

The Complete Plays Study Guide

The Complete Plays by Aristophanes

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Plot Summary

Aristophanes was the greatest writer of comedy in the ancient Greek world. This collection contains 10 of his surviving plays. Most are in the form of what is called Old Comedy. Old Comedy is typically satirical, attacking politicians and issues of the day. Many of these plays deal with issues in Athens at the time of the plays.

The first play in this collection deals with several of the themes that will recur in later plays, namely the issues of war and peace and satire of democracy and Cleon. In this play, *Acharnians*, a lone man attempts to make a private peace with the Spartans in opposition to his countrymen. In *Knights*, Aristophanes intensifies his attacks on Cleon by pitting a lowly sausage maker against a thinly disguised version of Cleon for control of Athenian politics. Both men compete in seeing who can be the most corrupt and vile in bribing the population of Athens. In *Clouds*, Aristophanes sets his sites on Athens' most famous gadfly, Socrates. In an attempt to get out of gambling debts an old man sends his son to Socrates' school so he can learn the rhetorical arts of turning bad arguments into good. The skill is more dangerous than the old man would have guessed though and the play ends with him trying to burn down the philosopher's "think-shop". *Wasps* take aim again at Cleon and the litigious nature of Athenian society. A son is worried about his father, who is addicted to serving on juries and judging lawsuits. It is only by staging a mock trial himself that he is able to get his father to give up on his court addiction.

In *Peace* and *Birds* Aristophanes leaves the topical behind and engages in comedic flights of fancy and fantasy. *Peace* is the story of a country gentleman riding a dung beetle into heaven to try to free the goddess peace and end the destructive war between Athens and Sparta. *Birds* is the story of two men who are tired of living among men and attempt to join a society of birds. In so doing, they organize a bird revolution against the gods and men.

Lysistrata is the tale of Greek women deciding to refuse sex with their men until they agree to stop fighting and sign a peace between Sparta and Athens. This obscene and hilarious play is the beginning of several plays about women. In *Thesmophoriazousae*, a group of women have formed a council to try and sentence the playwright Euripides in absentia for his slanders against them in his plays. Euripides sends his cousin to infiltrate the women but he is discovered and Euripides has to find a way to say his friend. *Frogs* is a critical comedy that tells the story of Dionysus and servant descending into Hades to bring back Euripides from the dead but deciding, once they get there, that they would rather save Aeschylus. In *the Assemblywomen*, a group of women hatch a plot to take over the government and institute a communist system. Finally, *Plutus* is the story of what would happen if wealth went to those who deserved it rather than those who are lucky.



Acharnians

Acharnians Summary

The Play begins with Dicaeopolis, a middle-aged Athenian, waiting for the Athenian assembly to begin in the Pnyx. He talks of the horrors of the ongoing war between Sparta and Athens focusing on the economic damage the war has done to the city. Dicaeopolis is waiting for the assembly to start so he can bring up the issue of peace once again. As the assembly opens, he is not able to put his peace agenda on the table before several other speakers make their case. First there is an ambassador from the court of the Persian king second is the messenger of the King of Persia, the "Great King Eye" and third there is a Thracian. No one discusses peace and the assembly closes before Dicaeopolis can make his case. Frustrated, Dicaeopolis meets a man named Amphitheus who claims he can meet with the Spartans and broker a private peace deal between Dicaeopolis and the Spartans.

Amphitheus is successful and the Spartans make a private peace deal with Dicaeopolis. Overjoyed, he tells his family the good news and throws a feast of Dionysus to celebrate. Unfortunately, a gang of Acharnians has pursued Amphitheus, old farmers and veterans whose farms were burned by the Spartans and who now wish only revenge on the Spartan enemy. Dicaeopolis tries to reason with the men, but to no avail. They plan to pelt Dicaeopolis with Charcoal but before they can get started, Dicaeopolis takes one of their number as a hostage with his sword. The hostage is, in fact, only a basket of charcoal, but for whatever reason, the Acharnians agree to leave Dicaeopolis alone if he spares the charcoal. Dicaeopolis, though, wants to convince the people of the justice of his cause so he agrees to put his head on the chopping block while he makes his case. Presumably, if the crowd dislikes what he says, they will execute him. Fearing the fickle mob, Dicaeopolis makes his way to the home of Euripides the famous playwright. Euripides is good at putting together convincing speeches, but Dicaeopolis only wants to borrow a costume of a beggar from one of Euripides's plays to wear during his talk. Costumed and on the chopping block, Dicaeopolis lays out his case against the war. Basically he claims that the war was started for ridiculous reasons and it is only hurting everyone now. Half of the Acharnians are won over by the argument, half are not convinced. Each half begins fighting with the other half until the Athenian general, Lamachus, who lives next door comes out to see what is going on. One half of the Acharnians claim that Dicaeopolis is treasonously attacking the state. Dicaeopolis then asks Lamachus why he supports the war and insinuates that he only supports it because of the money he is paid. This wins the Acharnians over and Dicaeopolis returns to his house.

Dicaeopolis returns to the stage and sets up a private, walled market around his house where Spartans, Athenians, and whoever else may trade in peace. A Megarian shows up who wants to sell Dicaeopolis a pig but an Athenian informer tries to confiscate the pigs as illegal. Dicaeopolis then tries to sell the informer to a Boeotian. Next a herald calls Lamachus to battle and Dicaeopolis is summoned to a drinking contest. Both men



prepare to go to their respective appointments in parallel. Later, Lamachus returns home, wounded and lamenting his injury. Dicaeopolis returns with two young girls, drunk and sporting the prize from the drinking competition. The play ends with Dicaeopolis talking about how great his life is while Lamachus laments his fate.

Acharnians Analysis

Acharnians is a seemingly silly piece of self-referential satire, though there is also a subtext of political and social criticism. One of Aristophanes' earlier plays, Acharnians takes aim at those in his city of Athens that would continue the war in Athens and try to quash dissent. In a previous play, Aristophanes had attacked Cleon, an Athenian statesman and leader of the pro-war faction. Aristophanes depicts Cleon as a warmongering, corrupt, demagogue who seeks to quiet those who, like Aristophanes, would speak out against the war. The play takes place in the background of the Peloponnesian war between Sparta and Athens. Aristophanes, like his main character Dicaeopolis opposed the war, seeing it as wasteful and pointless. By taking a costume from Euripides, another famous playwright who Aristophanes often mocks, the author seems to be signaling that he has inserted himself into the play. Aristophanes is saying that his head is on the chopping block as well as Dicaeopolis.

At the end of the play Aristophanes hopes to have made a strong case for the virtues and benefits of peace. He contrasts Dicaeopolis with Lamachus the general. Dicaeopolis has, at this time, made his private peace with Sparta and spends his time trading in his market and drinking. Lamachus, however, is still involved in the war and in the final scene we see Dicaeopolis returning from a fun night of drinking and Lamachus returning home from battle wounded.



The Knights

The Knights Summary

The Knights is a satire and indictment of Athenian Democracy at the time of the play. Like Acharnians, The Knights is symbolic and self-referential.

The Play begins with two slaves, Demosthenes and Nicias, complaining of a recent beating they received from their master Demos. In reality, Demosthenes and Nicias were Athenian generals and 'Demos' means, in Greek, the people, that is, the ultimate authority in the Athenian democracy. Demosthenes and Nicias were beaten because of the lies of their fellow slave Cleon, also called Paphlagon. At the time Cleon was a democratic leader of Athens, very influential and popular. The two men decide to get drunk and steal some wine while discussing how bad Cleon/Paphlagon is. The two men, now drunk, decide to take a look at what the oracles say about Cleon. They find that, according to the oracles, a sausage merchant will replace Paphlagon. Just as they find out the fate of their country, a sausage merchant passes by them and they tell the merchant to come and listen to his future. They tell him that he will rule Athens while the sausage merchant is, understandably, skeptical. The merchant protests that he is not a great man and can only read and write a little. Demosthenes and Nicias explain that the more common and uneducated a man the better. The people of Athens will respond better to one of their own. They then show him a ridiculously obscure oracle and claim that it predicts his ascension. Demosthenes and Nicias tell the sausage merchant that he will have the support of the Knights, and their support will ensure his victory.

Just then, Paphlagon enters and finds his wine drunk and accuses the three men of plotting against him. The men call the Knights to come defend them and the Knights, in the form of the chorus show up and charge Paphlagon with various crimes. Paphlagon tries to defend himself to the Knights and accuses the sausage merchant of different crimes as well. Both the sausage merchant and Paphlagon accuse each other and try to make a case to defend themselves to the people. The Knights are not convinced and declare the sausage merchant the winner. Paphlagon, in a last attempt to salvage his life and power races off to the Athenian city council to accuse the sausage merchant and his supporters of treason. Not content to leave his case to fate, the sausage merchant follows to plead his own side of the story to the council.

The next scene begins with the sausage merchant returning to tell what has happened to the assembled Knights and people. The sausage merchant has convinced the council to rule in his favor by offering them food, basically he has bribed them with the only thing a sausage merchant has and the council has ruled in his favor. Paphlagon, still refusing to give in, decides to take his case directly to his master, Demos. In the ensuing exchange both Paphlagon and the sausage merchant accuse each other of serious and ridiculous crimes, though, not surprisingly, the sausage merchant is willing to sink to lower depths than even the demagogue Paphlagon and eventually wins the argument. Paphlagon reads the writing on the wall and retreats.



After an interlude where the Chorus of Knights repeat some of the accusations of figures in historical Athens from Aristophanes, the play takes a turn for the ridiculous. The sausage merchant returns on stage to claim that he has boiled and cooked Demos and transformed it into something much better. Furthermore he has freed women that were being kept hostage by Paphlagon. Basically, the play ends with the sausage merchant and Demos talking about how things will be better in Athens now that Paphlagon is no longer in charge.

The Knights Analysis

The Knights is a strange play. It is very topical and doesn't completely make sense to modern readers. Most of the play is meant to satirize the Athens of Aristophanes' time and the leaders of that Athens, especially Cleon. Cleon is depicted here, in the form of Paphlagon as a criminal engaged in the worst kinds of crimes against the people of Athens. Many of the accusations are obscene and ridiculous though many are also more reasonable such as the accusations that Cleon has used his position to ingratiate himself with the people and that he has engaged in and prolonged the war with the Spartans for his own political advantage. Our concerns are not still the political concerns of Aristophanes so much of the play falls flat on modern ears.

Although directly a satire of Athens and Cleon, the play is also, more generally, an attack on and also a defense of democracy. Democracy, that is, rule by the people or Demos is portrayed here as susceptible to manipulation not only by demagogue like Cleon, but even worse demagogues like the Sausage merchant. In the end, democracy is saved from Cleon, but it is not clear, despite the hyperbole at the end of the play, that rule by the sausage merchant will necessarily be an improvement. We are left with a savage indictment and satire of Athenian democracy that doesn't necessarily propose anything in its place. This is ok, though, because Aristophanes is not trying to present a comprehensive political theory, but rather a satire of Cleon that will turn Athenians against their leader. It apparently worked and despite the obvious flaws of Athenian democracy, it is remarkable that such a wild and strong attack on a sitting leader would have been allowed. Maybe the censors were afraid of Aristophanes' pen as well.



The Clouds

The Clouds Summary

The Clouds is a satire of Socrates and the Sophists of Athens at the time of Aristophanes. It begins with the old man Strepsiades watching his son, Pheidippides sleep soundly while cursing his son for getting him into debt. Pheidippides loves racing horses and has spent all of Strepsiades' money paying for horses and racers. So much so that the old man is now in a great deal of debt. At wits end, Strepsiades begins to beat his son, waking the younger man who protests that his beating is undeserved. Eventually the father relents and decides that he will try to find a way to get rid of his debts. Having heard that the sophist Socrates teaches a kind of logic that allows his students to get out of their debts and turn bad arguments into good ones, Strepsiades tries to get his son to enroll in Socrates' "think-shop" where he may learn the masters' dialectical arts. Claiming that all the students of Socrates are pale and ugly, Pheidippides refuses to enter the school. Strepsiades, determined to eliminate his debt, decides to enroll in the "think-shop" himself.

Upon arriving at the "think-shop" Strepsiades' cloak is taken and he enters the school to meet the students and the master. They ask him ridiculous questions about how gnats fart and other silly things before they eventually introduce Strepsiades to Socrates who is in a basket suspended from the ceiling. Socrates claims that it is necessary to sit in the basket to be able to contemplate the mysteries of the airy heights. He comes down and, after explaining to Strepsiades that there are no gods, decides that he will allow Strepsiades to enter his school. Socrates introduces Strepsiades to the true gods, the clouds, who are shaped as women. He then goes on to explain why there are no other gods and that Strepsiades must get naked and begin his instruction. After some arguing, Socrates decides that Strepsiades has no ability for learning and suggests instead that he send his son, Pheidippides, in his place.

After some threatening, Pheidippides agrees to enter the "thin-shop". Later, Strepsiades returns to find his son turned pale like the other students of Socrates. Pheidippides tells his father that he has nothing to worry about and that Pheidippides will find a way to get out of all of his debts. He proves his skills with several examples of ridiculous sophistry. Eventually one of the creditors arrives asking for his money, Pheidippides uses twisted logic and a repudiation of his oath to the gods, who he claims do not exist, to send the first creditor packing. He quickly dispatches a second creditor with a similar method and afterwards, he and his father go inside to celebrate.

Sometime later, Strepsiades emerges complaining of the beating that his son is giving him over a small offense. Pheidippides claims that he has every right to beat his father using twisted logic to arrive at this conclusion. Pheidippides then claims that he will go on to beat his mother. Realizing he has created a monster by sending his son to Socrates, Strepsiades grabs a torch and heads over to the "think-shop" to burn the



school down. Making good with the old gods, Strepsiades burns the "think-shop" and those within, including Socrates.

The Clouds Analysis

The Clouds is a biting attack on the sophists of Athens, foremost among them Socrates. So strong and influential was this satire that Plato, a student of Socrates, claims in his own work on the trial and execution of Socrates that it was the caricature from this play that contributed to the indictment against Socrates.

Aristophanes is making two separate indictments of Socrates here. First, he is making Socrates and his followers out to be ridiculous. This is his lampoon of the subject matter of their investigations, including research on the farting habits of gnats. His second critique is in some tension with the first though, and it is the claim that Socrates is teaching dangerous doctrines. These doctrines include the belief that the gods do not exist and the ability to use words to make bad arguments good. In Athens at the time, loans were made partially on the assumption that Zeus would strike down those who broke their oaths or contracts. The argument that there is no Zeus is not only blasphemous, but also dangerous to the social order. Aristophanes seems to be saying that if we let thinkers like Socrates roam loose and spread their noxious doctrine, belief in the gods will wane and men will forget their oaths and obligations. Furthermore, the old social norms will break down and sons will beat fathers and debtors will escape from their debts. Athens, later, agreed with Aristophanes' indictment of philosophy and Socrates when they sentenced him to death for crimes similar to the ones mentioned in this play.



The Wasps

The Wasps Summary

The Wasps is another attack on Cleon and satire of the judicial culture of Athens. The play begins with two slaves, Sosias and Xanthias keeping watch over their master's house. Their master has ordered the two slaves to keep watch on his father's house and not to let the old man out because of his affliction. He is addicted to some activity, which the slaves ask the audience to guess about. After going through the usual list of gambling, drinking, women, etc. the slaves tell the audience that the old man is addicted to the court. He spends all of his time watching lawyers give statements and voting in juries. His son has tried to keep him from the court that he loves so much, but nothing has worked. Their master, Bdelycleon (Cleon hater) emerges and asks the slaves if they are sleeping. He claims that his father Philocleon (Cleon lover) is rummaging about in the oven trying to escape from the house. Just then, they see the father emerging from the chimney. He claims to be smoke escaping, but the slaves get a hold of him and pull him into the house. As he is being forced back into his home he screams that he must go out and join the jury lest a certain man be acquitted. It is clear that his legal addiction is serious.

Trying another trick to get out of the house, the father tells his son that he needs to leave to go sell his donkey in the market. Claiming that he will sell the donkey instead, the son drags the donkey out of the house, but not before one of the slaves notices a man hanging on to the underside of the donkey. Of course, it is the father disguised and claiming to be "noman" but his ruse doesn't fool anyone and his son sends the man back into the house, but not before the father calls for the help of the other judges, most prominently Cleon. The son tells his slaves to pile up stones and bolder over the door so that the old man cannot escape. The son, however, fears that his fellow legal maniacs will show up and try to free him. Just then, the chorus of old men dressed as wasps arrives.

The Wasps demand that the son release his father, but he refuses causing the wasps to buzz about and attack the men. After some argument, the son appeals to the litigious desires of the wasps and asks to settle the matter by a debate. The son claims that his father is being used by leaders of the city (Cleon) as a tool to their tyranny. He claims he can prove as much by argument. The old man begins the debate by describing the joys he gets from acting as a judge. He enjoys hearing the arguments and being fawned over by the litigants as well as being paid for his services and being able to have the power to interpret the law. Finally he enjoys the fear and respect that others have for him as a judge and juror. His son responds that however much power he may think that he has, it is really the officials above him, including Cleon, that use the courts to intimidate their enemies and to extort others for their own benefit. In return for their help, these other officials only pay the judges a small percentage of the money they extort. This line of argumentation wins over his father and the chorus of wasps. Still, the father



enjoys judging so the son agrees to set up a court in the house where his father can settle disputes. He races out into the streets to find his first case.

The case is that of two dogs, one named Labes who is accused by another dog of stealing some cheese off of a table. After an indictment by the other dog, the son gives a defense of the dog tricking his father into casting his first not guilty ballot ever. Afterwards the son takes his father to a fancy dinner-party where Philocleon gets drunk and steal a flute-girl to take her back home with him. The son confronts his father and tells him to let the flute girl go. Other partygoers show up and accuse the father of bad behavior. Eventually the son rushes the father back into the house. Hiding from other complainants, the play ends.

The Wasps Analysis

The Wasps is yet another attack from Aristophanes on Athenian democracy, the legal system, and especially Cleon. Cleon, according to Aristophanes, was responsible for using the courts to intimidate his enemies and allow him to get his agenda passed. Cleon had also tried to prosecute Aristophanes because of his portrayal in Knights and Wasps is also a kind of revenge for that. Cleon was a tyrant and warmonger, according to Aristophanes, but he was also a radical democrat. Aristophanes saw Cleon's ability to play to the lowest urges of the masses as his key strength and believed, ultimately that democracy if left unchecked would lead to the city being ruled by men like Cleon. Petty men that might oppose him could, like Philocleon, be kept happy by being given minor power to rule over the fellows in the courts.

Ultimately the power of the courts is analogous to the power of democracy in general according to Aristophanes: men like to make decisions and rule over their countrymen. This seems to be the chief appeal of the court and, seemingly, of democracy in general. Although an indictment of democracy may seem odd to modern sensibilities, the democracy of Athens was a radical kind of direct democracy where the whole population of free men could vote on every issue of the state and sit on juries that would decide the fate of their fellows. Although this kind of government avoids a direct tyranny of a king, it does allow anyone who can harness the power of mass opinion to rule with impunity. Aristophanes believes that Cleon has done just this and has used his power to prolong his war with Sparta and intimidate his enemies.



Peace

Peace Summary

The play begins with two slaves kneading "beetle-cake", that is, dung from a variety of animals that they are collecting to feed the huge beetle that their master has been keeping in the stable. Their master plans to ride the gigantic dung beetle into heaven to convince the gods to resurrect peace so as to end the war between Athens and Sparta. His plan, crazy as it seems was apparently inspired by Aesop's tale of another beetle flying into heaven to contend with an eagle. As their master Trygaeus flies off on his beetle, he tells his servants and daughter not to fart or use the bathroom for 3 days lest his dung beetle smell their excrement and fly back down to earth to dine on the delicacy. After this word of caution, Trygaeus flies into heaven only to be met at the gate by the god Hermes.

After some arguing with the god, Trygaeus is informed that all the gods have left, preferring to find a new home rather to deal with the constant warfare of the Greeks. The only god left is War who is attempting to finish off the Greeks by pounding their cities with a mortar. Meanwhile, he has imprisoned peace and covered the door of her tomb with heavy rocks. Making some kind of strange salad with the ground up Greek cities, war laments the loss of his great pestles and leaves to find a replacement. While he is gone, Trygaeus takes the opportunity to try and free peace. He calls on all of his fellow Greeks who wish an end to the war to help him free peace. They begin to tug and push away the rocks covering up the goddess.

Once Hermes sees what Trygaeus and the chorus are doing he tries to stop them until Trygaeus promises that all will make sacrifices to him if Hermes helps them raise peace. After much effort, the chorus helps to pull open the entrance and out jumps Peace, Harvesthome, and Mayfair.

After Peace appears, Hermes and Trygaeus discuss how it is the interest of war profiteers that have prevented her from coming back for so long. After a conversation where Trygaeus updates Peace on what has happened in Athens during her absence, Hermes and Peace give Harvesthome as a wife Trygaeus. Hermes also asks Trygaeus to take Mayfair back to the Athenian consul for entertainment. AS he is trying to leave, though, Trygaeus finds that Zeus has taken his beetle and he has no means of transportation back to earth. He is escorted back to earth while the chorus sings a long song.

Once returning to earth, Trygaeus tells his servants what has happened and has them prepare for a wedding between him and Harvesthome. He then introduces his bride to be to Athens and tells them to prepare for a festival wedding. Finally he leads them all in a prayer to Peace. The play ends with the wedding celebration and with those who benefit from peace giving presents to Trygaeus and the group using war instruments for more productive tasks.

Peace Analysis

Peace exhibits many classic themes from Aristophanes including his love of the quiet life and peace and his hatred for war and those who benefit from war. As we have seen, many of his plays attack Cleon and his war faction in Athens. This is not only because Aristophanes hates Cleon and his demagoguery but also because Cleon was the chief advocate of continuing the war with Sparta. The war had lasted many decades and was ruining the economy and stability of Athens. Aristophanes blames the continuation of the war on men like Cleon and other Athenian politicians as well as on unscrupulous businessmen who benefit from the continuation of the war. We also see in Peace a hint of Aristophanes' cultural conservatism. To Aristophanes, the best life is the quiet farming life, a life impossible because of the war.

The play ends with the protagonist throwing a harvest festival with his new wife celebrating the old non-martial virtues. These virtues are often the opposite of virtues extolled by tragic playwrights and Aristophanes continually lampoons those writers for glorifying violence at the expense of peace. Also, foreshadowing later comic conventions, Peace ends with a wedding, a common technique in later comedies.



The Birds

The Birds Summary

Birds is a play that is not as obviously topical and political as those that have come before it though some of those elements are still present here, though in a different form. The play begins with Euelpides and Pisthetaerus wondering in the woods looking for the great bird, Hoopoe. They want to ask Hoopoe if, while flying around, he has ever found a quiet place where the two men can go and live. They are tired of Athens and want to find a new spot, a quieter spot to make a home. Eventually they run into a servant of Hoopoe who, though claiming to be a bird, still looks something like a man. The servant takes the two men to be hunters in the forest and prepares to attack them until both men also, somewhat unconvincingly, claim to be birds. The servant goes to wake his master Hoopoe so that he may speak with the two men.

Hoopoe arrives and asks the men their business. First they laugh at Hoopoe because of his appearance. Though he claims to be a bird, he has no feathers and is basically just a man with a funny looking beak. The men ask the great bird if he know a place where they can get away from politics and money and settle down to live a quiet life. After going through several unacceptable options, Pisthetaerus comes up with an idea that will make the birds rulers of the earth. He tells Hoopoe that the birds can unite and form a blockade in the sky between heaven and earth to block the smoke from human sacrifices unless the gods pay some kind of tax to allow the smoke to pass. Hoopoe, thinking the idea is a good one, decides to summon the other birds to hear the idea.

A variety of birds arrive, forming the chorus, and ask Hoopoe why he has summoned them. He tells the birds that two men from Athens have something they want to tell the birds. Upon seeing the men the birds, who hate all men and fear them, begin attacking Pisthetaerus and Euelpides. The fight off the birds with pots and pans until, eventually, the birds relent and decide they will listen to the men.

Pisthetaerus tells the birds that they should, by all right be the kings of the gods and of earth. That they were created before the gods and the Titans and it was only a trick of fate that relegated them to their current state. Interested, the birds beg the man to go on with his tale. He tells them how once they ruled over even the greatest kings and gods but that now they are the lowliest of the low. The birds, hearing this story become incensed and desire to regain their once proud dominion. Pisthetaerus advises them first to unite into one city and then build a castle between heaven and earth. Then ask Zeus to give the reigns of heaven over to the birds otherwise they will block all the gods trying to get to earth so that they can rape human women or men. Then the birds will go to men and ask for a sacrifice to be made to birds before any sacrifice is made to the gods. The birds agree with the plan and get to work while the two men join Hoopoe for dinner. He tells them that there is a root they can eat which will turn them into birds.



Later they eat the root and emerge covered in feathers to see the new bird city, which they name Cuckoonebulopolis. Pisthetaerus sets off to perform a bird religious rite and sends his friend off to work on the walls. Later several men come by to gain favor with the birds but Pisthetaerus sends them off. Eventually the birds find out that Iris, the goddess has somehow made it through their wall and is wondering around on earth. The catch her to hold her hostage when Prometheus in disguise arrives to tell Pisthetaerus that Zeus is on his way down to negotiate with the birds. Apparently the gods are not getting any more sacrifices from humans because of the wall and are starving. Prometheus tells Pisthetaerus how to trick Zeus and gain control of Zeus' mistress Sovereignty. Pisthetaerus follows Prometheus' advices and get control of Sovereignty who he plans to marry, making him and the birds the supreme lords of the land. The play ends with preparation being made for a wedding.

The Birds Analysis

The Birds is both a work of fantasy and pure comedy as well as a kind of utopian speculation. The two men wish a return to nature and an escape from civilization characterized by laws, commerce, and interference. The notion is obviously at least as old as Aristophanes but we find similar themes in the bible and more modern utopian schemes. There is even a potential allegorical meaning in Pisthetaerus' claim that the birds ruled before the Olympian gods, namely, that earth was indeed ruled by animals before men and their gods took over. The irony is, of course, that it is a man, Pisthetaerus, who convinces the birds to take back what was once theirs. Not only does he convince them, but he also ends up leading them and, in effect, becoming their ruler.

It is not clear whether Pisthetaerus and his friend were being disingenuous in the original desire to leave the trappings of society and live the quiet life or whether they were just sucked into all the excitement. Starting a war with mankind and the gods to gain ultimate dominion over heaven and earth is hardly what most people would call "the quiet life" yet this is exactly what Pisthetaerus and co. does. So, although The Birds is not as topically political as Wasps or some of Aristophanes' other plays, there is still a rejection of his society in its current form, though in an admittedly absurdist way.



Lysistrata

Lysistrata Summary

Lysistrata is another play in the tradition of *Peace* and *Acharnians* that shows a group of private citizens trying to do everything in their power to end the war between the Spartans and the Athenians. Here, though, the plan has become somewhat desperate and the women of the town have decided to not have sex with their men until the war is ended.

The play begins with Lysistrata calling out to her friend Calonice. It seems that Lysistrata has a plan to save Greece from continued war and she has invited women from all over Greece to hear her master plan. While they are waiting for the women to arrive, they discuss some of the problems the war has caused. Once all the women have arrived, Lysistrata asks the women to swear that they will do all they can for the cause of peace. They all agree before hearing what Lysistrata has in mind. Finally she tells the women her plan, they are going to withhold sex from their men until there is peace. Although they had previously sworn to do anything necessary for peace, the women balk at this plan. All that is except the Spartan who eventually gets all the other women to her side.

Eventually the women swear not to have sex with their men under any circumstances and if they are raped to be as cold as ice. Lysistrata also informs the women that a group of older ladies will be taking over the citadel of the town. The women move into the citadel of the Acropolis when the chorus of old men arrives. The old men argue with the women and in the end the women dump their pots on the men who are incensed. A Magistrate arrives and with the men attempts to pry the gate of the citadel open. Lysistrata appears and tells the magistrate that they have taken control of the gold in the city to stop the war.

After arguing with the men, Lysistrata finds several women trying to sneak out to go back home for sex. They claim to need to go home for other reasons, but Lysistrata sees through their lies and makes them go back to their post. Eventually a man, Cinesias comes in looking for his wife. He calls to her but she refuses to come down. He then brings their child and tries to use the child to lure her back. She says that she won't come back and have sex with him until he ends the war. He agrees to find a way to end the war and but asks her to have sex with him before he leaves. She agrees and asks him to get naked in Pan's cave and while he is waiting to have sex with her she keeps stalling. Finally she asks him if he will get the treaty, he says he will think about it and she runs off.

Outside a Spartan herald arrives with a gigantic erection. At first, the magistrate is convinced that the herald must be concealing a spear underneath his cloak, but no, it is just the man's erection. The herald is sent from Sparta with full power to make peace so that both the Spartans and the Athenians may end the sex strike. The Athenians and



Spartans assemble all groaning from the pain of their erections to meet Lysistrata. They agree to peace terms and she tells them to return for a banquet. The play ends with the Spartans and Athenians joined together in peace at the banquet.

Lysistrata Analysis

Lysistrata is a play about the absurdity of war. It portrays strong and intelligent women characters trying to take control of their city. A city run by men who, according to the playwright, have lost their sense and must be blackmailed by sex. Aristophanes seems to be saying in this play that there is no possible rational solution to the war and that playing on the non-rational desires of the men involved is the only way to end it. Of course, the plan works, but only just barely. Both the women and the men are close to breaking the strike at several times throughout the play and only Lysistrata's strong will can hold her sex union together. Indeed, the final straw for the men seems to be the huge, painful erections that they can't seem to control. It is as if nature herself is rebelling against the war, forcing the men to give into their natural urges and to forget about their rational desires to pursue the war.

Maybe the message isn't so pessimistic after all then. While Aristophanes may be saying that it is necessary to appeal to the most strong and fundamental human urges to end the war he may also just be making an interesting philosophical point, namely that sometimes we can't reason ourselves out of error. Sometimes, once we take a certain path, say into war, it is hard to convince ourselves rationally that we need to change course. We are sometimes blinded to the madness or wrongness of our actions. Aristophanes has already commented on how feeble and ridiculous reason can be in the Clouds and here he seems to be saying that we shouldn't rely on argument and reason alone, but should appeal to our deeper and more primal nature. Make love not war Aristophanes might say, or at least don't make war.



Thesmophoriazusae

Thesmophoriazusae Summary

Thesmophoriazusae tells begins during the festival of Demeter with Euripides and his cousin Mnesilochus going to meet the playwright Agathon. Euripides is concerned because he knows that the women in town are holding a secret trial for Euripides because of all the bad things he has written about them in his recent plays. He wants Agathon to dress up as a woman and go among the women to speak on his behalf and to defend him to the assembly of women. Just as he is explaining a woman enters and begin singing a song. Mnesilochus asks Euripides who the woman is, but Euripides tells his cousin that the woman is none other than the playwright Agathon disguised as a woman. Marveling at this he asks Agathon why he is dressed as a woman. Agathon replies that to write the part of a woman he must dress as a woman.

Echoing Euripides' own words, Agathon tells Euripides he should do his own dirty work. Mnesilochus, feeling sorry for his cousin says that he will go in Agathon's place. Euripides begins to shave his cousin but, feeling the pain of the razor, his cousin runs off before eventually settling in and letting himself be shaved. Euripides borrows some woman's clothing from Agathon and sends Mnesilochus off to spy on the women.

Euripides is right, the women at the festival of Demeter have organized themselves into democratically into a kind of court to try Euripides for his insults. They all admit that he is guilty, the question before the assembly of women is what to do with Euripides given his guilt. The first woman to speak against Euripides lists some of the many slanders against women in his plays and advises that the women elect to kill Euripides. The second woman, whose business is selling religious trinkets, is upset because Euripides has put forward the idea, in his plays that the gods do not exist, causing business to decrease. She also recommends that they kill Euripides. At this point, Mnesilochus rises and tells the women that, in fact, Euripides is quite justified in what he has said about the women and they are lucky he doesn't know the half of their crimes. Mnesilochus, pretending to be a woman tells several stories about how he has cheated on his husband and the other imaginary crime that he, as a woman, has committed.

The other women are outraged at Mnesilochus' claims and threaten to attack him but he keeps on giving more and more horrible tales of women he supposedly knows and their dastardly deed. Just as a riot is about to break out, Cleisthenes arrives to warn the assembly that Euripides has sent a cousin of his to the assembly dressed as a woman to plead his case. Cleisthenes lines the women up and asks each in turn if the others know who she is. Going down the line, they eventually get to Mnesilochus. Cleisthenes asks Mnesilochus who his husband is and after making up an obviously fake name she asks him what they did during the festival last year. Mnesilochus gives a less than convincing answer and Cleisthenes doesn't believe that Mnesilochus is a woman. They begin to undress Mnesilochus and before he is completely undressed he grabs a baby and threatens it with a knife. Unfortunately, the "baby" is really just a skin of wine



dressed as a baby. The women arrest Mnesilochus and turn him over to the Athenian authorities.

Euripides, discovering that his cousin is in danger attempts to rescue him by playing out several parts from his plays, disguising himself in an attempt to rescue Mnesilochus, all to no avail. Eventually, after Mnesilochus has been handed over to the Athenian authorities, Euripides reveals himself to the women and agrees to not say anything bad about them anymore if they will help him rescue Mnesilochus. They won't help him rescue Mnesilochus but they won't stop him either. After he uses another disguise to distract the jailor, he eventually springs his friend and the play ends with their escape.

Thesmophoriazusae Analysis

Thesmophoriazusae was produced directly after *Lysistrata* and though the anti-war theme is missing the interest in sexual politics and the lives of women is similar in both plays. Here though, Aristophanes uses his competitor and colleague, Euripides as his foil. In many ways, this play not only subtly lampoons and even celebrates him, but also similar to, though written before, one of Euripides' most famous works, the *Bacchae*. In that play a character dresses as a woman to infiltrate a group of followers of Dionysus. The results in that story are less comic, but in some ways similar.

Both plays have a sense of "the world being turned upside down" with men acting as women and women acting as men. Here, part of the irony is that the playwrights are on stage as characters dressing up in costumes to play parts in Athens. This is a reversal of their traditional function and role. Similarly the women, who usually play a subservient role in Greek society have taken over in their own assembly to indict Euripides, this is another ironic role reversal that suggests something is not quite right in the world of the play. The scenes towards the end with Euripides acting out parts of his own plays are not very subtle, but it is effective and ingenious. Although less political than many of his other plays, *Thesmophoriazusae* is fascinating for its plot and use of dramatic irony.



The Frogs

The Frogs Summary

The Frogs begins with Dionysus and his slave Xanthias riding on a donkey discussing various gags. Eventually they get to Heracles' house and Dionysus asks Heracles' about the best way to sneak into Hades. Dionysus, tired of the second rate tragedians in vogue wants to go down to Hades so as to bring back Euripides who has recently died. Heracles gives Dionysus several quick options, including hanging, jumping off a tall building, and Hemlock. Dionysus decides each method is not for him and decides to take the same route that Heracles took across the river Styx.

Dionysus and Xanthias take the route to the edge of the river and find the boatman Charon. Charon welcomes Dionysus but tells Xanthias that since he is a slave he must meet them on the other side by walking around the river. On the ride over, Charon and Dionysus row while listening to and joining in with the strange songs of the frogs in the river. Xanthias greets his master on the other side and the two set off to find Euripides.

Along the way to Euripides, several creatures mistake Dionysus for Heracles and either attack him or welcome him depending on their past history with Heracles. When in danger, Dionysus trades his clothes with Xanthias, unless it is in his favor in which case he trades back. Eventually after several comedic episodes Dionysus and Xanthias make it to the home of the dead poets. Euripides and Aeschylus are already arguing over who is the better poet. This argument goes on for some time with Dionysus occasionally interceding. Aeschylus claims Euripides is light and derivative while Euripides claims Aeschylus is overbearing and ponderous. Euripides claims that his own plays have taught democratic Athens how to reason and to critically evaluate drama. Aeschylus claims that his plays deal with more weighty and important themes of virtue and heroism. Further, Aeschylus accuses Euripides of making the young men of Athens effeminate and uninterested in sports or martial activity. Dionysus needs to bring one of the poets back to help him solve the problem of Alcibiades and the two poets compete by throwing lines at each other and critiquing them.

Eventually, Dionysus tells them that each will have a chance to submit a line and then he will evaluate each line and the weightier line will win. Aeschylus' lines are heavier but Dionysus can still not decide which one to choose until he asks them what they think about Alcibiades. Aeschylus gives clear advice while Dionysus claims that Euripides only give clever advice. In this case, then, Aeschylus wins out. Pluto, god of the underworld gives Aeschylus and Dionysus a meal before they depart while the chorus accuses Euripides and Socrates of corrupting the thinking of the city. Upon leaving, Aeschylus heaves one more insult at Euripides, giving Sophocles his seat at the table while he is gone.

The Frogs Analysis

The Frogs, despite some of the buffoonish dialogue between Dionysus and Xanthias is one of Aristophanes' more important and deeper plays. It shows Aristophanes as critic not only of tragedy and comedy but also culture in general. It also highlights Aristophanes' conservative cast. The debate between Aeschylus and Euripides is really a debate between different understandings of the proper role of the city and culture within the city. Aeschylus stands for the older, virile, and morally upstanding culture that reveres the gods. Euripides stands in for the newer, intellectual culture of Socrates that scorns the gods and relies on cleverness instead of virtue. In their battle of words, Aeschylus is not univocally favored over Euripides and it is clear that the playwright not only recognizes but also takes as serious many of the flaws of Aeschylus that Euripides points out.

Still, in the end, Euripides is denigrated both by his rival and by the author. While it is clear that Aristophanes really does despise Socrates, his views on Euripides are more complex and there seems to be at least some respect for his rival, though he may think that the Aeschylean virtues are more beneficial to his city than the Euripidean.



The Assemblywomen

The Assemblywomen Summary

The Assemblywomen is a story that like *Lysistrata* shows the women of Athens wresting political control from their male counterparts. Instead of ending a wart, however, in *Assemblywomen* the goals of the women are more radical and revolutionary. They seek to remake society along lines that they find more congenial, communist lines where all property and goods, including love and children will be shared.

The play begins with the woman Praxagora lamenting the ineffective and ruinous rule of men. In their bumbling and corruption, they have ruined the city of Athens. She plans to organize the women of Athens in a revolution to overthrow the men and put the women in charge. While she is complaining about the men of the city, other women begin to show up eager to hear what she has in mind. The women have assembled in the early morning darkness dressed in their husbands' clothes and fitted with fake beards. The plan, from Praxagora is to get to the Athenian parliament in time to make up an overwhelming majority of seats. Then, at the right time, introduce a measure to turn control of the city over to the women. Since the women disguised as men will outnumber the men, the measure will easily pass thus ensuring a bloodless but nevertheless complete revolution. After a discussion of the plan and a rearticulating of the virtues of women by Praxagora, the women head off to the parliament.

Meanwhile, Praxagora's husband, the older Blepyros, feeling intestinal discomfort and having to find a place outside to relieve himself realizes that his wife is gone and, not only that, but also that she has taken his clothing. Not having anything else to wear, he puts on her clothing and runs outside to relieve himself on the sidewalk. While engaged in his business, a neighbor walks by to ask him why he is dressed as a woman. The man, after hearing Blepyros' explanation, claims that his wife has also gone missing with his clothes. The neighbor also tells Blepyros how the Parliament has just given full control of the government to the women of the town. Another friend Chremes describes the measure in more.

Blepyros, confused and a little dismayed, tells his friend that they may as well try to make the best of it, surely the women can't do any worse governing than the men did. After this, Praxagora returns home. Her husband, believing she must have been out and up to extramarital escapades questions the woman but she produces a convincing excuse. He then tells her about the change in regime. She responds by describing her plan for reform of the Athenian state. She plans to move the city to a system of complete communism. All things will be shared in common, food, land, children, and even love. She claims that if a man wants to sleep with a pretty girl, he will have to service an ugly old woman first and vice versa. The plan surprises her husband but he is willing to go along with the scheme.



Next we find Chremes with all of his possessions bringing them to the place where he will contribute them to the state. Along the way he meets another citizen who call him a sucker for contributing his property to the state but, when the dinner bell rings, both citizens, he who contributed and he did not, run to the dinner table to get heir common meal. In another comic scene, a young man is trying to find his lover but an ugly old woman who claims to have first right to the young man intercepts him. An argument ensues until an even uglier woman arrives and claims and even more urgent right to the young man. There are several other scenes that show the comic effects of communism. Finally, the play ends abruptly with Blepyros being taken home by envoys from his wife with the promise of a hearty dinner.

The Assemblywomen Analysis

The Assemblywomen is comic in the absurdity of its situations, though there is also an underlying pessimism and bitterness in the play. This is one of Aristophanes' last surviving plays and it is clear that Athens, rather than heading the playwright's warnings about war and democracy have indulged in the worst parts of their collective appetite to ruin the city. The solution in The Assemblywomen is partly a satire of political plans floating around at the time, most notably Plato's scheme in the Republic but also it is a kind of "throwing up of the hands" of a frustrated poet.

Nothing short of turning the entire society on its head by putting women in charge and completely reforming the economy would have the effect of changing the social problems in Athens. We see, though, that even this radical reform would not be able to actually solve the Athenian's problems but would rather, create newer and stranger problems. Aristophanes seems to be saying at least three things then. First, Athenian society ruled by men is hopelessly corrupt and inept. Democracy has no ability to decide between good ideas and popular yet bad idea. Democratic politics is also open to massive manipulation as we see in the plot by the women. Third, even a reform as radical as complete communism would not solve the political problems of Athens. The suggestion seems to be that Athenians should look to the good old days before the war to find solutions to their problems rather than trying out ever more radical and silly schemes.



Plutus

Plutus Summary

Plutus is the last surviving play of Aristophanes and its style is considerably different from those that have come before. The theme is more abstractly moral and political rather than directly satirizing an actual political figure. Still, the play is one of Aristophanes' most tightly plotted and also most interesting, to modern readers at least.

The play begins with Chremylus and his servant Cario returning from the oracle. Chremylus, a good but poor man, has asked the oracle how he can improve his situation. The oracle told him to follow the next man he finds on the street and to take him home. Cario interprets this message symbolically but Chremylus is convinced that the message is literal and he goes up to the blind man in front of him on the road to introduce himself. The blind man happens to be Plutus, god of wealth. Plutus claims that Zeus made him blind so that Zeus could decide who would have the luck to earn wealth. Chremylus sees a solution to the problem, namely that they should figure out a way to restore the sight of Plutus. The three men go home where Chremylus summons some of his poor friends to try to figure out a way to make Plutus see again. They decide the best thing is to take Plutus to Asclepius, who might be able to restore his sight. Cario takes Plutus off to find a cure.

While his servant is gone, the goddess Poverty visits Chremylus. Poverty claims that it would be bad to eliminate poverty by restoring sight to Plutus. Poverty claims that if wealth were distributed equally according to virtue rather than luck, there wouldn't be any slaves left to do the work and no one with money would have an incentive to keep working. Women would also pay less attention to men if they didn't have to rely on men for presents and money. Furthermore, the poor will take on airs and begin to lose the virtue that poverty has instilled in them. While this debate is raging, Plutus returns with Cario. Plutus' sight has been miraculously restored and poverty leaves.

After Plutus' sight is restored, the economic situation of the world is turned upside down and different people begin to come to the house of Chremylus either to complain or to give thanks to Plutus. First a good man shows up to give thanks to Plutus. Then an informer and blackmailer show up complaining that his business has been ruined. An older woman also shows up complaining that the man who claimed to love her when she gave him presents now wants nothing to do with her now that wealth is distributed equally. Finally Hermes shows up complaining that the gods are starving because no one feels the need to sacrifice to Zeus anymore. Eventually despairing, Chremylus offers to let Hermes come work for him and the play ends with a festival about to begin.



Plutus Analysis

Plutus is a fascinating play that looks at the importance of luck and inequality in social relationships. It also lacks many of the qualities that define the old comedy and begins to look much more like what will eventually become the New Comedy. The basic idea of Plutus is "what if people had as much money as they deserved?" Taking that basic premise, Aristophanes runs with it and shows some of the interesting effects and problems that would arise if this were the case. It is not entirely clear what Aristophanes' position is on this issue.

It is clear from *Assemblywomen* that he thinks communism is unworkable and absurd, but he also clearly thinks that many who have wealth do not deserve it. Furthermore, in the debate with Poverty, Chremylus doesn't really provide any knock down arguments against what Poverty is saying. That is, if Poverty's arguments against wealth equality are sound, they are never refuted. It is interesting that again, as in many of his other plays, Aristophanes, though a conservative of one sort or another, accuses the gods of needing to rely on the support of wicked and base men. Furthermore, there seems to be some allusion to the thought of Plato who also advocated a similar scheme based on what he saw as moral deservingness.



Characters

Demos

Although Demos only makes an appearance in a couple of Aristophanes' plays; it is really a character in the background of most of his works. In Athens, the Demos were a named that referred to the "people" or at least the voting population. Athens, being a democracy was ultimately ruled by the will of the Demos. This is the symbolism in Knights of two Athenian generals and Cleon being portrayed as slaves of Demos. Regardless of their power in Athenian society, all public figures owed their power and allegiance to the will of the people. In many ways this is an inspiring ideal, an ideal that our society has also, to a more limited degree, adopted but there is also a dark side, often the side Aristophanes focuses on in his plays.

Athenian democracy, unlike our own, was not representative but rather was a form of direct democracy. We see the effects of this in the Wasps where some citizens have gone mad with the power and influence they gain from serving as judges of their fellows. We also see the madness of this form of government in Assemblywomen where all it takes is a collection of people with a strange idea to completely change the political and social order. The system was also open to much manipulation, either outright bribery of the voting population or politicians playing to the lowest desires of the populace to get votes. While Aristophanes' is clearly not in favor of eliminating democracy, he also lacks respect for the soundness of judgments of the Demos. It is part of the job of a poet to try to instruct the Demos and to help them make better judgments.

Cleon

Cleon was a member of an aristocratic family in Athens who made his fortune in the tanning business and eventually became the head of a powerful faction of lower class and middle class voters who kept him in power during the time of Aristophanes. After the death of Pericles, Cleon was able to take power by appealing to the interest of his lower class and merchant constituency. He increased the pay of jurors and encouraged, at least through his institutional incentives, the leveling of false charges for gain a practice that is lampooned in Wasps.

Aristophanes and other contemporaries such as Thucydides portray Cleon as a warmonger and ruthless demagogue. He is the subject of vicious attacks in many of Aristophanes' plays. Cleon apparently prosecuted Aristophanes for treason after he was attacked in the poet's lost play Babylonians. Cleon's suit was unsuccessful and this only increased the attacks on the leader by Aristophanes who portrays Cleon as venal, petty, and hopelessly corrupt. Much of the guilt of the ruinous war with Sparta is laid at the feet of Cleon in these plays. Although some may defend Cleon today this may have less



to do with any of his actual virtues but rather more to do with the way that our own culture and politics has become more like that of Aristophanes' own time.

Strepsiades

Strepsiades is well to do but poorly born man who married well and whose son is bankrupting him because he is living beyond his means and wasting money on horseracing. Strepsiades enrolls in Socrates' "think-shop" but eventually burns it down because of the effect that the master's teaching have had on his son.

Socrates

Socrates is arguably the founder of moral and political philosophy as well as the teacher of Plato. Well known in Athens at the time for questioning important citizens' most strongly held beliefs. Was later put on trial for treason and made to kill himself by drinking hemlock largely based on accusations drawn from Clouds.

Philocleon

The name literally means "lover of Cleon". A man obsessed with serving on juries and accusing as well as sitting in judgment on his fellow citizens.

Pisthetaerus

Pisthetaerus is the protagonist of Birds who organizes the birds and leads a war against mankind and the gods. Clearly intelligent as well as ambitious eventually becomes ruler over the earth due to his successful prosecution of the war.

Bdelycleon

Bdelycleon literally means "hater of Cleon", son of Philocleon and an interesting character in Aristophanes as youth are often portrayed badly but here we find that the son has more sense than the father.

Hoopoe

Hoopoe is a great bird that was apparently once a man. Like Pisthetaerus will eventually wear, Hoopoe wears a somewhat unconvincing bird costume that seems to amount to little more than a crude beak mask.



Hermes

Hermes is the messenger god who relays messages between other gods. He is also the god of boundaries and is typically portrayed with a huge, erect phallus. Alcibiades, whom Dionysus is trying to deal with in *Frogs*, was accused of going around town before his expedition to Syracuse knocking the phalluses off the statues of Hermes.

Euripides

Euripides was the last of the three great tragic playwrights of Athens. Contemporaneous with Aristophanes, Euripides is known for his beautiful poetry his innovative characters and his, sometimes, attacks on women in his plays.

Aeschylus

Aeschylus was the first of the great tragic poets of Athens, known for his trilogy centering on Orestes' murder of his mother and lover. Aeschylus was known for his ponderous language and idealized characters.

Dionysus

Dionysus is the Greek god of theater, both tragic and comedic. He is also the god of wine and is often portrayed as slightly feminine.



Objects/Places

Pnyx

The Pnyx was the meeting place of the Athenian assembly or Parliament. It is where all the laws in Athens were made by a vote of Athenian citizens.

Agora

The Agora was the central marketplace in Athens. Also sometimes used to just mean market in a more abstract sense.

Boetia

Boetia is a part of Greece to the southwest of Athens and home to the City Thebes.

Acharnians

The Acharnians were men from the outskirts of Athens that Aristophanes portrays as veterans of the war with Athens who wish to continue the war.

Sparta

Sparta was a city in the southern Peloponnes of Greece that was Athens' chief rival during the Peloponnesian war. Sparta was a militaristic society that eventually defeated Athens and imposed a dictatorship for a time on the Athenians.

Drachmas

Drachmas were a form of metal currency in ancient Greece. Roughly equivalent to \$25 in purchasing power.

Lacedaemonians

Another word for Spartans.

Libations

Libations can refer to wine in general though it is typically used to refer to wine that is given to the gods or the dead, often poured on the ground or a grave.



Burnt offering

Greek religious practice made extensive use of burnt offerings, the smell of which supposedly pleased the gods. Typically a lamb or calf was burned on an altar for the offering.

Athenian democracy

Different from modern democracy in that it was a form of direct rather than representational democracy with all citizens being able to vote on and propose laws.

Zeus

Zeus was the king of the gods and the enforcer of contracts and promises with lightning bolts and thunder.

Themes

Cleon and Democracy

One of the central and recurring themes in the plays of Aristophanes is his opposition to Cleon and radical democracy. Aristophanes believed that Cleon and his manipulation of the Demos were at least partially responsible for the continuation of the ruinous war with Sparta. He believed that once the population had lost its moral and civic virtue, it was open to manipulation by crass demagogues like Cleon who would promise the average person petty power and wealth in exchange for votes. Aristophanes' savagely attacks Cleon in most of his plays and was apparently prosecuted by Cleon for treason for some of the accusation he made in his play, *Babylonians*.

Cleon, whatever his support in the lower and middle classes, offends Aristophanes not only for his policies, but primarily because of his methods. He used his political power to try to silence and intimidate his critics, including Aristophanes. He also used the court system to intimidate those who caused him political problems. In the process, he turned Athenian society into a group of Sycophants trying to gain favor either with each other or with Cleon lest they be prosecuted on trumped up charges or lose some other favor. Democracy, at least in this form, has the effect then have making the population venal and servile rather than virtuous and free.

It is this irony of popular, democratic government that Aristophanes is trying to bring out in many of his plays. Furthermore, people need verbal, argumentative skills in a society as litigious as Athens and therefore they needed training from, according to Aristophanes, dangerous hucksters like Socrates. The effect of all of this is to make the citizenry forget about civic virtue and to instead focus on different ways to prosecute their neighbors and use sophistry to get out of their debts.

The Evils of War

Aristophanes is, perhaps, one of the greatest anti-war writers of all time, though it is clear that he is no pacifist. His opposition to war is not a moral opposition based on an aversion to killing, though he may have had that aversion as well, it was rather based on a more practical concern with the political, moral, and economic effects of war on society. Although Aristophanes clearly blames the interests of demagogues like Cleon and others who benefit economically from the war for the continuation of the war, it is clear that Aristophanes believes that war is poisonous to good government.

With the threat of war and attack, citizens are apt to give more and more power to generals and demagogues. Further, attacks on the political life of the city, attacks that were Aristophanes' bread and butter could become treason in time of war. Under the threat of constant attack, the old moral order also tends to break down. People engage in activities that they wouldn't necessarily in times of peace. Family life become harder



and it is nearly impossible to live a country lifestyle when citizens are shut up in the city gates for fear of attack.

Furthermore the economy in wartime was greatly hampered making it harder to get all kinds of good and harder to enjoy the comforts of peace. In Peace the first thing the characters do after they end the war is to have, basically, a harvest party and wedding. It is the simple but essential joys of life, the joys of celebration and family that Aristophanes sees sacrificed during wartime.

Conservatism

There is no doubt that Aristophanes was an extreme conservative though his conservatism was very different than anything that would count as conservatism today. First and foremost his concern in many of his plays is to ridicule new ways of doing things, especially in the moral and political sphere. His conservatism looks back to the "good old days" before the war and before Cleon. It is partly a curmudgeonly conservatism and partly what you might call a "conservatism of fear." In many ways a fear of new things and innovation would have made sense in Aristophanes' Athens.

Remember, there are essentially no checks on what the assembly can make law, a fact that Aristophanes lampoons in *Assemblywomen*. If the Demos get whipped up into a frenzy, they can make decisions that will have long reaching effects on their society. This actually happened several times in the history of Athens, often with disastrous effects. There is also a disdain for base and bad men taking on airs and gaining power in a democratic setting that makes Aristophanes sometimes pine for the "good old days" when men behaved better and knew their place. Whether or not there ever was a time when this happened in another matter, but it is clear that Aristophanes sees the role of the comic poet and critic as that of a brake. The poet savages and ridiculous new ideas hoping that the population will move away from them.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of all of these plays is similar as an audience views them and so there are several conventions that are used to convey information to the audience. Most of the action in the plays occurs between characters that typically do not have full access to what is going on in the play as a whole. There is also a chorus that will engage in what is called a parabasis or a direct address to the audience. In this part of the play, the chorus will address the audience from the point of view of the author.

Sometimes this part of the play will involve the chorus explain how great the author is or getting another jibe in at a political figure or rival playwright. Sometimes, the parabasis will include a chastisement to the audience for not liking an earlier play by the author and sometimes it will include inducements to vote for the current play. In the *Birds* the chorus, made up of birds, threatens to poop on the audience after the play if they do not vote for the play. This is an interesting technique not widely used since Old Comedy where members of the cast will directly address the audience breaking what was later called the "fourth wall".

Old Comedy in general is more informal than tragedy in this regard and more so than later comedy as well. The themes, though always topical in one way or another are also often absurdist such as in *Lysistrata* and *Birds*.

Setting

Most of Aristophanes' plays take place in Athens, though with a few notable exemptions. *Birds* takes place outside of Athens and *Peace* largely takes place in heaven. *Frogs* mostly takes place in Hades. It is not surprising that most of the plays would use, roughly contemporaneous, Athens as the setting given that Old Comedy is chiefly an art form used for topical political and social satire. Indeed, it is so topical that it is often hard to understand what is going on in the plays without a detailed knowledge of Athenian history around the time of the play.

This is really unique to the Old Comedy. In later forms of comedy or in tragedy, plays may be set in this city or other, but it is either a historical version of the city or some idealized version of the city. In Old Comedy the action takes place in something like the actual city or at least an alternate version of actual city that shares many of the same political figures and concerns. There is also no doubt that the setting is meant to be "low" rather than "high" as in tragedy. This is obvious from the profusion of insults leveled at public figures and the prevalence of extremely dirty jokes and situations.

Although both tragedy and comedy were meant for a general audience, it is clear that the common man at its basic level could appreciate comedies. This is true also of much



modern comedy as well and it is clear that many of the conventions of modern comedy come directly from the Old Comedy of Aristophanes.

Language and Meaning

The language of Aristophanes, even when translated well, can be difficult for the modern reader to understand. While there is no difficulty understanding and laughing at the dirty jokes and obscene humor of *Lysistrata* or some of Aristophanes' other plays, it is also true that much of what is going on in these plays is direct attacks on figures and customs of the Athens of the time.

Without familiarity, sometimes-detailed familiarity, with those figures, issues, and customs not to mention historical and political knowledge of the time, these plays can be tough going. It is not that Aristophanes uses language that is overly symbolic or hard to understand like Aeschylus. It is rather that the topics are so tied to his own time that even though there are many universal elements that still speak to us today, the reader needs to avoid getting bogged down in the topical details. His use of language tends to be very colloquial and whenever he uses language to great effect it is not so much for the beauty of his construction as it is for the witty turn of phrase or the dirty pun that he employs.

In this way he is similar to comedic writers of our own time and though his aim is often on political leaders or customs of his time, he never misses an opportunity to get a laugh, cheap or otherwise. So, with a little patience and background information it is possible for the modern reader to find these plays as riotously funny as his original audiences no doubt did.

Structure

Although the structure of the plays changes slightly over time, Aristophanes tends to follow the conventions of Old Comedy. The play typically begins with a prologue where the main character or characters is usually complaining about some problem. The one major exception to this rule is in *Frogs* where the play begins with a conversation between Dionysus and Xanthias about what would be the funniest way to begin the play. Next, there will typically be a *parados* or introduction of the chorus.

At some point after this, there will be a *parabasis* where the chorus will directly address the audience in the voice of the author. Sometimes there is a second *parabasis* towards the end of the play. There will then tend to be an *agon* or debate between two of the characters to resolve the conflict in the play. The best example of this is in *Wasps*. Finally there will be an *exodus* of the chorus at the end of the play, typically singing a song.

These parts are present in almost all of these plays, though they are not strict rules so much as conventions that tend to hold in Old Comedy. For instance, in *Lysistrata* there is a divided chorus between men and women and the *agon* occurs within the chorus

itself. In *Plutus* there isn't a chorus at all in the traditional sense. Some of the plays will lack an *agon* altogether and *Peace*, *Assemblywomen*, and *Plutus* all anticipate the New Comedy by ending with feasts or weddings.



Quotes

Dicaeopolis: For what is true even comedy can tell. And I shall utter Startling things but true. (Acharnians 29)

Demosthenes: The Gods! Don't tell me you believe in them!

Nicias: Of course I do.

Demosthenes: And on what evidence?

Nicias: Because they hate me so! That's proof enough.(Knights 56)

Strepsiades: They [Socrates and co.] teach (if you pay them) how to win any case, right or wrong. (Clouds 105)

Socrates: ...Is your memory good?

Strepsiades: It depends. Very good if someone owes me, very bad, alas, if I owe someone. (Clouds 115)

Xanthias: I'll tell you master's disease. He's a lawcourt-lover, like no one else. (Wasps 147)

First Servant: My Master's got astride upon the beetle, and up they go ascending in the air. (Peace 189)

Pisthetaerus: Oh what a plan the race of birds could launch! Listen to me and power untold is yours. (Birds 235)

Lysistrata: So fine it comes to this—Greece saved by woman! (Lysistrata 289)

Magistrate: Are you a man or a Priapus, pray? (Lysistrata 319)

Agathon: A poet, sir needs adapt his ways to the high thoughts which animate his soul. (Thesmophoriazusae 335)

Chorus: Following in the Socratic train, Rejecting music with high disdain, abandoning with foolish equanimity, Noble tragedy's lofty sublimity. (Frogs 414)

Praxagora: When all a man wants is set free to his hand, what becomes of the law of supply and demand? (Assemblywomen 439)



Topics for Discussion

What is Aristophanes' main complaints against Cleon?

What charges does Clouds make against Socrates? Are they justified?

How is Aristophanes' view of Socrates different from our own?

How is Athenian democracy as portrayed here different from American democracy?

Is Lysistrata pro-woman? What is Aristophanes' attitude towards women generally?

Are Poverty's arguments in Plutus for the desirability of inequality convincing?

What are some of the drawbacks of communism in Assemblywomen?