Clouds* II (see below, p. 15): so rightly K. J. Dover, *Aristophanes, Clouds* (Oxford 1968), p. xcviii.

[10] See below, pp. 13–14.

[11] Below, pp. 48–53. It is obviously possible, even likely, that the large imbalance of evidence for A, as against the rest of Old Comedy (see below, p. 14), serves to make us see as distinctively Aristophanic what was actually generic. However, it seems clear that A was consistently an innovator, so that 'generic' might often only mean a feature popularized by A himself: see the discussions in D. Harvey and J. Wilkins (eds.), *The Rivals of Aristophanes* (London 2000).

covers the comic drama of the fifth century BC,[12] and more specifically the comic output of the eighty-odd years from the institutionalization of comedy at Athens (traditionally dated to 486) to the end of the Peloponnesian War (404). The last two of Aristophanes' extant eleven plays lie outside this period. The first nine (from *Acharnians*, 425, to *Frogs*, 405) belong to its last phase, as do his earliest, lost, plays (427/6).

During these last decades of the Old Comedy, performances of comic drama (along with the other dramatic forms, including tragedy) took place at two annual state festivals in honour of the god Dionysus, the City Dionysia and the Lenaea, at the Theatre of Dionysus on the Acropolis. A set number of comic poets (probably five) submitted, normally, a single play in open competition. The costs of each production (chiefly the expense of training and dressing the chorus) were borne by a state-appointed citizen of suitable means (known as a *khorêgos*). The competitions were decided by an elaborately appointed panel of judges whose verdicts (it is clear) were taken seriously by the poets; how far they corresponded with audience reactions (and so tell us about ancient taste) and how far, in any case, they tell us anything about dramatic or poetic qualities perceptible to us is debatable.[13] The chorus numbered twenty-four, the speaking actors three (perhaps sometimes more), along with silent supernumeraries. In Aristophanes' time, at the Lenaea (though not yet at the Dionysia) the leading actor in each play competed for a separate prize; these 'protagonists' were effectively professionals; the chorus, and presumably the other actors, were amateurs.

The chorus performed on a large circular dancing-floor (*orkhêstra*), surrounded by the audience on three sides; the actors performed on a raised stage, with a two-storey building (*skênê*) behind it, or appeared (usually only when playing divinities) on a crane (*mêkhanê*) suspended above the stage, or were 'wheeled out' across the stage on a platform (*ekkuklêma*). Whether and how often actors usurped the *orkhêstra*, or chorus-members the stage,

[12] i.e. *Attic* comic drama: there was also an independent tradition of comic drama, associated chiefly with Epicharmus, in Sicily: see below, pp. 69–70.

[13] Known results are included in the chart below, pp. 18–21. Modern commentators tend to pay unnecessary deference to them and to the whole process (see e.g. A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*[2], rev. J. Gould and D. M. Lewis (corr. edn., Oxford 1988) 95–9). For all we know, verdicts may have been as erratic, even inexplicable, as modern awards of Hollywood Oscars.

is unclear.[14] Masks might be generic (old men, young men, slaves, etc.) or distinctive ('portrait masks'), in representation of particular individuals. Comic masks tended to give an impression of distortion and male costumes, likewise, to be 'distorted' by padding and by the attachment (or exposure) of a leather phallus: how uniformly is, again, unclear.[15] All performers (actors and chorus) were men.

Performance itself included song and dance (usually combined and mostly, though not entirely, choral), speech (from the actors and the chorus leader), and an intermediate kind of verbal delivery, generally called 'recitative' or 'chant' (common both in choral sections and between actors). With very occasional and special exceptions, all words (sung, chanted, or spoken) were in verse, the commonest metre being the iambic trimeter (a rising rhythmic form roughly akin to the staple of most canonical English verse).[16] The tonal range of language involved was enormous—both in Aristophanes and in other Old Comic poetry—all the way from frank obscenity to high style. Musical accompaniment for songs was chiefly on the unaccompanied *aulos* (conventionally mistranslated 'flute'). The music itself (like Greek music in general) an audience from the modern Western world would find rhythmically complex, melodically alien, and harmonically minimal. Acting styles and stage movements would tend to

[14] See e.g. K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (London 1972) 19, E. Csapo and W. J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor 1995) 268, and below, pp. 207–8 n. 3.

[15] Arist. *Poet.* v refers to 'the comic mask' as 'ugly and distorted' (*αἰσχρόν τι καὶ διεστραμμένον*), but is presumably generalizing from contemporary (late Middle?) comedy. Vase paintings certainly suggest distortion, both for masks and costumes (see e.g. the sample in O. Taplin, *Comic Angels* (Oxford 1993)), though modern authorities are probably too ready to extrapolate from such evidence. Visual art in any age is liable to establish its own generalizing conventions: modern visual symbols for public toilets put all 'men' in trousers, all 'women' in skirts; 'the most obvious feature of Greek art is that men are mostly naked or partially naked, whereas women are usually clothed' (A. Stewart, *Art, Desire, and the Body in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge 1997) 24). On the phallus see L. M. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Poetry* (Salem 1984) 72–126.

[16] e.g. (*Ach.* 500) *to gár dikaíon oide kaí trugôidía* (where *-ôi-* is a diphthongal single syllable), cf. e.g. (Keats) 'Fade fár awáy, dissólve, and quíte forgét' (etc.): in both cases the accentual marks indicate notional underlying rhythm (quantitative in Greek, 'stress', essentially, in English). Greek verse is properly analysed into patterns of syllables, ⏑ (light), – heavy, and × (indeterminate, 'anceps'): for the terminology see W. S. Allen, *Accent and Rhythm* (Cambridge 1973) 53–62; in general, M. L. West, *Greek Metre* (Oxford 1982).

involve the kind of bold, externalized stylization appropriate to performance from masked actors in a large outdoor theatre whose capacity exceeded 15,000 (equivalent, maybe, to a tenth of the total—both sexes, all ages—citizen population of the time). Audiences covered the social spectrum from high state officials to the collectivity of ordinary citizens (the *dêmos*), from artists and intellectuals to peasant farmers, from women to children to slaves. Visiting foreigners attended the Dionysia, though not the Lenaea, and the Dionysia in particular was a magnificent public occasion, and, necessarily, an occasion fraught with potential political significance, in terms of self-understanding and self-projection on the part of the articulate spokesmen of the *polis*. How, and how far, that potential was realized by Aristophanes is a matter of interpretation.[17]

In Aristophanic Old Comedy and (to judge from the fragments of other poets of the genre) in Old Comedy as a whole, there are recurrent structural features: a spoken introductory scene ('prologue'), the chorus's entrance song (*parodos*), a formal debate (agon), a sequence in the form of a direct address by the chorus to the audience (the parabasis or 'approach'), and a concluding scene (*exodos*) which often contains or promises a *kômos* (the 'party', from which the name of 'comedy' is itself derived).[18] There may be additional unclassifiable scenes ('episodes') and songs, especially in the later part of the play. The technical terms cited here are all Greek in origin (though agon, in particular, is simply a modern appropriation of the Greek word for 'contest'). The agon and parabasis tend to have elaborate structures of their own.

Old Comedy as a whole was expansive and unpredictable. Different plays might involve very different kinds of material and treatment—from mythological burlesque or some kind of social confrontation to topical presentations which might have a prominent satirical element (like *Clouds*) or not (like *Peace*), and which—whether satirical or not—might be fairly described as 'political' in a narrow sense (like *Knights*) or not (like *Frogs*).

[17] See below, pp. 301–49. Unconvincing attempts have been made to detect typical differences between Lenaean ('Athenian') and Dionysian ('Panhellenic') plays; see e.g. C. F. Russo, *Aristofane autore di teatro*[2] (Florence 1984) 3–21; *contra*, e.g., Pickard-Cambridge, *Festivals*, 39–41, and MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens*, 16.

[18] Below, p. 78 n. 116.

These labels will require closer scrutiny at a later stage, but it is worth spelling out here that if we survey the evidence for Old Comic plots and plot material overall, it is clearly false to suppose (as often implied) that 'political satire', or indeed satire as such, was a determinative requirement of the genre. At the very least, however, it is apparent that 'comic politics' was a prominent feature of Aristophanes' plays of the 420s, much of it directed against Cleon, the most powerful politician of the day. From various references in these same plays it is inferred that Cleon retaliated against Aristophanes himself with public denunciations and threats of legal action.[19] This impression of direct political engagement may or may not be all it seems. Nevertheless, comic involvement in democratic debate—of which this kind of real-life agon would be an extreme example—is unquestionably one of the distinctive features of Old Comedy, albeit not necessarily the most distinctive feature of Aristophanic comedy itself.

Such involvement is equally one of various features of Old Comedy which can be seen to take on a reduced significance or scope in the wake of Athens' sobering defeat in the Peloponnesian War. That defeat is followed by a series of momentous political developments, which begin with civil war and democratic restoration, and end, inside seventy years, with Athens a conquered city in a Macedonian empire under Philip, then Alexander. By the time of the death of Alexander in 323, a century after Aristophanes' arguments with Cleon, a drastic cultural reorientation has taken place, and all the distinctive features of Old Comedy have gone. The New Comedy—Menandrian comedy of manners—disclaims (among much else) the public stance and the interest in topicality, the tonal range and the expansive unpredictability, the agon and the parabasis and the traditional use of a chorus: the chorus is now removed from the action and restricted to interludes. These developments—broadly speaking—begin in a transi-

[19] Supposedly in response to *Babylonians* and to *Knights*: see, succinctly, MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens*, 42–5, 175–6. Apart from A's 'testimony', the only supporting evidence is statements in the ancient *Vitae* and scholia (e.g. schol. on *Ach.* 378), which themselves may have been derived, in whole or part, from the text. Cleon and A apart, there is some (much-contested) evidence for legislation restricting the scope of comic satire before and after this period: see F. S. Halliwell, 'Comic satire and freedom of speech in classical Athens', *JHS* 111 (1991) 48–70, MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens*, 42–5, and cf. the chronology below, pp. 19–20, under years 440–437 and 415.

tional period, conventionally labelled Middle Comedy, to which Aristophanes' last two extant plays, *Ecclesiazusae* and *Plutus*, and especially the latter, clearly belong: the evidence about certain of his last plays is still more revealing.[20]

The cultural reorientations of the fourth century may be traced back to a nexus of tensions and developments in the fifth. From the standpoint of an Old Comic poet concerned with the possibilities of comedy, Athens in the closing decades of the fifth century is in cultural, as also in political, turmoil. This city of great intellectual explorers—the tragedian Euripides, the historian Thucydides, the philosopher Socrates—is also the city famous for its religious traditions, its great religious festivals and movements, and (in tragedy, in particular) its religious poetry. The student of classical Attic literature and society soon learns to see the city as a cultural hot-house, where new forms and configurations grow up, and perhaps wither, with startling rapidity, and where resistance to the new can often be new and exciting itself. A hundred years before Aristophanes' first phase of comic politicking, Athens was a small conservative agricultural community; by the 420s Athens is an outward-looking power and a centre of political, intellectual, and artistic creativity; and in different ways Aristophanic comedy can be shown to acknowledge both of these realities.

The innovations themselves make up a formidable list. This hundred-year period sees the establishment of the peculiar Attic form of direct democracy, and it is in this same period that Athens invents, or hosts the development of, the dramatic forms—comedy, tragedy, satyr-play—and a wealth of prose forms, notably historiography, philosophy and oratory; and these literary developments may be seen to follow, more or less, the trajectory of the progressive democratization of the state. Attic drama, equally, may be seen to be the heir to the earlier poetic traditions of Greece: lyric poetry (meaning *song*), high and low, and epic poetry, narrative and didactic; and—to use a revealing, if perhaps tendentious, recategorization of that same range of earlier material—poetry of praise, poetry of blame.[21] Tragedy, the earliest of

[20] See below, pp. 51–2.

[21] See variously J. Herington, *Poetry into Drama* (Berkeley 1985); G. F. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, Mass. 1965); R. Rosen, *Old Comedy and the Iambographic Tradition* (Atlanta 1988); G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore 1979) 211–75. The identification of Greek 'praise poetry'

the new cultural forms, is, in its heyday, incontestably the most prestigious of them, but from the second half of the fifth century, even the supremacy of tragedy comes into question with the rise of prose thought. This last development is critical. From the 450s Athens becomes a centre for philosophers and philosophy, and 427 (the year of Aristophanes' first play) is the landmark date when the influential Sicilian sophist Gorgias visits the city. Through a cluster of separate challenges to existing tradition, the sophistic movement—a configuration of independent thinkers and teachers, whose very name (partly thanks to their chief enemy, Plato) still drips with connotations of subversive irresponsibility—helps to establish philosophical argument as a prime concern for modern man. More specifically, the sophists proclaim the word, language, the power and the study of language, as the source of intellectual enlightenment and control. Here begins linguistic science. Here, above all, begins oratory as a prestigious art-form with, soon, its own supporting science (rhetorical theory) and its own self-evident claim to a major place in the life of an open, democratic society.

Articulate verbalizing is not just a dominant form of late fifth-century political practice: it is an intense preoccupation of the whole culture. Athens in this generation is truly 'the city of words'.[22] Since the world of archaic Greece, poets above all others—'wise' ones, *sophoi*—had spoken both to and for the community.[23] This role was inherited by drama, and most directly by tragedy, with its complex articulating and mediating of the traditions, the aspirations, the values, and the tensions of the newly democratic state. For all such 'serious' poetry in the traditional high style (which looks back, ultimately, to Homer) it is myth—meeting point of religious belief and socio-cultural practice—that serves as vehicle. By the time the Peloponnesian War is at an end, and Old Comedy is giving way to its successor forms, tragedy, mythic poetry, and poetry in general are themselves giving way in prestige and significance to the challenge of

and 'blame poetry' was originally due to M. Detienne, *Les Maîtres de vérité dans la grèce archaïque* (Paris 1967) 16–27.

[22] The title of ch. 3 in Goldhill's *Reading Greek Tragedy*, and, more recently, of ch. 5 in D. T. Steiner, *The Tyrant's Writ: Myths and Images of Writing in Ancient Greece* (Princeton 1994).

[23] On poetic *sophia*, see below, pp. 46–7 n. 11.