

# Chapter 9: Aristophanes

## **Aristophanes' Life and Career**

- lived from ca. 450-386 BCE
- active as a playwright from 427-388 BCE
  - thus flourished young (cf. Shakespeare, Wilde, Molière)
  - but also maintained his comic vigor by changing with changing times

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## **Aristophanes' Drama**

- elegant verse mixed in with earthy humor
  - often sexual/scatological but never gratuitous
- focused on current events and political figures, e.g. Cleon
- from early on there was a need for commentary, hence **scholia(sts)**
  - e.g. scholia cite the dates and festivals of Aristophanes' plays

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## **Aristophanes' Drama**

- thus, Aristophanes' plays have always been very important to historians of the Classical Age
- but were they ever restaged in antiquity?
  - he rewrote two plays (*Frogs* and *Clouds*)
  - but for a reading public only?
- but cf. Taplin's *Comic Angels*

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## Aristophanes' First Two Plays

- ***The Banqueters* (427 BCE)**
  - produced by Callistratus because Aristophanes was still too young
  - won first prize (but at Lenaea or Dionysia?)
  - *agon* between a good young man and a profligate young man
    - cf. Just Reason vs. Unjust Reason in *Clouds*
  - a good name for a *kom-oidos* (“party-song”)

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## Aristophanes' First Two Plays

- ***The Babylonians* (Dionysia, 426 BCE)**
  - little is known about it (e.g., did it win?)
  - Dionysus is an important character
    - like in Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros* which was produced a few years before
  - includes a savage attack on **Cleon**
    - Cleon sued Aristophanes and slandered his good family name, but Cleon apparently lost the case

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## ***The Acharnians***

**(Lenaea, 425 BCE)**

- but Cleon's case also seems to have kept Aristophanes out of the Dionysia for the next two years
- Dicaeopolis ("Just City") makes a private treaty with Sparta and holds a big *komos*!
- another attack on war-mongering Cleon
- won another first prize (hooray!)

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## *The Knights*

**(Lenaea, 424 BCE)**

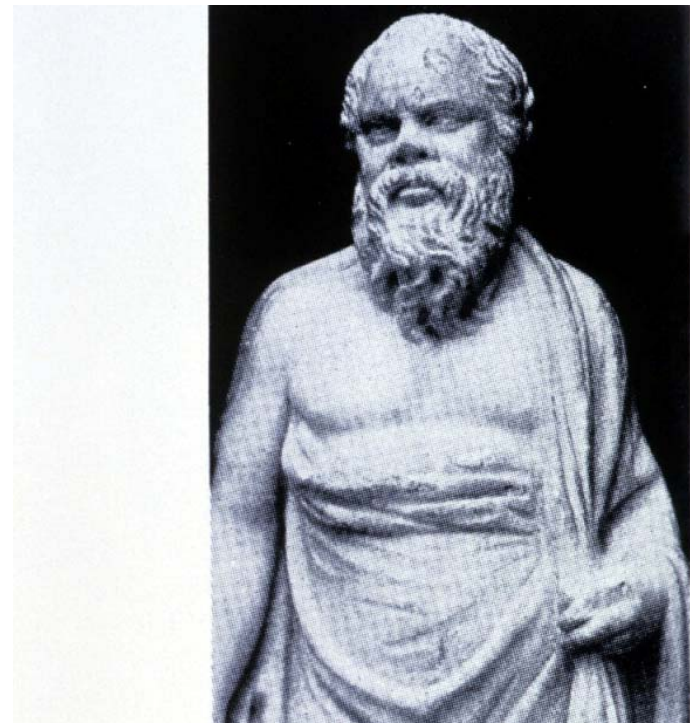
- even with Cleon at the height of his power, Aristophanes attacked him again
- Cleon is “the Paphlagonian” who caters to Demos (“People”)
- a sausage-seller beats the Paphlagonian at a contest over Demos’ affection
- won a third first prize (go dude!)

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## *The Clouds*

(Dionysia, 423 BCE)

- Aristophanes returns to the Dionysia, but gets third place (ack!)
- attack on philosophy
- **Socrates** is unfairly treated as a sophist
- real reason for using him: Socrates was ugly!



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## *The Wasps*

**(Lenaea, 422 BCE)**

- Aristophanes goes back to the Lenaea
- attacks the Athenian jury system
- young Bdelycleon holds home-trial to entertain his conservative father Philocleon
- sues family dog Labes for stealing cheese
  - spoof of General Laches' embezzlement trial
- won second place (whew!)

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## *The Peace*

**(Dionysia, 421 BCE)**

- Cleon is dead now (killed in battle)
- the hero wants to fly to heaven and bring the goddess Peace back to earth
- rides a giant dung beetle
  - spoof of Euripides' *Bellerophon*
  - excuse for much scatological humor
- won second place (well, okay!)

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## *The Birds*

**(Dionysia, 414 BCE)**

- the birds of the world decide to intercept divine offerings and tax the gods
- a spoof of the greed which led to the Sicilian Expedition?
- wonderful opportunity for bird costumes!
  - despite the war, no reduction in theatre budget!
- won second prize (thanks a lot!)

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## ***Thesmophoriazusae***

***(“Women Celebrating Demeter”)***

**(411 BCE)**

- attack on Euripides and rescue plays of 412
- Euripides dresses an older male relative in drag and sneaks him into a women’s festival
- then has to rescue him, à la *Helen*
- did this inspire Pentheus in *The Bacchae*?

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## *Lysistrata*

(411 BCE)

- Aristophanes' best known comedy today
- women mount a sex strike until the men of Greece agree to stop fighting the war
- a spoof of women as much as men
- beneath all the comedy lurks a sense of desperation (war? ha ha ha!)

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## *The Frogs*

**(Lenaea?, 405 BCE)**

- the cowardly Dionysus wants to rescue Euripides from Hades
- dresses up like Heracles (Hercules)
- ends bringing Aeschylus back

<http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/093reading4frogs.htm>

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## ***Ecclesiazusae***

### ***(“Assembly-Women”)***

**(392 or 391 BCE)**

- women dress up as men and take over the assembly
- n.b. no new costumes
- beginning of the change into Middle Comedy

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## ***Plutus* (“Wealth”)**

**(388 BCE)**

- Aristophanes’ last surviving play
- the god of Wealth regains his sight and begins distributing money more fairly
- almost no choral odes!
- but there are places marked for them
  - *chorou* (“chorus’ [song]”)
- another sign of things to come!