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# The Complete Plays of Aristophanes



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# The Complete Plays of Aristophanes

Edited and with an  
introduction by  
Moses Hadas



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THE COMPLETE PLAYS OF ARISTOPHANES

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# Introduction

## THE WORLD DESTROYED AND REMADE

Aristophanes is not the most profound or exalted of Greek poets, but he is the most creative. Others deal with the world as it is, glorifying it, perhaps, or justifying its flaws, discovering hidden values in it and suggesting how they may be realized; Aristophanes erases the world that is and constructs another. The tragedies we have are all based on traditional myths which the playwrights might interpret and embellish—provided the embellishment were appropriate and probable—but they could not significantly alter the ancient “history.” Aristophanes abolishes history and all ordinary constraints of space and time, of gravity and physiology. If war has become tiresome he makes a private treaty with the enemy or goes to heaven to fetch down the goddess Peace. If Athens has become tiresome he builds a new city in the sky. If living poets are inadequate he goes to hell to fetch back an old one.

For their principal *dramatis personae* the tragic poets were limited to the traditional personages of myth. If Aristophanes wants a character he invents one. To us this does not seem remarkable, but we must remember that not only epic and tragedy and choral lyric but even the dialogues of Plato used only personages who were believed to be historical. And if characters are invented so are their doings. Aristophanes created his own world, and populated it with his own people, as a god might do.

## THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE COMIC

And yet these invented people behave in ways consonant with our conceptions of human nature. Once we grant the validity of the new world which Aristophanes has created, what his people do in it seems perfectly normal. This involves another important difference between comedy and tragedy. The personages of tragedy do indeed grieve and rejoice as men everywhere and always have done, else their stories would be unprofitable and indeed meaningless to us. But

sometimes we need to learn a particular code to understand that causes apparently inconsequential can generate intense emotional responses. Sometimes, similarly, we need to know a particular set of conventions to recognize that a thing is incongruous and therefore funny; but the incongruities which comedy invents are seldom so subtle as to require commentary. Laughter is more direct and more universal than the emotions of tragedy.

No Athenian of the fifth century B.C. (or indeed of any other) ever saw an Agamemnon or a Clytemnestra in the flesh; these stalking figures were deliberately built up by the poets, and their costumes and mode of speech, like their emotional intensity, were calculated to set them apart from ordinary humanity. The figures of comedy, historical (like Euripides or Plato) or invented, are familiar contemporary types, and their behavior is according to familiar norms. The figures of tragedy are sometimes little more than symbols to illustrate some permanent principle of morality; those of comedy have to do with simpler but more immediate problems of making peace, running a school, writing a play. In comedy alone do men drop the rigid poses they are given in graver kinds of writing and walk and talk on a level with their fellow citizens. When the tyrant of Syracuse asked how he could discover what Athenians were like, Plato advised him to read the comedies of Aristophanes.

Aristophanes should then be the most accessible of the fifth-century dramatists, and at many levels he is. He is not at all levels because preoccupation with the timely militates against timelessness. The tragic poets who deal with eternal problems write as if they knew they were addressing the ages. Aristophanes wrote for a specific audience and occasion, and would have laughed at the thought that remote generations might be fingering his plays. At the level of physiological jokes, therefore, and those that approach the physiological in universality, all who share our common physiology can understand him well enough. But allusions to contemporary persons, events, or usages, special connotations of words, and, in a more general view, the intellectual bent of Aristophanic wit sometimes leaves us in the dark—just as reflections of contemporary life in our comedy would be lost on a Greek audience. An old movie has Groucho Marx's secretary say, when two men are waiting to see him, "Epstein is waxing wroth," and Groucho replies, "Tell Roth to wax Epstein." How many volumes of commentary would a Greek require to understand all of the

joke, and how unfunny it would be after he had studied the commentary! We do have helpful information to solve some puzzles in the compilations of scholia made in later antiquity, but much must remain only partially understood. But as in all classical literature so in Aristophanes also the specific merges with the general. From Aristophanes' contemporary Thucydides, for example, we learn the details of a particular war but we learn also about the nature of war generally. So in Aristophanes, if the details are not always clear the general principles are not only clear but instructive.

### WIT AND HUMOR

More basic than the difficulty of forgotten allusions is the fact that Aristophanic comedy is intellectual rather than sentimental. What the essential nature of the comic is, is still an open question, but for assaying individual creators of comedy it is convenient and it may be instructive to distinguish between the sentimental kind, which engages the reader's sympathy for its personages as human beings, and the intellectual kind, which attacks the reader's head rather than his heart, or, if we may give the words these particular meanings, between humor and wit. In later European literature the outstanding protagonists of the two kinds are Cervantes and Rabelais. Cervantes engages our sympathy for Don Quixote until we wince for him when he is beaten or ridiculed; Gargantua and Pantagruel are bloodless figures of intellectual fun, and whatever befalls them our kibes are ungalled. Or, to look at the stage, the casts of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* or *Alchemist* can no more be hated than loved, for they are almost  $x$ 's and  $y$ 's in a mathematical demonstration; but we do come near loving Molière's Agnes just as we loathe his Tartuffe. If, in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, we feel kindly toward Socrates or Strepsiades, it is because we know Socrates from other sources and because we are sorry for old men we know who are bedeviled by wastrel sons, Aristophanes does nothing to waken our sympathy or play upon it. It is just where kindness might be expected that we find him most heartless. He is notably cruel to old women, for example, as all writers of intellectual comedy tend to be: Gilbert and Sullivan, to cite one example, are.

Intellectual fun, needless to say, is not necessarily lofty. Pie-throwing and prat-falls are intellectual jokes, not humor. The basis of the intellectual joke is manifest incongruity.

Very often, as notably in Rabelais as in Aristophanes, the incongruity depends on kinds of word play: a pun is funny because it brings together two meanings of a word that are really incongruous. But puns are not the only kind of incongruity. It is incongruity, not sympathy for an impoverished gentleman, that makes us laugh at a top-hat that is dented or worn with patched shoes. If it were habitual with us to keep the queer members which flap at either side of our heads scrupulously swathed, nothing could be funnier than to see them unexpectedly exposed. That is why the phalluses and talk about them which are ordinarily discreetly covered are funny when exposed to an audience.

### OBSCENITY SACRED AND PROFANE

To use Aristophanes as a stick with which to belabor the Victorians and their progeny is false, for the Greeks too were Victorian; if they had not been, Aristophanes' bawdry would not have been incongruous and would not have amused the Greeks any more than it would have amused us. It is true that we are more reserved in these matters than were the Greeks, and hence the bawdry is to us more obtrusive; that is how "Aristophanic" has acquired its meaning. It is of course true that Aristophanes' plays are saturated with obscenity; excretory and sexual functions are explicit or implicit on every page, and dozens of seemingly innocent words apparently carried obscene connotations. But what should interest us is not that Aristophanes is so outspoken but that the rest of Greek literature is so pure, not that men seemed to relish obscenity (when have they not?) but that it was presented under the highest auspices of the state, to the entire population, at a religious festival under the presidency of a priest and on consecrated ground.

Obscenity was incongruous because Greek literature aside from comedy is one of the most decorous we know; it is more decorous, for example, than the literature of the Old Testament. It is as if dumping all bawdiness into one form served to keep the others pure, and that indeed is one implication of Euripides' *Bacchae*. The ferment which a man must exert himself to suppress if he would keep all the days of the year pure will nevertheless creep in to taint all 365 of them; but if he gives the ferment three days of carnival in which to boil itself away then he might hope to keep the other 362 untainted. The god who proved this arithmetic upon Pentheus



in the *Bacchae* was of course the same Dionysus who was celebrated in the dramatic festivals.

If comedy is a wholesome purge we can understand how the enlightened authorities of a state might tolerate it, but the religious auspices must still seem odd to communicants of more austere religions. The explanation is that, as in the Greek art forms, a usage which originally had a religious rationale obvious to all came to be retained for aesthetic or other reasons after the religious burden had faded or disappeared. About the early history of comedy we know little—mainly because Aristotle did not like comedy and scanted it in his *Poetics*—but there can be no doubt that its origins are to be connected with a fertility cult, in which the element of sex would naturally be central. The beast mummery (as in the fantastic costuming and titles of the choruses) and the festive topsy-turvydom which gave inferiors license to make butts of their betters are surely integral to the cultic origins of comedy also. To what degree fifth-century audiences were conscious of the original significances of these elements of comedy we cannot be sure; but the sense of ritual surely remained, for the Greeks were extremely conservative in preserving established forms. Aristotle says that when an art form reaches its proper development it remains fixed. Euripides might revolutionize the spirit of tragedy, but he retained its form virtually unchanged.

### THE FORM OF OLD COMEDY

It is because of its religious origins and associations, doubtless, and because Greek art is always observant of form that Aristophanes' plays fall into a regular pattern; the pattern is not so strict as tragedy's, but much more regular than in modern comedy. As in tragedy there is a *prologue*; the *parodos*, or entry of the chorus; the equivalent of *episodes*, separated from one another by fixed choral elements; and an *exodos*, or marching-away song. The chorus (usually numbering twenty-four) is much larger than the chorus of tragedy, and its apparently capricious arrangements accord to a strict pattern. In the *parabasis* the chorus comes forward to speak for the author in his own person. Here the author may justify his own work, defend himself against rivals or attack them, and here he may comment, like a columnist in a modern newspaper, on whatever abuses in the contemporary scene he may wish to animadvert upon. It is from the parabasis of

Old Comedy that the Roman genre of satire derived. At one point in the play the chorus divides into two, each half defending some point of view and abusing the other half, not only with words but sometimes even physically. Rowdy and uproarious as it may be, this contest or *agon* is usually a serious presentation of some contemporary problem. For each of the parts of the choral performance there was a prescribed meter; for example a patter song, called *pnigos* or "choker," was sung rapidly without drawing new breath.

The masks of comic actors, unlike those of tragedy, showed exaggeratedly coarse peasant types. The theory that there were a fixed set of masks—Old Man, Cook, Courtesan, etc.—somewhat as in the *commedia dell'arte*—does not apply to Old Comedy. Not only were the features of the masks coarse, but the actors were ridiculously padded on belly and buttocks, and had oversize phalluses appended. The padding allowed for all kinds of farcical business, as in the singeing of Mnesilochus in the *Thesmophoriazusae*. The prominent phalluses and the beast costumes of the chorus, as has been suggested, derived from early ritual associations of fertility cults. Providing the fanciful costumes for the chorus and training them in their intricate performances involved great expense; that is why the choral work is curtailed in Aristophanes' last plays, presented when Athens was impoverished.

The movement of an Aristophanic play is as regular as its form. The prologue, frequently a master-slave conversation, sets forth some fantastic scheme—a descent to hell, a sex strike, or the like—and the rest of the play is worked out on the assumption that the premises are the most commonplace in the world. In the *agon* the "good" side naturally wins and the bad is discomfited. The bad side goes off, often literally bruised, and the good goes to a riotous celebration, often accompanied by gay females. This is surely a relic of some sort of ritual "marriage" which was the culmination of a fertility celebration; psychologically it is the only acceptable solution of a comedy. The endings of tragedy, however grim they may be, are psychologically satisfying, but how else is a comedy to end?

### THE TEACHING BRIEF

Aside from its creative fantasy and its purgative wit, what makes the comedy of Aristophanes memorable is its exquisite lyrics and its serious commentary—on politics, poetry, educa-

tion, good citizenship. The qualities of lyric poetry are notoriously hard to communicate, in translation or description; all that can be said of Aristophanes' is that they are singularly graceful, with a sweetness that is more appealing because of the soil out of which they grow. Richest of all in this kind is the *Birds*, which the lyrics transform into an idyllic fairyland, but there are fine pieces in all the comedies. It is Aristophanes' lyricism, indeed, which lends his comedies wings, and that is why prose or inept verse translation is peculiarly unfortunate in his case. Without the lift of poetry much of his terrain is a malodorous and heavy bog in which people of certain tastes may take pleasure in wallowing, but which is a travesty of Aristophanes' scintillating artistry.

What is more surprising than lyricism or bawdiness to innocent readers who expect of farce only that it be rollicking is Aristophanes' mature commentary on perennial problems of political and social life. All the classic poets were looked upon and looked upon themselves as serious teachers—the doctrine of pure belles-lettres was invented by the precious Alexandrian court poets under the patronage of the Ptolemies—but none seems so conscious of a teaching mission as Aristophanes. For one thing his teaching was more explicit and immediate. The tragic poet might explore large questions of the ways of God to man; the comic poet told his audiences what was wrong with foreign policy or politicians, or how educationists were corrupting sound learning or neoteric poets corrupting good taste, and he invited immediate action, not merely a change in attitude. Outspoken criticism of what Euripides called "the statues in the market place" was a carnival privilege which probably originated in the revels of the fertility cult, but it has always been an element in serious comedy. We think of Rabelais' slashing criticism of state educational practices at the Sorbonne, or of war in the episode of the grape growers and cake bakers, of the entire anti-humanist outlook upon life in his ideal Abbey of Thélème. "For children have tutors to guide them aright," Aristophanes makes Aeschylus say in the *Frogs*, "young manhood has poets for teachers."

So pervasive is the didactic in Aristophanes and so consistent the tenor of his criticism that many have thought that advocacy of a particular set of doctrines was his prime object and that he chose comedy as their most effective vehicle, and some have thought that he was actually in the pay of the conservative oligarchy. Nothing could be more mis-

taken. The proper description of Aristophanes is poet and comic genius. His object in writing plays was to amuse, and to do it so well that he would win the prize. But an intelligent man who is funny must be funny about something, and the traditions of the form in which Aristophanes worked involved comment on matters of public interest. In this respect the comic poet was something like a newspaper columnist, and as in the case of thoughtful columnists it happened that Aristophanes' comments on all questions followed a consistent direction.

The direction is at all points conservative. Aristophanes plainly does not like the relaxation of traditional standards which attended the rise of democratic power and looks back wistfully to the soberer ways of an earlier day. Like many upper-class Athenians he admired the Spartans and thought the war against them a regrettable mistake. This feeling is more or less under the surface in all the plays of the war period, but it is outspoken in the *Acharnians* and especially in the *Knights*. In the latter play he brushes aside the stunning victory of the Athenians at Sphacteria and exaggerates a minor success won by the knights at Corinth. He loathes Cleon (who took credit for the victory at Sphacteria), and thinks (in the *Wasps*) that the innovation of pay for jury duty, actually a measure to provide sustenance for the beleaguered and unemployed Athenians, was introduced by Cleon to strengthen his hold on the populace. And yet, as the *Lysistrata* shows, he is more moved by sympathy for the innocent sufferers of war than by anger against the war-mongers. The amazing thing is that plays attacking the war policy when the state was at war could be given under state auspices and that Cleon could be most virulently attacked for bad morals and manners when he was himself in the audience.

Aristophanes is most bitter against the sophists, for it was their doctrine of man the measure which was the greatest solvent for traditional privilege and for traditional morality, and which encouraged the loquacious impertinence of sailors and artisans. In order to give force to his attack on the sophists he is willing to make Socrates, who was himself opposed to the sophists, a butt, because Socrates was a familiar figure and his appearance and manner invited ridicule. This does not mean, of course, that Aristophanes' shrewd attacks on the relaxed discipline and the criterion of expediency favored by the new education are without point. He



strikes at Euripides in almost every play and makes him the chief butt of the *Frogs* and the *Thesmophoriazusae* because, following sophist doctrine, Euripides degraded tragedy from its lofty plane and vulgarized it by introducing commonplace characters and unseemly plots. And yet he pays Euripides the tacit compliment of imitating him, and for all his sympathy for Aeschylus, in the *Frogs*, he pronounces some unkind truths about Aeschylus' own faults of pomposity and turgidity. And the *Thesmophoriazusae* is a delightful piece of literary playfulness, wholly without malice. He dislikes innovations in music, and thinks the old tunes were better because they fostered manly discipline. He dislikes theories of social reform pointing to socialism or communism, mainly because people cannot in nature be equal, as these systems premise. Human nature, he holds, cannot be transformed by legislation: the exploiting officials whom communism was expected to reform, in the *Ecclesiazusae*, promptly turn up as even more grasping commissars. He is thoroughly Athenian in making the interest of the state the gauge for all values: when Dionysus cannot decide between Euripides and Aeschylus on grounds of poetic merit (in the *Frogs*) the decision is reached by the soundness of the political advice which each offers. It is significant that the *Birds*, which is the most carefully wrought of all the plays, is also the most charming and utterly free from malice. It is the sad state of the human condition, and not a particular set of malefactors, that prompts the establishment of a utopia in a fanciful never-never land.

One final quality of the plays, which tells us more about the audience than the playwright, must be mentioned, and that is the volume of literary allusion which the audience was expected to recognize. There are allusions or intentionally garbled quotations from tragedy (of which we owe the identification to the scholiasts) in all the plays, the *Thesmophoriazusae* and the *Frogs* turn on quotations, mainly from Euripides, and the *Frogs* expects of its audience a high degree of sophistication in literary criticism. All of this would be understandable in works directed to an esoteric audience of scholars; but these plays were addressed to the whole population, and were meant to win prizes, not be a *succès d'estime*. We have no better evidence than the plays of Aristophanes for the high level of general literary sophistication in Athens, as we have no better evidence than his plays for the effectiveness of Athenian *eleutheria* and *parrhesia*, liberty and freedom of speech.

## THE MAN, HIS RIVALS, HIS SUCCESSORS

Except for the parabases of his own plays, in which he speaks of his own and his rivals' works, we know no more of Aristophanes than we do of the writers of tragedy. One distinction of Aristophanes is that whereas the surviving plays of Sophocles and Euripides were written in full maturity and most near the ends of their long lives, those of Aristophanes, except for the *Ecclesiazusae* and the *Plutus*, are a young man's work. Aristophanes was born about 445 B.C., and the *Acharnians*, produced in 425 when he was barely twenty, is a fully mature work. Details given in the ancient Lives are extrapolations from his plays or imaginary. His death cannot have occurred before 388 B.C.

In all, forty-four plays were attributed to Aristophanes, and of these some were produced under the names of other poets. The fact that the eleven plays of Aristophanes which we have are the only complete specimens of Old Comedy to survive is sufficient proof that his work was esteemed the best. Five of the eleven plays we have—*Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Clouds*, *Wasps*, and *Peace*—were produced one each year from 425 to 421. Then follow the *Birds*, Aristophanes' acknowledged masterpiece, 414; *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophorizusae*, 411; and *Frogs*, 405. The fall of Athens in 404 was a blow to comedy as to other aspects of Attic creativity, and the two last plays of our corpus show spiritual as well as physical impoverishment. The *Ecclesiazusae*, produced in 392 B.C., shows a flagging of comic verve; the choral portions are perfunctory, and at one place our texts give merely the word "Chorus." *Plutus*, produced in 388 B.C., leaves the exuberant farce of the earlier Aristophanes almost entirely and makes a transition to the comedy of manners. There is no longer criticism of persons and policies but a travesty of the myth of the blind god of wealth to which no individual could take exception and which is applicable to any age or place. The *Plutus* was in fact far the most popular of Aristophanes' comedies in the Byzantine period.

There were, of course, many other masters of Old Comedy, a number of whom defeated Aristophanes in competitions, just as there were tragic poets who defeated Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides. The Alexandrian scholars who constructed "canons" of poets in various genres joined Cratinus and Eupolis to Aristophanes in a triad to balance the Tragic

Three. It is clear that Aristophanes towered above his rivals by a greater interval than any tragic poet above his, but the work of the others, on the evidence of their fragments, is by no means negligible. Those whose loss is most regrettable are Epicharmus, the pioneer in the form, Crates, and Plato Comicus.

Greek Comedy after Old is traditionally classified as Middle and New. Of Middle Comedy little can be said, for although the volume was enormous we have no extant specimen of the genre and can only surmise its character from Aristophanes' *Plutus* and from such a play as Plautus' *Amphitryo*, which is also a travesty of myth and presumably drawn from a Middle Comedy model. In New Comedy, on the other hand, we have not only a complete play (the *Dyskolos*) and extensive fragments of the work of Menander but numerous adaptations of several other New Comedy playwrights in Plautus and Terence. It is New Comedy—which has affinities with the later work of Euripides—rather than tragedy or the farce of Aristophanes which is the ancestor of our European drama. The persons and plots of New Comedy are invented, as in Old Comedy, not drawn from ancient "history," but New Comedy represents the relationships and problems of Everyman, and is therefore the most exportable of all ancient dramatic forms.

If Aristophanes is without direct progeny his influence on subsequent satire and farce is very great. But valuable as he may be as a commentary on a uniquely valuable area of human experience or as a begetter of art in others, his true claim upon our attention is as the most brilliant and artistic and thoughtful wit our world has known.

### THE TRANSLATIONS

Where a poet's doctrine is our chief concern a clear prose version may be better than mediocre verse; but for Aristophanes, though his teaching is significant, verse is mandatory. Without it the sparkle vanishes and the bawdiness is reduced to a noisome morass. Older verse translations have been antiquated by new standards of faithfulness and propriety. The first acceptable in English are those of Benjamin Bickley Rogers (1829-1919), which combine sparkle and melody with accuracy. Four of the Rogers versions are included in the present volume. Three others of similar quality but with an unmistakable American tang are from the hand of Robert

Henning Webb (1882-1952), late Professor of Greek in the University of Virginia. These are used with the generous permission of the University of Virginia Press, which plans to publish all of Webb's Aristophanes, with the translator's illuminating notes. Of the remaining four plays two have been translated, with his customary verve and felicity, by Jack Lindsay, the English scholar and poet, and two by the present editor.



## Acharnians

The *Acharnians* was produced in 425 B.C., when Aristophanes was barely twenty, but in exuberant inventiveness, lyrical quality, serious political criticism, it is among Aristophanes' best plays. It won the first prize over Cratinus and Eupolis. The characteristic topsy-turvy fantasy upon which the play hinges is the notion that a man weary of an ill-considered war might make an individual peace with the enemy. Here Dicaeopolis makes such a peace with Sparta, but as he is about to celebrate the long-intermittent vintage festival he is attacked by a chorus of Acharnian charcoal burners who represent the war party and he wins a hearing by a parody of Euripides' *Telephus*. In a seriocomic speech he shows that the causes of the war were trifling, and wins over half the chorus, who are engaged in a violent agon by the other half. These call in the general Lamachus to assist them, but the general too is bested in argument, and the chorus, uniting on Dicaeopolis' side, deliver the poet's parabasis. Then Megarians and Boeotians bring in for sale the good things Athens has lacked. A herald summons Lamachus to a hard campaign, and another, Dicaeopolis to a wine party. Lamachus returns wounded, and Dicaeopolis reels in, having won the prize for drinking, on the arms of pretty flute girls, whom he leads out in procession. If we are astonished at the temerity of a poet who could say a word for the enemy and many words for pacifism amid the passions of war, we must be amazed at a democracy which permitted and sponsored such a play in time of war, and gave it first prize.