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## The Court of Comedy

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## Epilogue

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ἔστιν δ' ὁ μὲν περὶ τῶν μελλόντων κρίνων οἶον ἐκκλησιαστής.

A man at the Assembly is a judge of what will happen in the future.

—Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.3.2.1358b4–5

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More than a decade intervenes between *Frogs* and the next extant comedy. That these were the years of the tyranny of the Thirty and the more expansive reincarnation of the Athenian democracy makes it all the more regrettable that there is so little to reconstruct of comedy's characterization of this difficult but fascinating period. Legal speeches of the time testify to continuing debate about how to deal with the legacy of the Thirty, both in terms of appropriate punishment and how to properly understand the development of the regime (*Lys.* 13 and 30), but also how to vet the future participants in the democracy (*Lys.* 25).

The most intriguing topical comic fragments from the period belong to Archippus, and these all shade into issues of politics and rhetoric. The title of Archippus' *Donkey's Shadow* was proverbial for a dispute over something trivial, and all references to the saying appear in the context of Athenian courts, so perhaps the play also had a forensic context, but the fragments (35–36) are unhelpful.<sup>1</sup> Another of Archippus' comedies, *Fish*, seems to have

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1. See *Wasps* 191 and Σ for an aetiology of the phrase, a story also found in [Plut.] *Mor.* 848ab

satirized the political machinery of Athens. One fragment complains about the double jeopardy officeholders face with their audits (fr. 14); another has an orator addressing the (chorus of?) fish, not with the customary address of a jury as ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, “gentlemen of Athens,” but with the more context-appropriate ἄνδρες ἰχθύες, “Gentlemen Fish” (fr. 30). Yet another writes up a mock peace treaty between the Athenians and the fish (fr. 27).<sup>2</sup> It would be fascinating to know, then, how Archippus handled one of the key figures in the aftermath of the tyranny of Thirty in 403, when he staged *Rhinion*, but the remains (frr. 42–44) are unhelpful.

When Aristophanes surfaces again with extant plays, his approach to the political environment and the role of rhetorical speech within it displays some continuity, but the differences are more marked. The chain to the glorious past of Athens that Aristophanes fervently clung to in *Frogs* now seems broken. Given the broader context, this is not surprising. Ober has demonstrated that the period 403–322 B.C.E. for the Athenian democracy marks a new, ideologically coherent era deserving its own synchronic study.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the plays of this period merit a separate study to analyze fully how Aristophanes’ last two extant plays fit into the intellectual milieu of the fourth century, as he pursues new ways to envision the political and cultural landscape. I offer only a few comments outlining this approach. In many ways, it is remarkable how radically and energetically Aristophanes works to articulate a new, progressive vision of Athens, given that he seems to have forsaken the optimistic idealization of Athens that propelled nearly all his plays of the fifth century.<sup>4</sup>

*Assemblywomen*, of the late 390s, already benefits from progressive scholarship about its vision of democratic culture in its early renewal, along with the role of rhetorical speech in the public arena.<sup>5</sup> Rothwell finds the protagonist Praxagora the very embodiment of a new articulation of persuasion (*peitho*).<sup>6</sup> She is a successful *rhetor* who leads the contingent of women in the Assembly on a new venture for Athens’ civic community and opens up a new space for effective rhetorical speech to benefit the Athenian Demos. On the other hand, the range and domain of her reforms bespeak a cynicism or lack of faith in current institutions not found in the fifth-century plays.<sup>7</sup>

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(Lives of Ten Orators), where Demosthenes employs it.

2. Cf. Rothwell (2007, 126–28).

3. Ober (1989, 36–38).

4. See Zumbrennen (2012, 99–122) for a fresh look at these issues.

5. Ober and Strauss (1990, 264–69).

6. Rothwell (1990).

7. For Aristophanes’ vision in *Assemblywomen* compared to Plato’s political vision in *Republic* 5,

Aristophanes' vision is, if anything, more radically inclusive, egalitarian and democratic, perhaps the most hopeful scenario the comedian can offer in Athens' depressed situation.

In *Wealth*, of 388, Aristophanes offers another total re-creation of the Athenian *polis* by redistributing wealth based on merit, and the time-honored institutions of the democracy have barely any relevance this time. A range of "political" readings of the play have been proposed over the years, from the "ironic" reading to the dark readings that expose the ideological irrationality of Athens to deeply cynical charades.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent readings have found more positive elements in its literary technique and sociological foregrounding of desire.<sup>9</sup> Sommerstein's earlier reading of the play as a somewhat hard-edged defense of the poorest of the democracy's supporters comes closest to continuity with the Aristophanes I propose in this book.

Interestingly, somewhere in this period, Aristophanes himself served in the institution he had so long championed, the Council (*JG* II<sup>2</sup> 1740.24 = T9 PCG = *Ath. Agora* XV.12.26). It is tempting to speculate that this service and the radical politics of his last plays are related. Serving on the Council could have been discouraging and led him to believe deeper structural change was needed, perhaps explaining why in the late plays the Council no longer factors in social reform or provides stability. Conversely, Aristophanes' increasingly committed politics focusing on social reform might have contributed to his pursuing and being selected by his tribe to serve. While such scenarios remain entirely speculative, his service at this time, as Sommerstein points out, means that Aristophanes passed his *dokimasia*, and the audits of other litigants at the time demonstrate that his past behavior, especially his loyalty to oligarchy or democracy, would have been an issue.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it was problematic, but those insisting that Aristophanes espoused an antidemocratic line for decades must reckon how and why Aristophanes then served in one of the bastions of the democracy at a time when the democracy was vigilant about who participated, and anyone linked to oligarchy was vulnerable politically and in court.

Another consequence of the coherent ideological landscape Ober charts for 403–322 is the development of the focused use of formal rhetoric. As Ober argues, formal rhetoric developed in this period as the established

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see now Tordoff (2007). Cf. Reinders (2001, 243–79).

8. Sommerstein (1984) surveys the ironic readings, such as Konstan and Dillon (1981). For an even more cynical reading, see Olson (1990).

9. Sfyroeras (1995); McGlew (2002, 174–91).

10. Sommerstein (2009, 5 n. 15; revised from 1993).

medium of communication between the democratic body and the elite sub-population of Athens, the means by which each party continually renegotiated their relationship, but with the Demos holding the ultimate authority of interpretation.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, Aristophanes was on the wrong side of history yet again. He had repeatedly characterized and dramatized the development of technical speech as a drag on the democratic deliberative process, but it in fact became the efficient means of maintaining stability. There is perhaps some hint that Aristophanes is aware of this growing reality in *Assemblywomen*, with its speech by Praxagora before the Assembly, and in *Wealth*, in the debate between Poverty and Chremylus, each allowing considerable development of organized speech and developed argumentation in ways that actually forward the positive goals of the protagonists to benefit Athens.

Even so, it is a long way from the formal rhetorical devices systematized by Aristotle and others later in the century. Later comedy would respond to these developments. Specific philosophical schools, and sometimes the speech habits of their students, are recognized.<sup>12</sup> Eventually a passage full of technical rigmarole will hit the comic stage (Cratinus Jr. fr. 7, of the Pythagoreans):

ἔθος ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς, ἂν τιν' ἰδιώτην ποθὲν  
 λάβωσιν εἰσελθόντα, διαπειρωμένοις  
 τῆς τῶν λόγων ῥώμης ταραττεῖν καὶ κυκᾶν  
 τοῖς ἀντιθέτοις, τοῖς πέρασι, τοῖς παρισώμασι,  
 τοῖς ἀποπλάνοις, τοῖς μεγέθεσιν νουβυστικῶς.

This is their character: if they catch some ordinary person coming along, they test his strength in argumentation, assault and batter him with antitheses, conclusions, balanced clauses, digressions, quantities enough to stuff your brain!

Comedy gradually proceeds from reacting to and reflecting formal rhetoric until plays incorporate speeches that later students will recognize as models to be emulated. In the Roman world, Quintilian recommends a half dozen plays of Menander that contain speeches that are both prime specimens of rhetoric and whose content benefits the orator in training (10.1.69). Much to the exasperation of the staunch Atticist Phrynichus a century later, a

11. Ober (1989).

12. See Olson (2007, 227–55) for a survey.

certain Balbus of Tralles was known to prefer Menander over Demosthenes (*Epit.* 394 Fischer = Menander T119 PCG).

While Aristophanes would be crucial for Atticists as a source of unimpeachable Attic vocabulary, and he would win points for style, it has only been in modern scholarship that he has been credited with formal construction of speeches following precepts neither he nor his contemporaries knew. While the basis for such work is understandable, we can now securely say that Aristophanes in fact opposed and attacked the early developments that would blossom in the generations after his lifetime into formal instruction in rhetoric. In the fifth century he supported, even as he criticized, the democracy of Athens, which in the fourth century, in a way that would likely have surprised and perhaps disturbed him, thrived by appropriating the very type of speech he despised.

In any case, Aristophanes' legacy and determination to dramatize the importance of public free speech certainly continued. Some sources in antiquity said that the fourth-century comic playwright Nicostratus was a son of Aristophanes. As it happens, in one brief passage surviving from his comedies (fr. 29), a character quotes a line from Euripides (οὐκ ἔστιν ὅστις πάντ' ἀνὴρ εὐδαιμονεῖ, "No man is completely happy," fr. 661.1 *Stheneboea*), the same line that Aristophanes' own version of Euripides used in desperation when trying to avoid Aeschylus' little bottle of oil (*Frogs* 1217–19). It is ironic in one way that Aristophanes in *Frogs* disparages a playwright when, six years earlier, one of his characters, Inlaw, invoked freedom of speech under the democracy (παρρησία, *Th.* 541) to defend Euripides. But freedom of speech has been the more enduring legacy of Aristophanes. Another stray line of Nicostratus champions the idea as if to pick up where Aristophanes' career leaves off (fr. 30, first line unmetrical):

ἄρ' οἴσθ' ὅτι τῆς πενίας ὄπλον ἔστιν ἡ  
παρρησία; ταύτην ἐάν τις ἀπολέσῃ,  
τὴν ἀσπίδ' ἀποβέβληκεν οὗτος τοῦ βίου.

Don't you know that the weapon against poverty  
is freedom of speech? If you lose that,  
then you've lost the shield of your life.

Perhaps then, in the end, as caustically as he sometimes used language, at his core Aristophanes believed in freedom of speech as a shield rather than as a weapon, and so he perennially objected to the use of language to harm the Demos while he himself sought to shield the Athenian democracy, to

protect it, so that better, wiser natures would render sound judgment, and its citizens would enjoy a success and prosperity approaching the fantastic worlds he was able to create on stage before the Demos. Such sound judgment, of course, had to include the spectators in the theater voting Aristophanes' comedies, which dramatized these worlds, first prize.