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Research Article

Greek economic institutions through Aristophanic comedy: a pedagogical application

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Abstract

Teaching introductory courses on the ancient world is a study in reviewing a vast field of material without compromising on nuance. It is a tightrope walk, especially when beginning a teaching career. Comedy and economics are topics often parsed in more advanced courses to engage the primary source materials and modern debates with appropriate depth of analysis. However, their place in the introductory classroom is an essential aspect of understanding the ancient Greek world fully. Especially as students often struggle to find ancient comedy amusing upon first interaction, teaching these topics is a process of trial and error for the professor, who is often constrained by their own exposure to these topics. This article shares a classroom activity on comedy and economic institutions designed for the introductory class, engaging students by activating prior knowledge and practicing close reading of a selection from an ancient text.

Keywords: Aristophanes; *Acharnians*; economics; pedagogy; classroom activity

Inclusion of the *agora* in ancient Greek archaeology, history, and/or classics courses is ubiquitous. The *agora* lies at the centre, not only of the city, but also of political, social, and religious discourse. However, the functioning of the *agora* and its economic institutions draws less attention. Particularly in introductory courses, the physical and legal definitions of the space often fall by the wayside due to the overwhelming breadth of information under discussion. In the subsequent pages, I demonstrate a method to include the legal and economic technicalities of the *agora* in an analysis of Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, a comedy set during the crisis of the Peloponnesian War, which deals with the economic fallout of limiting interstate interactions, such as by the Megarian Decree (*c*. 432 BCE), due to the war. Whilst the following activity on comedy and economics can be adapted for a range of courses, introductory through advanced, with varying enrolment, this example is targeted to first- and second-year university students in a liberal arts setting with a class size of 30–40.

Background of the activity

At the end of one of the earliest iterations of my intermediate-level course on ancient Greek economics, I asked my students to reflect on the course and think about how they would teach the material – What would they prioritise? What primary sources would they use? One woman raised her hand and said, 'I'd use more comedies. I found several quotes in my final paper research, and we didn't talk about them that much'. She was right. In my prioritisation of legal speeches, epigraphy, archaeology, numismatics, and modern theoretical models, I had overlooked one of the main tools in the classicist's toolbox.

Comedy is a gateway into understanding daily life of the modern day, just as much as of ancient cultures. Aristophanes in particular used current events to contextualise the narrative of his plays, creating a familiar world for the audience and engaging in a form of ancient observational humour, as well as political critique. However, because his humour (and truly all humour) is situated within very specific socio-political moments, students can struggle to 'find the funny'. The mores of the modern world differ so vastly from ancient Athens that it interferes with the comedic experience. As Thomas has argued, '. . . how we experience comedy impacts on our confidence and attitudes towards present comedic experiences. Comedy that conflicts with our personal values and life experience will not be enjoyed' (Thomas 2015, p. 257). Reading about little girls sold essentially into slavery as 'piglets' to be the butt of sexual jokes to avoid starvation (as happens in *Acharnians*, 729–781) is unlikely to find a receptive audience in the twenty-first-century classroom. Additionally, reading a transcription of an ancient performance in translation, often crammed into the night before class, is not the way to enhance the comedic experience.

Due to these barriers between ancient text and modern audience, I have found that reading the entirety of most Aristophanic comedies (*Lysistrata* perhaps being an exception) in an introductory class can be an exercise in frustration for myself, as well as the students. I have heard complaints from students that range from 'there are too many names' and 'the names are hard to remember' to 'that is *not* funny' and 'this is clearly a reference to something, but I don't know what'. Introductory-level students quickly become overwhelmed and reach a form of cognitive overload. Moreover, the expectation that the play will be funny, as a

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comedy is assumed to be, can intensify student dissatisfaction when their comedic expectations are not met. Without the time and focus to develop a more complete understanding of the ancient comedic genre and atmosphere of the plays, my attempts at in-class activities on comedies have often felt rushed or, in my opinion, fell flat in their execution.

Much like the 'banking model' of teaching (a top-down hierarchical explanation of information that depends heavily on experts imbuing students with knowledge; Freire 1970 [2005], pp. 71–86), I have found myself explaining *to* the students what is happening and why it is funny. This does not result in much amusement at the characters' antics. Recognising the limits of this pedagogical method, I was left searching for a way through which I could activate students' own comedic appreciation and apply it to ancient texts. Breaking down a whole text was too much; thus, I decided that instead we should focus on just a few lines and go into depth to understand their meaning, their implications, and their absurdity. I designed this activity to open the door to ancient comedy and invited interested students to read more deeply, but without losing the larger focus of the course. Students are encouraged to read comedy to complete other assignments, but I limit the amount of assigned reading outside of class.

Where Aristophanes becomes exceptionally useful in the classroom is in his employment of recognisable institutions (the laws, rules, and formal organisation) of everyday Athens as a basis for his humorous worldbuilding. Ideally, students would be able to identify rules and regulation in the marketplace of Dicaeopolis, then extrapolate the real institutions underpinning the comedic description. Once they have worked backwards to understand the real institution, comparison between the real world and the play would allow them to appreciate the comedic absurdity introduced by the playwright. As MacDowell argues:

knowledge of Athenian law can help us to understand individual lines of Aristophanes, and study of Aristophanes can give us information about points of Athenian law . . . when Aristophanes mentions a feature of legal proceedings, perhaps to make a joke about it, clearly we shall not see the point of the reference or the joke unless we understand what the legal feature is (MacDowell 2010, pp. 147–148).

Through close reading of short selections of ancient comedies, students could not only gain an appreciation for the humour and social experience of the ancient world, but also for the rules and regulations engrained in day-to-day life.

However, excavating these legal features can be difficult for the introductory student who has little background knowledge of the minutiae of Greek legal and economic systems. This activity addresses these difficulties directly, by approaching a very limited selection of text with modern parallels. Students do not start by reading the text and working backwards to understanding. Rather, they put themselves into a space to understand the world Aristophanes has built, particularly where it intersects their own experiences.

Classroom activity overview

This multi-stage classroom exercise took place over the course of two 50-minute lecture periods, though it could be configured differently, condensed, or lengthened, depending on course need.

As a warmup, I broke the students into groups of four (or so) and asked them to describe a variety of commercial spaces.

- What is a store?
- What is a mall?
- What is a garage sale?
- How do these commercial spaces differ from one another?
- How do you differentiate between them?

Then, I provided a series of follow-up questions to deepen their definitions and address aspects they may have overlooked.

- How did you describe the spaces physically (construction, lay out, etc.)?
- Can or do they all occur in the same geographical locations?
- How are they regulated and managed?
- Are there any other activities happening in those locations that give them more cultural meaning or context?

Finally, they put their definitions to the test against a fourth commercial space.

- Is a market stall, or a series of market stalls, more like a store or a mall or a garage sale or does a market stall exist in a category of its own?
- In comparing definitions of these commercial spaces, what other attributes are you considering in finding similarities or differences?
- How did you come to your conclusion? Did all members of the group agree?

For the second phase of the activity, to bridge the connection between comedy and commercial space, I next shared two memes, one making a pun (Figure 1) and one for them to analyse (Figure 2). Upon presentation, students usually chuckle a bit (usually humouring the professor) and then I ask them to identify as many different layers of meaning in the second meme as possible. They needed to breakdown every aspect of the phrase 'America's version of a walkable city center', in terms of the social and economic layers that produce the humorous aspect.

Asking someone to explain why something is funny not only 'ruins the joke', but also can be quite difficult for students to accomplish (McDermott 2018, pp. 340–341). Fear of social criticism hinders engagement with the material. To address this barrier, students were asked to engage with very low-stakes material – a bland meme about an old-fashioned commercial space – and activate their own perceptions of American culture and humour. This reduces student risk of censure from their peers, as the activity lacks the more charged material of most observational humour.

Once the students had discussed in smaller groups, we came back together for a whole class discussion, which often ended with observations about 'mall culture' and the shift away from commercial malls as centres of retail activity. Students often drew upon knowledge from other forms of media – specifically movies and television – in which malls played a larger role to supplement their own experiences. 'Mall culture' in the twentieth century often provided social and economic space for people of many ages. However, unlike the *agora* or a town square, malls are privatised spaces. As such, they can lack, or sometimes intentionally limit (see, for example, the 1972 case *Lloyd Corporation v. Tanner*), the political and religious aspects of earlier public spaces (Scharoun 2012, pp. 88–96). As such, we problematise in our discussion the oppositional expectations of economic efficiency versus the full array of the social–communal experience.

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Figure 1. Mall pun meme.



Figure 2. America's version of a walkable city center.

Moving into the crux of the lesson, I introduced Aristophanes' *Acharnians* and the nature of Greek comedy. The students were assigned to read a selection from the introduction of S. Douglas Olsen's commentary to support the historical framing in the class lecture, but they had not read the play. *Acharnians* is a difficult comedy for students, as it ranges wildly in topic, makes the many contemporary political references so common in Aristophanes, and is full of crude sexual and bodily humour. Especially in an introductory course, the informational gap between ancient audience awareness and the modern student creates a nearly insurmountable breakdown in the jokes (O'Shannon 2014 [2012], pp. 2–20). To combat this breakdown and to restrain the length of the activity, I have students focus on a selection from the text, lines 719–728, which they read and discuss in class.[1]

ὅροι μὲν ἀγορᾶς εἰσιν οἵδε τῆς ἐμῆς.
ἐνταῦθ' ἀγοράζειν πᾶσι Πελοποννησίοις
ἔξεστι καὶ Μεγαρεῦσι καὶ Βοιωτίοις,
ἐφ' ᾧτε πωλεῖν πρὸς ἐμέ, Λαμάχῳ δὲ μή.
ἀγορανόμους δὲ τῆς ἀγορᾶς καθίσταμαι
τρεῖς τοὺς λαχόντας τούσδ' ἰμάντας ἐκ Λεπρῶν.
ἐνταῦθα μήτε συκοφάντης εἰσίτω
μήτ' ἄλλος ὅστις Φασιανός ἐστ' ἀνήρ.
ἐγὼ δὲ τὴν στήλην καθ' ἣν ἐσπεισάμην
μέτειμ', ἵνα στήσω φανερὰν ἐν τἀγορᾷ.

And these are the *horoi* (boundary stones) of my market.
Here it is possible for all Peloponnesians
And Megarians and Boeotians to buy and sell,
On the condition that they sell to me and not to Lamachus.

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I appoint these as *agoranomoi* (market inspectors)
These three whips of Leprean leather.
Here let no sycophant enter
Nor let be some other man of Phasis.
And fetching the stele upon which I made the treaty,
I will place it there clearly in the market.

After reading the selection, I ask the students to visualise the marketspace. What actions are on-going? Who is included and excluded? How are the space and the commercial activities regulated? What socio-political activities are taken (or not) in Dicaeopolis' *agora* compared with the Athenian *agora* which makes up the centre of the city? These questions allow us to discuss the impact of the Peloponnesian War on the market economy (due to Dicaeopolis' insistence on including Spartans, Megarians, and Boeotians), and in more detail, the institutional expectations of the *agora* which have been replicated by Dicaeopolis, even though his market is essentially a private, not public, space. The discussions have largely ranged freely – with students making comparisons with the malls and market stalls we recently discussed, as well as identifying the role that interstate decisions, such as the Megarian Decree, likely played in creating the dire economic straits which forced Dicaepolis to establish his market in the first place (and reflects the real suffering of Athenians at the time).

Ultimately, I make sure to discuss two aspects that I find particularly relevant to a full understanding of the space and which often get lost in the wider discussion of the *agora*. First, the establishment of the boundaries of the *agora*, where the *horoi* delineate both the physical and legal limits of the *agora* (de Sainte Croix 1972, pp. 267–284; Whitehead 2000, pp. 49 and 303; Bresson 2015, pp. 306–307). This inclusion is important, as Athenian law, according to Hypereides (3.4), states "ὁ μὲν τοίνυν εἷς νόμος κελεύει ἀψευδεῖν ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ (And one such law forbids lying in the *agora*)." If the Athenian government wished to prevent lying in a certain space, they would need to mark out the boundaries of that space, hence the *horoi*. But why forbid lying in the *agora*? Why not in temples or the *ekklesia* or on the Pnyx? I ask the students to think about why lying might have been prevalent enough in the market to warrant legal regulation. I also ask them to think about the process of buying and selling – who has what information when it comes to transactions? Who knows the quality of various goods for sale? How does that affect someone's ability to get a good deal or, at least, not be taken advantage of? Information asymmetry was a consummate and problematic part of the ancient market experience (Leese 2021, pp. 137–40). The use of *horoi*, laws, and market regulators or *agoranomoi* (as Dicaeopolis mentions in line 724) limited abuses of that asymmetry.

I also ask the students – what does it mean that Dicaeopolis replicates this aspect of the public *agora* in such detail? Why might that add, not only to the realistic portrayal of his market, but also to the comedic effect of the play? Students quickly recognise not only that jokes are often based on recognisable realities of daily life, but also that regulation of the marketspace is expected – both by Dicaeopolis and the play's audience. Aristophanes uses this realistically grounded expectation to push into the comedic absurdism that imbues leather whips with sentience. I have the students try to imagine what Dicaeopolis' *agoranomoi* looked like – whips without a handler; leathery strips floating in midair that snap at people under their own power. Students usually agree that this is absurd but perhaps do not see it as funny. I try then to tie it back to the modern mall example and ask them, what would be a funny or absurd version of these whips in the regulation of the modern mall? How would Monty Python, the creators of The Simpsons, or Sacha Baron Cohen describe the scene? Usually, we come to a humorous understanding that this is an ancient form of a security guard's empty uniform rushing after shoplifters, *sine corpore*, to enforce the mall's rules.

The second aspect that I include in discussion leads us back to the multiple uses of the *agora*. The 'stele upon which I made the treaty', in line 727, is set up within Dicaeopolis' market, once again mimicking the public memorialisation of diplomacy and personal achievement in the Athenian *agora* (i.e., Lambert 2007 and Stewart 2023). Dicaeopolis' private treaty and private market fly in the face of the public nature of realistic diplomacy and commercial space in ancient Athens. Thus, I ask students to think back to our discussion of the private nature of malls and how that impacts their ability to function in lieu of town squares or other more traditional socio-commercial spaces. Comparing what they have already discussed to the situation outlined in these few lines of Aristophanes tended to lead them to identify the exclusion of Lamachus and the sycophants as unusual exclusions from the marketspace. Lamachus and the sycophants are locals; they are known to Dicaeopolis. Traditionally they would be part of the socio-economic interactions of the *agora*, even if Lamachus and Dicaeopolis were rivals of some sort, as is made clear in line 722. However, whilst more foreigners were able to do business in the play's market, more Athenians were kept away by Dicaeopolis' rules. Considering that the Athenian *agora* was often a space for democratic discussions and informal deliberations, students connected the role of the *agora* to the functioning of the Athenian socio-political system (or at least identified the disconnect between Dicaeopolis' limited, and more purely economic, *agora* and the standard functioning of the real space).

To conclude the exercise, I asked for a written response. The prompt read, 'In 200–300 words, explain one aspect of the Athenian *agora* that Dicaeopolis left out or overlooked in creating his own market space and how that adds to Aristophanes' humour. Then, explain one aspect of the market or comedy that you're unclear on for follow-up discussion in our next class (muddiest point)'. These written responses allowed me to check for clarity within the lesson but also created an opportunity for me to address common misconceptions before bringing the activity to an end.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the goal of this activity is to inform and not overwhelm. Introductory courses need to touch on so many topics in the ancient world that students can feel overloaded with information and socio-cultural content. As professors we can also struggle with creating a course that coherently and cohesively engages with the vast material left from the ancient world. The modern pedagogical push to prioritise active learning techniques and skill development, such as writing, often leads to the removal of topics, especially those that do not resonate with introductory students, due to time constraints. And whilst active learning has been shown to improve long-term learning goals (Dewsbury et al. 2022), reduction in content without oversimplification is still challenging when the scope of an introductory course is narrowed. This activity is designed to encourage students to participate in deconstructing absurdist Old Comedy and to aid professors in succinctly including economic development into standard discussions of the Peloponnesian War.

The visualisation of modern commercial spaces is a valuable aspect of the activity, as it asks students to take what they already

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know about market-like spaces, to integrate information that they have learned from the text and their peers, and then to consider the comedic elements of the play that humanise the experience of interpersonal transactional relationships. The juxtaposition of ancient evidence with their modern visualisation strives to break down barriers to exegesis when dealing with such multi-faceted texts.

Additionally, having students position their own experiences as a foundation for engaging with material that can be considered 'difficult' or 'advanced' (and Aristophanes' twists on his contemporary world eschew simplistic understanding) pushes back on the 'banking model' of classical pedagogy (Freire 1970 [2005], pp. 71–86; D'Angelo and Stewart 2024, pp. 15–21). Instead, it empowers students to activate their own ideas and critical analysis to dive into a new and strange text. In conjunction with a contextual discussion of the causes and outcomes of the Peloponnesian War, students can bridge their lived experiences in economically and politically volatile times with the historical details of the war, the economic fallout, and the resulting socio-political commentary of comedy.

Author biography

Anna Accettola is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Hamilton College. Her research focusses on inclusion and exclusion of non-Greek foreigners in Greek economic spaces in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. She also specialises in Nabataean history and identity.

Note

1 Personal translation. I also annotate the English translation to give some insight into the political and geographical context, largely on the basis of (an abbreviation of) S. Douglas Olson's commentary. For example, Olson, 2002, p. 258, lines 725–726: "Φασιανός is easily taken as a pun on *φάσις* ('denunciation'); cf. *Av.* 1694–1699; fr. 443; Hsch. *φ* 201 = adesp. com. fr. 436. Phasis was the easternmost city on the southern coast of the Black Sea (Str. 11. 498; cf. E. *Andr.* 650–651 with Stevens ad loc) and the source of the brilliantly coloured *Φασιανοί* ('pheasants') apparently introduced in Athens around this time (Nu. 109 with Dover ad loc; cf. *Av.* 68; Thompson, *Birds* 298–300)."

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