II OLD COMEDY AND ARISTOPHANES

Origins and cognates

The development of tragedy and those responsible for it have not been forgotten, but comedy was neglected from the start because it was not taken seriously; only at a late date did comic choruses, which had been volunteers, become assigned by the archon. Comedy's recorded poets date from a time when some of its characteristics were already established. Who introduced masks, prologues, additional actors and the like is unknown; but Epicharmus and Phormis introduced plots, which came originally from Sicily, and in Athens were introduced by Crates, who abandoned the lampoon form in favour of coherent storylines and plots.[16]

Although the competition for comedies at the Athenian City Dionysia was made official in 486, the genre itself is certainly older, probably by generations. In this much-discussed passage from the *Poetics*, Aristotle complains that his research into the early history of Attic drama was hampered in the case of comedy by a shortage of documentation, making it impossible to construct the kind of developmental history that he was able to piece together for tragedy. Only with the generation of Crates, whose career began around 450, did a clear sequence of innovation start to become traceable, and for the earlier period Aristotle himself seems to have been driven back on what would have appeared to him a plausible inference: that comedy had evolved in the same way as tragedy, from a pre-dramatic mode of performance through the separation of chorus and soloist. He saw a credible ancestor in the 'phallic songs' performed at Dionysiac festivals around Attica, such as the one staged in *Acharnians* (237 ff.), and suggested that the lead voice in such processional songs (taken by Dicaeopolis in the *Acharnians* scene) was the origin of the comic solo actor.

Yet Aristotle was also aware that comedy's origins were more complex, diverse, and contested. Tragedy was an Athenian invention, but it is far from clear to what extent the same was true of comedy and, in arguing for autochthonous origins, Aristotle had to fend off rival claims from other parts of the Greek world. From the mid-sixth century, Attic vases were already starting to show costumed choruses that strikingly anticipate those of fifth-century comedy, and a Thespis-like

[16] Aristotle, *Poetics* 5.1449a37–b9.

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figure by the name of Susarion, claimed variously by Megara and by the Attic deme of Icaria, was credited with inventing comedy in the 560s or thereabouts. But there is still earlier evidence, from the late seventh century onwards, for popular comic mummery in the Dorian dialect zone of the Peloponnese and Greek west. Early vases, showing padded dancers with or without costume phalli, tend to be associated especially with Corinth, but two fifth-century instances are of particular interest: the local comedy of Megara, Athens' closest Dorian neighbour city to the south, and a byword in Aristophanes for weak and lowbrow humour; and the Sicilian comic plays of Epicharmus and his successors early in the fifth century.

Epicharmus is something of a puzzle.[17] Aristotle dates him 'much earlier' than Chionides and Magnes, the pioneers of the comic competition in Athens from 486 onwards, but he was certainly active into the 470s, and may simply have had a very long career. Ancient writers regularly confused or identified him with a Pythagorean philosopher of the same name who may or may not have existed, and many of the putative fragments clearly belong to this apocryphal tradition. Even the plausibly authentic play-fragments give little clue about the storylines or form of the plays; but their style is strikingly reminiscent of Athenian Old Comedy, and the titles are tantalizingly suggestive. Mythological comedy dominated, perhaps exclusively; among the forty or so titles attested for Epicharmus are such familiar names as *Amycus*, *Atalanta*, *Cyclops*, *Philoctetes*, *Sciron*, *The Trojans*, and the intriguing *Pyrrha and Prometheus* (also known as *Deucalion*); while from Phormis we hear of *Admetus*, *The Sack of Troy*, *Cepheus or Perseus*; and the later Dinolochus offers *Althaea*, *Medea*, and *Telephus*. Two staple figures of Athenian Old Comedy, Heracles and Odysseus, already appear repeatedly: *Heracles and the Girdle*, *Heracles and Pholus*, *Busiris*, *Hebe's Wedding*, and perhaps also Dinolochus' *The Amazons*; *The Sirens*, *The Cyclops*, *Odysseus Shipwrecked*, *Odysseus Doing a Bunk*, and Phormis' *Alcinous*. Other of Epicharmus' titles are more enigmatic: *Earth and Sea*, *Hope or Wealth*, and the cryptic *Logos kai Logina* ('The Word and his Wife'?). There is no sign of a chorus in the fragments, though many of the plays have plural titles that suggest one, and indeed in some cases were actually used of Athenian tragedies or comedies named after their choruses: *Persians*, *Bacchants*, *Islands*, *Muses*. Epicharmus' *Dionusoi* ('Dionysuses') has a curious form of pluralized celebrity name that in the mid-century Athenian comedy of

[17] Useful recent discussions in Cassio 2002; Kerkhof 2003.

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Cratinus refers to a chorus of followers of the named hero: *Archilochoi* ('The Archilochus Boys'), *Odysseis* ('The Odysseus Boys'). One title attested for the second-generation playwright Dinolochus, *Komoidotragoidia* ('Comitragedy'), refers tantalizingly to the proprietary Athenian genre of tragedy, and seems to anticipate the metadramatic comedies of Aristophanes and his younger contemporaries.

How all this bore on Athenian comedy is far from clear. Dramatic links between Athens and Syracuse were well established in the time of Aeschylus, who toured productions there in the 470s and 450s, and the similarities between Epicharmean and Cratinean comedy suggest that some cross-fertilization has taken place, though when, how, and in which direction is hard to determine.[18] Aristotle notes Sicilian claims that Athenian comedy was a straight derivative of their own, but he was aware that the chronology seemed to rule out anything so tidy; his solution, quoted above, was to credit Epicharmus and Phormis with the innovation of giving comic performances a narrative spine in the form of an actual storyline, something that, in his judgment, Athenian comedy did not adopt until the time of Crates in mid-century. What its earlier 'lampoon form' (*iambike idea*) looked like is unclear; the term looks back to the tradition of scurrilous personal poetry in iambic metres from Archilochus to Hipponax, which seems to have been at least an influence on the tone and style of comedy's spoken dialogue.[19] But Aristotle may not have had much to go on for this early period; it is unlikely that scripts from before the age of Crates actually survived.

All that can really be concluded from this is that comedy's origins were more diffuse than those of tragedy; that they lay at least partly outside Athens; that comedy was probably the older genre; and that such similarities as we do find between tragedy and comedy in the period of the surviving scripts were probably the result less of common origins than of a long process of mutual influence and convergence.

Old Comedy and tragedy

Whatever their prehistory, comedy and tragedy remained in a paradoxical state of mutual segregation. They were produced at the same

[18] See in particular Dearden 1999.

[19] The case for a more fundamental and pervasive debt of comedy to archaic iambic poetry is put by Rosen 1988.

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festivals, in the same theatres, in front of the same audiences, and apparently on the same days, and yet there was no formal interaction between them. They had completely separate competitions – a tragedy and a comedy could never compete for the same prize – and, most remarkably, were composed by entirely different people. There were no ancient Shakespeares: nobody who wrote tragedy ever wrote comedy, and once a young writer like Aristophanes had had a comedy accepted for a festival, he never wrote anything else so long as he lived. The reasons for this are complex and somewhat elusive; there was no actual prohibition against writing in both genres, and the tragedians' exclusive custody of satyr-play shows that the skills of comic writing were not so specialized as to be beyond the tragedians' reach. Yet the professional separation of genres in the archaic and classical period seems to have been so ingrained that the very notion of writing both was taken as a self-evident absurdity. The famous end of Plato's *Symposium* has Socrates trying to persuade Aristophanes and Agathon that, in theory at least, it was possible for the same person to write both tragedy and comedy, but the point of the episode is that the idea is presented as a joke: the only person who would seriously pretend to argue such a notion is the fifth century's most notorious intellectual *provocateur*, and on grounds which even Plato does not take seriously enough to feel them worth setting out at length.

This fundamental separateness of the two genres must be part of the reason why their performance conventions are so radically different. Considering that the plays were being put on in the same theatres in front of the same audiences, it is astonishing how different they manage to be in the basic grammar of performance that each develops. In general, tragedy was a much more restrictive performance system than comedy. Where tragedy put limits on what it could do with the form and medium of theatre, comedy made a virtue of its freedom to transgress those limits. It is not that comedy could not choose, when it suited, to abide by tragedy's conventions; but it never felt that it had to. Some of the more striking examples:

(i) **Myth and reality**. After Aeschylus' *Persians*, tragedy confined its subject matter to myth. There were no more historical tragedies, let alone a tragedy about fictional characters set in the contemporary world. But this is what comedy was able to do in play after play. All eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes tell original stories set in the time of the here and now. Even when mythological characters and settings are involved, the time setting is the present and the story is a fresh one. *Peace* is set in heaven, *Frogs* in the underworld, yet they are

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specifically and crucially the heaven of March 421 BC and the underworld of January 405. This is not to say that Aristophanes did not write mythological comedies set in the age of heroes and retelling stories familiar from epic and tragedy; it just happens that none of his famous mythological comedies, which made up perhaps a quarter of his output, is among the eleven that survive. The point, rather, is that Aristophanes could do *both*: he could recycle a story from myth, or he could make up a story set in the streets of contemporary Athens, or he could combine the two in any number of imaginative ways. Where tragedy was locked into telling the same stories over and over again, comedy was free to break loose – one reason why its creative lifetime was so much longer than that of tragedy.[20]

(ii) **Topicality**. One consequence of this was that tragedy had no way of referring directly to the world of the audience, since the plays were set hundreds of years before they were even born. Comedy had no such difficulty, and made the most of its freedom to deal directly with issues of satirical interest in contemporary Athenian life, culture, and politics. It could caricature real people on the stage; it could comment on current affairs; it could base its plots around matters of topical concern. The best that tragedy could do was to present a mythological story in ways that made it possible to see pointed parallels with contemporary events; but even that is so obliquely done in the surviving plays that it is seriously possible to question whether any of them is doing it at all. Old Comedy's fondness for subjects of immediate topical concern was one of the factors that militated against its long-term survival, as it made plays very difficult for actors to revive for later production, or even for later readers to understand, once the original topical references had lost their resonance.

(iii) **Fantasy**. Where tragedy tried to keep magic and the supernatural at arm's length, comedy positively revelled in suspending the laws of physics, logic, and naturalism on every available level. Aristophanes' plots are founded on deliberately bizarre and impossible premises, such as making a one-man peace treaty with Sparta while the rest of Athens is at war, or founding a city of birds between heaven and earth and imposing a trade blockade on the commerce in prayers and sacrifice between humans and gods. Characterization, too, is uninterested in the kinds of intense psychological realism that tragedy found so important; Aristophanes' characters are larger-than-life cartoon figures, their motivation determined less by nuances of

[20] A fuller discussion of these issues is in N. J. Lowe 2000b.

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personality than by the dictates of theme, plot, and comic possibility.[21] This is mirrored in the costume: tragic actors' masks and costume were dignified and naturalistic, whereas comic costume was distorted and deliberately grotesque, with leering masks and exaggerated belly, buttocks, and phallus.

(iv) **Language**. One area where comedy's greater freedom and range, and its disdain for naturalism, has spectacular consequences is in its verbal style. Tragedy has a fairly uniform, restrained, highly artificial poetic diction of its own; there are differences between the Greek of the spoken dialogue and the Greek of the choral odes, but all the characters speak within a homogeneous linguistic register. Comedy is quite different: its poetry spans a wider range of styles of Greek than any other literature the ancient world produced, ranging all the way from gutter obscenities at one extreme to high-flown tragic parody at the other, with a licence to soar beyond existing lexical horizons to invent exuberant new words, usages, and expressions of its own. Aristophanic verse is dizzily inventive, mixing styles and metaphors in relentlessly unpredictable ways; he can capture the idioms and speech patterns of everyday spoken Attic with a precision that only Menander ever surpassed, but he can also mix it up with bizarre poetic coinages of his own creation – and do both within the space of a single phrase.

(v) **Production values**. Comedy was a more extravagant theatrical form than tragedy. It was more expensive to put on: the figures quoted in the orators suggest that a tragic production cost about twice as much as a comic production, but the tragic production comprised four plays as against the comic production's one, so that, play for play, a single comedy required double the budget of a single tragedy.[22] From the texts of Aristophanes' plays, it is not hard to see where the money is going. A major part of the expense was the chorus, which was double the size in comedy – twenty-four members as against tragedy's twelve or fifteen – and far more spectacularly characterized, costumed, and choreographed. Fantasy choruses such as clouds or frogs abound; Aristophanes' most lavish surviving play, *Birds*, seems to have had a chorus representing twenty-four different species of bird.[23] There is also much more use made of props, stage machinery and

[21] On 'imagist' characterization, see especially Silk 1990, 2000: 207–55.

[22] The speaker of Lysias 21 laid out 3000 drachmae as tragic *choregos* (for a production of four plays) but 1600 for a (single) comedy; analysis of the figures in P. Wilson 2000: 89–95 (who perhaps overemphasizes the expense of costume relative to other per-capita expenditure).

[23] This has sometimes been disputed, but Dunbar 1995: at lines 267–326 notes the precedent of the twenty-four individualized members of Eupolis' chorus of *Cities*.

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special effects, additional speaking and non-speaking actors, and extra costumes and masks for further characters (*Birds* manages an astonishing twenty-one from the three main actors alone).

(vi) **Dramatic illusion**. Tragedy never openly breaches the 'fourth wall' dividing the world of the play from the world of its spectators. The closest it comes is to use language or to set up situations that might implicitly invite the audience to think about their own role as spectators of a performance; but no character in a tragedy ever acknowledges the audience directly or refers directly to the fact that they are watching a play. Comedy has no such restraints. Characters in Aristophanes are constantly acknowledging the audience, making jokes about individuals in the audience, and referring to their own status as characters in a play by Aristophanes at an Athenian dramatic festival. The one thing that they cannot do, interestingly, is to take off their masks or name the actor beneath.[24]

(vii) **Space and time**. Tragedy insists on literalism in the treatment of space and time. Scene changes are largely avoided, and the action presents at least the pretence of real-time continuity. In fifth-century comedy, there is no such insistence; scene changes are freely permitted, and the action can skip ahead days in time if it happens to suit the story. Interestingly, Aristophanes takes much less advantage of this freedom than we might expect, and a couple of plays retain unity of time, place, and action throughout. But it is still possible to have a character fly from earth to heaven, or travel through the underworld, in real time, live on stage, and the identity of the stage building can be dissolved and reassigned repeatedly throughout the play if desired.[25]

(viii) **Formal structure**. Comedy has a much more elaborate formal structure than tragedy, with even the shared elements used in different ways. Both normally begin with a *prologue* (simply the opening scene before the chorus arrives) and *parodos* (a big entry song where the chorus first arrive), and end with an *exodos* (mass exit of all characters, including the chorus, by one or more routes off stage). But the main body of the play, as the diagram below shows, is structurally very simple in tragedy (merely alternating dialogue scenes or *episodes*, with choral odes or *stasima*) but extremely complex in comedy. An important option that does not exist in tragedy at all is the *epirrhematic syzygy*, a strictly symmetrical, two-part musical routine, which can itself take a number of further forms in the course of the

[24] Occasional claims that something like this happens in *Acharnians* should be viewed with grave scepticism.

[25] See more on this in N. J. Lowe 2006; Revermann 2006: 107–29.

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play as alternatives to the dialogue episode. One variation is the *agon* or comic 'contest', a symmetrical debate scene in which the two sides of the central conflict square up and argue their case in formal presentations; another is the *parabasis*, a long set piece in the middle of the play where the chorus get the stage to themselves and are able to drop out of character to speak in wider terms about the play and its author. Much of this gets lost in the layout of translations, but it is a vitally important feature of comedy's performance structure, and to a large extent can determine the actual shaping of the plot (see below, pp. 54–6).

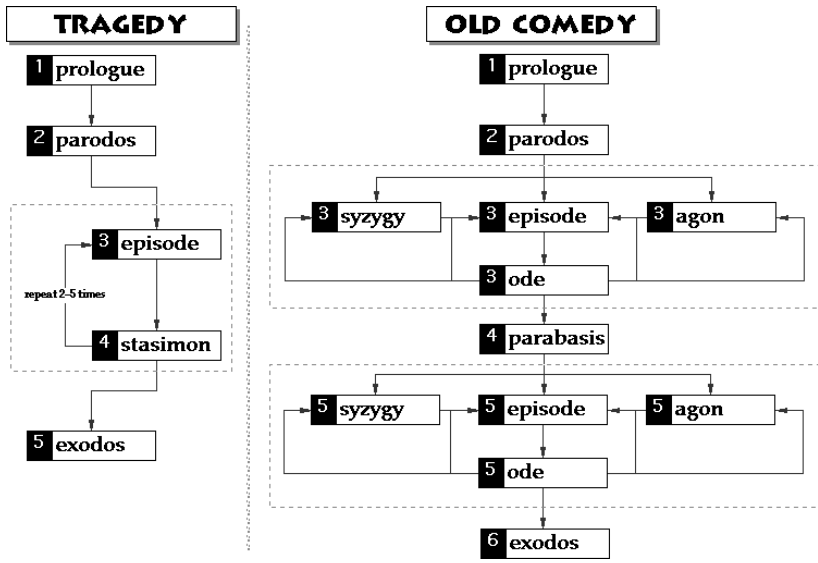


Figure 4

Yet, despite these fundamental differences of performance convention, and despite the professional and institutional segregation of the two genres, comedy could not help but be influenced by what was going on in its sister genre. (It is a great deal harder to argue for any influence of comedy on tragedy.[26]) The genre in which Aristophanes began writing in the 420s was already the product of sixty years (and probably many more) of convergent evolution, and one of the things that seems to have distinguished Aristophanes and his generation from their predecessors is a more direct interest in tragedy as a source

[26] For interesting recent attempts, see Sommerstein 2002b; Kirkpatrick and Dunn 2002.

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of plot ideas, parodic opportunities, and general theatrical inspiration. Over the course of Aristophanes' forty-year career, we can already see comedy beginning to adopt more of tragedy's techniques and conventions; by the time of Menander, another sixty years' influence and convergence have changed the whole shape and character of comedy almost beyond recognition.

Attic comedy before Aristophanes

The first generation of Athenian comic poets is irrecoverable beyond a handful of names and titles and a handful of suspect fragments. The titles of plays will have been preserved in the festival records, but it seems unlikely that scripts survived. **Chionides** seems to have competed, and presumably taken first prize, in the first official competition in 486; the plays that survived under his name in antiquity (*Heroes*, *Beggars*) may have been fabrications, but their choral-sounding titles (there was also a *Persians* or *Assyrians*) may be authentic, since they would have been documented in the festival records that were later edited by Aristotle and published. **Magnes** is a more substantial figure: he won first prize in 472, and a long career is implied by Aristophanes' typically back-handed tribute to him in the *parabasis* of *Knights* (520–5) as one of three once-celebrated poets who in old age outlived their audience's enthusiasm for their plays. He is widely suspected to be the enigmatic early comic playwright ending in -s who is credited with a record-breaking eleven victories in an inscription (*IG* ii^2.2318.7). Aristophanes seems to allude to plays called *Lyre-Players*, *Birds*, *Fruit-Flies*, and *Frogs*, as well as the independently attested *Lydians*; we hear also of two versions of a *Dionysus* and the more mysterious *Grass-Cutter* and *Pytacides* (a character name, perhaps garbled). Particularly notable is the anticipation of Aristophanic titles and subjects: Dionysus is already a recurrent comic lead, and fantasy choruses of birds and frogs are an established tradition on which Aristophanes is building his own variations.

Magnes' later plays would have overlapped with the comedians of the period 450–430, the first generation from whom we have sufficiently extensive and illuminating fragments to be able to characterise their output. **Crates**, as we saw above, was credited by Aristotle as a major innovator, the pioneer of comedies with logical plots instead of loose satirical sketches (if this is what is meant by the problem term

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iambike idea, 'lampoon form'). The fragments give us little opportunity to assess the basis for this verdict, but the preserved titles suggest contemporary rather than mythological settings: *Heroes*, *Neighbours*, *Samians*, *Games*, as well as *Lamia* and the utopian fantasy *Beasts*, from which we have a handful of fragments describing a new dispensation under which humans will no longer need to work. Aristotle implies that Crates refrained from political engagement with current events and individuals, which seems, from the 300 or so fragments, to have been true also of Crates' supposed disciple **Pherecrates**. His long career began around 440 and lasted perhaps to the end of the century; the titles and fragments include several golden-age and underworld fantasies, as well as a number of female names and choral titles that suggest an Aristophanic interest in comedies of gender; whether Pherecrates or Aristophanes was the pioneer here remains unclear, but Pherecrates' underworld comedy *Krapataloi* ('Small Change'), in which the dead Aeschylus was a character, seems to have preceded, and presumably influenced, *Frogs*. Several other plays had a literary or musical theme: an extraordinary and brilliant long fragment from *Chiron* has Music complaining in sexual terms of her abuse at the hands of the avant-garde composers of the so-called 'New Music'. Another figure from the same era was **Callias**, who may or may not be the same as the author of the fascinating *Alphabet Tragedy*.[27] This is also the generation in which political comedy first emerges to clear view: two key figures here were **Teleclides** and **Hermippus**, both of whom seem to have pursued particular comic vendettas against Pericles and Aspasia.

But the titan of this era was **Cratinus**, who was still producing annually in the years of Aristophanes' earliest surviving plays (425–422), and defeated him in 423 with the extraordinary *Putine* ('Hipflask'), which responded to Aristophanes' dismissal of him in the *Knights* as a washed-up drunk by presenting Cratinus himself as torn between the rival mistresses of Poetry and Booze. Among other plays whose storyline is not completely obscure, *Odysseis* ('The Odysseus Boys') was a mythological comedy reworking the episode of Odysseus and the Cyclops, previously staged by Epicharmus and also an enduring staple of satyr-play; the fragments all fit neatly into identifiable moments in the Homeric storyline, though there was doubtless more to it. *Archilochoi* ('The Archilochus Boys') featured the founder of iambic satirical poetry, perhaps in some kind of competition with

[27] Rosen 1999.

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Homer and other founding fathers of Greek poetry. *Dionysalexandros* ('Dionysus/Paris') is relatively sparsely represented by fragments, but a papyrus synopsis of the second half of the play tells us that the god assumed the role of Paris of Troy, judged the goddesses' beauty pageant in his place, and carried off Helen of Sparta as Aphrodite's reward – only for the real Paris (referred to here, as often in drama, under his Homeric name Alexandros) to track the impostor down, confiscate Helen, and fall in love with her himself. Two further details are especially tantalizing. First, the papyrus concludes by interpreting the play as an ingenious political satire accusing Pericles of 'bringing the war on Athens', which seems to imply that Paris, Helen, and the Trojan War were open, or at least fairly transparent, mythological allegories of Pericles, Aspasia, and the Peloponnesian War (or possibly the Samian War of ten years earlier; the play is only dated by this reference). Second, the papyrus opens at a point where the chorus of satyrs are addressing the audience, presumably in a *parabasis*, 'about the poets' – which, if the text is correctly supplemented, would appear to be an early example of the kind of literary polemic familiar from Aristophanes' *parabases*. But the papyrus is damaged at this point, and the correct reading may be 'about the making of sons' – perhaps in connection with Pericles' citizenship law of 451.

Aristophanes himself belonged to a fertile new generation of young comic poets who emerged in close succession in the early years of the Archidamian war. One such was **Phrynichus**, who would go on to compete against *Birds* with his *Monotropos* or 'Hermit' – apparently an ancestor of the misanthrope leads in Menander's *Dyskolos* and Plautus' *Aulularia* – and against *Frogs* with the intriguing but mysterious literary comedy *Muses*.[28] Phrynichus probably made his bow in the same year (429) as the seventeen-year-old **Eupolis**, whose seven victories in his short career left his sparring-partner Aristophanes standing in his shade until Eupolis' early death (probably in the sea-battle of Cynossema) in 411. His *Demes* is the best-preserved comedy on papyrus and had its hero resurrect four great Athenians from different past eras to put a degenerate Athens to rights; *Baptai* (apparently 'Dyers') was a satire on the vogue for foreign ecstatic cults and somehow attacked Alcibiades; *Marikas* (421) was a *Knights*-style attack on Cleon's demagogic successor, Hyperbolus, portrayed as the titular Persian slave, with a split chorus in the manner of *Lysistrata*; *Kolakes* ('Flatterers', also 421) satirized the intellectual and social life

[28] Harvey 2000.

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of the phenomenally wealthy Callias. Unusually, perhaps uniquely, Eupolis specialized in political comedy, and seems not to have shared Aristophanes' taste for mythological or literary comedy – unlike their versatile contemporary **Plato** (no known relation to the philosopher), whose particular fondness for mythological sex comedies may be one reason why ancient critics sometimes classed him as a, sometimes *the*, representative of Middle Comedy. The somewhat younger **Archippus** similarly dramatized the amours of Heracles and Zeus, but of greatest interest is his *Birds*-like utopian comedy *Fishes* from the post-war years. Also making their débuts in the teens were **Theopompus**, a third or more of whose plays took their subjects from non-tragic myth, and the fascinating paratragic specialist **Strattis**.

But it was the 420s that were Old Comedy's golden decade, when the three canonical masters of the genre – Cratinus, Eupolis, and Aristophanes – were all in regular and increasingly hard-fought competition. The intense professional rivalry between these three escalated over the decade in a number of ways: in the Aristophanic *parabases*, which engage in open self-advertisement, disparagement of rivals, and competition for audience support; in the emergence of a new class of metatheatrical comedy, such as Cratinus' *Putine* and Aristophanes' mysterious *Proagon*; in rival attempts at the same subject matter, and back-and-forth accusations of plagiarism; and in a fascinating succession of more-or-less veiled self-representations by the playwrights in the plays themselves. All this came to a head at the Dionysia of 423, when Aristophanes' most ambitious play to date, *Clouds*, found itself up against a rival Socrates play in the form of Ameipsias' *Connus*, which beat *Clouds* into third place (of three) but was itself beaten by Cratinus' late masterpiece *Putine*. Cratinus disappears from the scene around this time, and 421's *Peace* jokes about him as already dead (which perhaps he was).[29]

Aristophanes: life

The ancient biographical tradition on Aristophanes, represented in the *Life* preserved in the manuscripts and assorted notes in the

[29] A series of important recent studies (Sidwell 1993, 1994; Biles 2002; Ruffell 2002; and see also Heath 1990; Luppe 2000; Storey 2003; Kyriakidi 2007) has challenged what we once thought we knew about the dynamics of comic intertextual rivalry in the 420s and by implication beyond, with the competition of 423 the climactic battleground. Further contributions to this debate are forthcoming.

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scholia, is, as usual, built largely out of naively biographical readings of incidents and passages in the plays, but does at least embed some raw prosopographical information. Aristophanes was the son of Philippus of Cydathenaeum, one of the four Attic demes nucleated in the city itself; fellow-demesmen included Aristophanes' political *bête noire* Cleon and a number of figures from Aristophanes' early career who appear as members of a *thiasos* or religious association in honour of Heracles in the remarkable inscription IG ii^2.2343, including Aristophanes' frequent producer Philonides and the singularly named Amphitheus, who appears as a character in *Acharnians*.[30] The chorus of Aristophanes' first play, *Banqueters*, seems to have been modelled on or inspired by this club; the implications, and the extent of such in-jokes and characterizations *à clef* in the plays of the twenties, remain something of an enigma, but *Clouds* 528–31 thanks an unspecified group of early enthusiasts who were apparently responsible for getting *Banqueters* produced, and it is plausibly inferred that Aristophanes' career was launched with the help of these contacts. There was some connection with Aegina (*Ach*. 653–4); possibly Philippus held property on the island as a windfall from the Athenian clearances in 431.

Aristophanes' birth and death are undated. The low birth-date of 444 that is still occasionally found in derivative modern sources is the product of an emendation and a chain of inference too shaky to stand,[31] and Aristophanes (who was already bald by the time of *Peace*, 767–74) could have been born any time from 460, though a first production at seventeen is not entirely unthinkable for a comic poet; Aristophanes' rival Eupolis is said to have produced his first play at that age in 429, and Menander's career began at a similar age. Aristophanes may be playing up his youth and inexperience in the *Clouds* passage, but that he was at least more comfortable writing than rehearsing is suggested by his frequent use, especially early in his career, of such figures as Philonides and Callistratus in a role approximating to that of theatre director – something that caused understandable confusion in the competition records, though it is also attested for Eupolis and perhaps Plato. The *parabasis* of *Clouds* paints a possibly disingenuous self-portrait of a tyro playwright only gradually and coyly emerging into the spotlight in his own right, but Mastromarco and Halliwell have suggested that references to

[30] Dow 1969, Welsh 1983a, N. G. Wilson 2007a: 17, cf. 83.
[31] Dover 1968: xix n. 1.

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collaborative writing preserve traces of a typical pattern of comic apprenticeship, which would begin with the contribution of material to others' plays and only gradually work up to the composition and production of a full-scale work under one's own name.[32] At any rate, Aristophanes' first plays were produced by the Callistratus who continued to direct some of Aristophanes' later plays as late as *Lysistrata*, and perhaps also by the still longer-serving Philonides, who directed *Wasps* and *Frogs* as well as at least three comedies of his own. Aristophanes' own first production as director was *Knights* in 424; this was the play for which he remained most celebrated until *Frogs*.

About a quarter of Aristophanes' total output survives.[33] As also for Aeschylus and Menander, a Hellenistic catalogue of titles is preserved; it lists forty-four plays, of which four were of debated authorship. Some titles existed in more than one version; in some cases (such as the two plays *Thesmophoriazusae*) these seem to have been titles reused for different plays, while in others they were revisions (*diaskeuai*) of plays previously produced. The most interesting case is *Clouds*, which appears to be an unproduced partial revision, for book circulation only, of the unsuccessful production version; but *Peace* and *Wealth*, as well as the lost *Aeolosicon* and perhaps *Plays*, seem to have been staged competitively in revised versions, although the details are difficult to untangle and ancient scholars were easily confused by this practice. One particularly regrettable loss is the substantial subcorpus of mythological comedies amounting to nearly a quarter of Aristophanes' attested production.

The eleven extant plays fall into three chronological clusters: five plays from 425–421, four from 414–405, and two from the end of his career in 393–388. The majority of Aristophanes' undated plays are at least assignable to a general period on the basis of topical references to named individuals whose careers in the spotlight have more or less firm limits, and, with the significant exception of the revised text of *Clouds*, no known play is plausibly datable to the years 420–415, when the comic stage seems to have been heavily dominated by Eupolis. There is no such discontinuity apparent in the post-war period, though Aristophanes' final years seem to have seen a renewal of activity after a slowdown. He seems to have died in the mid–380s; the last firm dates are a stint on the city's Council around 390 (IG ii^2.1720.24) and the production of *Wealth* in 388. Two subsequent

[32] *Wasps* 1018–50 as interpreted by Mastromarco 1979; Halliwell 1980. Storey 2003: 280–1 surveys views since.

[33] For the full list, see Silk 2000: 16–17; Harvey and Wilkins 2000: 510–11.

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plays, *Aeolosicon II* and *Cocalus*, were directed by his son Araros and may have been posthumously produced. Like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, Aristophanes founded a theatrical dynasty – Araros and two other sons had careers as comic dramatists in their own right – which was probably influential in keeping his plays in circulation during the critical period between their first (and, in the case of comedy, generally their only) productions and the collected editions assembled at Alexandria as much as two centuries later. Despite their intense topicality, some of the plays were still sufficiently appreciated a generation after his death for a scene from *Thesmophoriazusae* to be represented in close theatrical detail on an Italian vase around 370, and other illustrations from the same period are plausibly tied to *Frogs* and to Eupolis' *Demes*.[34]

Historical events		**Aristophanes: plays (+ producer, festival, prize)**
revolt of Mytilene	**427**	*Banqueters* (Philonides or Callistratus,[35] ?Lenaea, ?2nd)
Cleon prosecutes Aristophanes	**426**	*Babylonians* (Callistratus, Dionysia, ?1st)
Pylos campaign	**425**	***Acharnians*** (Callistratus, Lenaea, 1st)
battle of Delium; Brasidas in Thrace	**424**	***Knights*** (Aristophanes, Lenaea, 1st)
1-year truce	**423**	***Clouds*** (?Aristophanes, Dionysia, 3rd)
battle of Amphipolis; deaths of Cleon, Brasidas	**422**	*Proagon* (Philonides, Lenaea, 1st); ***Wasps*** (?Aristophanes, Lenaea, 2nd)
Peace of Nicias	**421**	***Peace I*** (Dionysia, 2nd)
negotiations with Argos	**420**	
Alcibiades in Peloponnese	**419**	
Mantinea campaign	**418**	
Hyperbolus ostracized	**417**	
revolt of Melos	**416**	
Sicilian expedition sails	**415**	
siege of Syracuse	**414**	*Amphiaraus* (Philonides, Lenaea); ***Birds*** (Callistratus, Dionysia, 2nd)

[34] *Frogs*: the 'Berlin Heracles' (Taplin 1993: 45–7), lost and presumed destroyed in the Second World War. *Demes*: Assteas (Salerno, Museo Provinciale Pc 1812; Taplin 1993: 42; Storey 2003: 117).

[35] Callistratus according to *Prolegomena* III (9.38 Koster), Philonides in Schol. *Clouds* 531. Sommerstein 1980–2002: vol. 11 (2001) 219 favours Callistratus, but Welsh 1983b: 52–3, MacDowell 1995: 35, and Storey 2003: 280 favour Philonides.

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Historical events		Aristophanes: plays (+ producer, festival, prize)
Spartans occupy Decelea; Sicilian expedition wiped out	**413**	
allies revolt; Spartans woo Persia	**412**	
oligarchic coup in Athens	**411**	***Lysistrata*** (Callistratus, ?Lenaea); ***Thesmophoriazusae*** (?Dionysia)
Athenian democracy restored	**410**	
Athens loses Pylos	**409**	
Thracian campaign	**408**	*Wealth I*
Alcibiades returns to Athens	**407**	
Alcibiades exiled; battle of Arginusae	**406**	
fleet destroyed at Aegospotami	**405**	***Frogs*** (Philonides, Lenaea, 1st)
Athens surrenders; 'Thirty Tyrants' puppet regime	**404**	
democracy restored	**403**	
	402	
march of the Ten Thousand	**401**	
Spartan war with Persia	**400**	
trial and execution of Socrates	**399**	
Sparta negotiates with Persia	**398**	
Conon commands Persian fleet against Spartans	**397**	
Agesilaus invades Phrygia	**396**	
Agesilaus in Lydia	**395**	
Athenian–Boeotian alliance against Sparta; battle of Coronea	**394**	
Athenian Long Walls rebuilt	**393**	
	392	***Assemblywomen*** (?)
	391	
	390	
Thrasybulus killed on campaign	**389**	
	388	***Wealth II*** (Aristophanes, ?1st)
'King's Peace'	**387**	*Cocalus* (Araros)?
	386	*Aeolosicon II* (Araros)?

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The early group (427–421)

Aristophanes' early career was both prolific and successful. As well as the five extant plays from successive years, at least half a dozen others can be assigned with confidence to the same eight-year period. On one curious occasion (Lenaea, 422), he seems to have exploited a loophole in the festival regulations to enter two plays, one under his own name and one under its producer's; one of these was *Wasps*, which took second prize to the lost paratheatrical comedy *Proagon*. With *Acharnians* and *Knights*, this puts three of his four securely attested victories in this period, and he may also have taken first prize with *Babylonians*.

The plays of this period are, for all their layeredness and complexity, essentially single-issue plays, heavily topical comedies on a well-defined matter of current concern: the war with Sparta (*Acharnians*), domestic demagogic politics (*Knights*), the impact of the new intellectuals (*Clouds*), the democratic legal system and its abuse (*Wasps*), the imminent peace treaty of spring 421 (*Peace*). The plots are happy to shape themselves more around the traditional elements of formal structure than any sustained logic of cause and effect; *Acharnians* and *Peace* resolve their conflicts by the time of the *parabasis* and devote the second half to a loose series of sketches illustrating the consequence of that resolution through a succession of new characters trooping to the hero's door. Nevertheless, the great plays of this period – especially *Clouds* and *Wasps* – are already starting to move beyond this, using transgenerational conflicts to dramatize major contemporary social and cultural changes as seen through the eyes of Aristophanes' own generation and that of his elders. Several of these plays (*Banqueters*, *Clouds*, *Wasps*) fasten on father–son conflicts as a means to dramatize cultural change, by aligning the generations with old and new sets of ideas or values that are then shown at work within an existing structure of family bonds and problems.

***Banqueters* and *Babylonians*.**[36] Aristophanes' two earliest plays are the best documented of his lost works. *Banqueters* was an early generational comedy in the mould of *Clouds* and *Wasps*, though here with two sons embodying the effects of traditional versus sophistic education. The surviving fragments give more sense of situation than of plot, but there seems to have been a strong agonistic element between the contrasting brothers, whom Aristophanes calls 'the

[36] Cassio 1977; Welsh 1983a, 1983b; MacDowell 1995: 27–45.

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decent and the indecent' (*ho sophron kai ho katapugon*, *Clouds* 529). The scandalous *Babylonians* is more of an enigma. Something in the play about Athens and its subject allies seems to have provoked Cleon to the legal procedure known as *eisangelia*, though the details of pretext, charge, and outcome are all extremely unclear, as indeed is the situation of the play, which somehow involved the god Dionysus and a chorus of tattooed Babylonian slaves working in a mill. At any rate the legal and political fallout, which seems to have done Aristophanes' fledgling career no harm at all, was sufficiently fresh to be repeatedly invoked in the extant play from the next available festival.

Acharnians (Lenaea, 425, 1st prize).[37] This hugely complex political and literary comedy is framed, as is *Thesmophoriazusae*, around a burlesque of Euripides' lost tragedy *Telephus* (438), in which the hero, responding to an oracle instructing him to seek a cure for the crippling wound inflicted by Achilles' spear, infiltrated the Greek camp at Aulis in a beggar disguise, Odysseus-style, and made a speech arguing that the Trojans were not wholly to blame for the war; cornered, he forced a standoff by holding a sword to the infant Orestes. In Aristophanes' version, the Telephus figure is the war-weary farmer Dicaeopolis who, frustrated by official resistance and public apathy towards peace negotiations with Sparta, arranges a private peace treaty for himself and his family while the rest of Attica remains at war; the Trojan War becomes the current war with Sparta, and the role of the hostile Greeks is taken by the chorus of charcoal-makers from the village of Acharnae, whose hostility to Sparta has been stoked by five years of invasion and crop-burning. After costuming himself from Euripides' own character wardrobe, Dicaeopolis makes his scandalous speech defending Sparta, performs the hostage scene with a basket of charcoal, and spends the second half of the play enjoying the fruits of trade monopoly with Athens' enemies while the real-life general Lamachus suffers the consequences of pursuing the war.

[37] As well as the editions by Sommerstein (1980–2002, vol. 1 [1980]), S. D. Olson (2002), the reading commentary by Platter (2003), and the chapters in Dover 1972, Russo 1994, and MacDowell 1995, see Forrest 1963; Edmunds 1980; Sommerstein 1980; A. M. Bowie 1982; Harriott 1982; MacDowell 1983; E. L. Bowie 1988; Foley 1988; Sutton 1988; S. D. Olson 1990a, 1991b; Goldhill 1991: 185–8; L. P. E. Parker 1991; Carey 1993; N. R. E. Fisher 1993; Slater 1993; Sidwell 1994; Van Steen 1994; Habash 1995; Compton-Engle 1999; Moorton 1999; Hesk 2000: 237–43; Lanza 2000; Pelling 2000: 141–63; Dobrov 2001: 47–97; McGlew 2002: 57–85; Brockmann 2003; Whitehorne 2005.

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Acharnians paints a compelling picture of the mood of Athens six years into a war that had seen no significant successes and two desperate hardships: the annual spring invasions of Attica, with their attendant evacuations of the rural population within the city walls while their crops and livestock were ravaged by the Peloponnesian army, and the plague outbreaks of 430 and 429. Against this background, rural demes like Acharnae might seem like a tough constituency to try to win to the cause of peace; but, from the outset, the play is built around issues of democratic accountability and the individual's right to power. A dazzling prologue stages a meeting of the Athenian assembly, in which it becomes clear to the heckling Dicaeopolis that peace is being deliberately kept off the agenda by the city's officials, who are lining their own pockets by continuing the war; and it is this failure of the machinery of democracy to enact the actual will of the people that drives Dicaeopolis to his individualistic solution.

Like his play, the character of Dicaeopolis operates on several levels at once. The imaginary speaking name Dicaeopolis, 'just-[in-respect-of-his]-city', is calqued on the suggestive name of Aristophanes' rival (but also, apparently, intermittent collaborator) Eupolis, yet Dicaeopolis is not Eupolis in any simple sense: he is a middle-aged farmer from the deme of Cholleidae, albeit one who perplexingly identifies himself at one point as a comic poet. What we seem to have here is an early example of Aristophanes' onomastic play with the names of real public figures whose identity is lightly and partially invoked by a name which plays on, but substitutes one element of, its real-world counterpart; so with 'Lysistrata' and the priestess of Athena Polias, Lysimache, and with the figure of Amphitheus (whose rare name means 'god on both sides') in this very play. Dicaeopolis has a notional name, life, and family of his own, but he is also, as a specimen of the middle-aged, self-assertive, everyman hero, a representative of the comic genre, who at times can seem to speak with the voice of its makers; and on to this are further overlaid the intertextual role of a comic Telephus, the onomastic role of a civic benefactor, and the metadramatic role of a spokesman for comedy itself.

Knights (Lenaea, 424, 1st prize).[38] This was the defining play of Aristophanes' early career: a relentless personal onslaught on

[38] See Sommerstein's edition (1980–2002, vol. 2 [1981]), and Brock 1986; Littlefield 1968a; also Edmunds 1987a, 1987b; Worthington 1987; C. A. Anderson 1989; Bennett and Tyrrell 1990; Welsh 1990; S. D. Olson 1990c; Sidwell 1993; Cannata 1995; McGlew 1996, 2002: 86–111; Hesk 2000: 248–60; Biles 2001; Reinders 2001; Scholtz 2004.

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Aristophanes' arch-nemesis Cleon, building a full-blown allegorical satire on the conceit that populist politicians were slaves and/or lovers (the metaphors slip and mix as the play unfolds) of the *demos* – perhaps a contemporary political catchphrase. Here Demos ('the people') has been himself effectively enslaved by the shameless toadying and manipulation of his own favoured slave, Paphlagon, until the other slaves come up with an even more grotesque rival in the form of a street hawker flogging low-grade meat products. The duel for Demos' favours takes up the rest of the unusually tight and minimalist play, with a series of twists towards the end as Demos is revealed to be only play-acting dementia (but is rejuvenated nevertheless) and the sausage-seller emerges as a natural statesman.

In later years, Aristophanes would claim, apparently with some justice, that in devoting a play to an all-out onslaught on a single political figure he had pioneered a kind of comedy that would keep his rivals in business long after he himself had moved on.[39] Certainly it is Cleon's historical misfortune to have managed personally to alienate both of our two major sources for the period. Whatever exactly happened in the aftermath of *Babylonians*, no individual receives as sustained or savage treatment in Aristophanes' plays; his name and reputation are still being traduced in *Frogs*, eighteen years after his actual death. Yet Cleon at this time was a popular hero following his personal role in the Pylos campaign the previous autumn, when 120 Spartan citizens had unprecedentedly been captured alive in a brilliant operation in the south-west Peloponnese. Like Thucydides, whose bravura narrative of the episode (iv.1–41) is one of the sustained dramatic highlights of his history, Aristophanes presents Cleon as stealing the credit that rightfully belonged to the main architect of the victory, the general Demosthenes. But at the very least Cleon gambled and won on Demosthenes' talent against the more cautious stance of his domestic rival Nicias, whose generalship he dramatically took over in the process; and the Spartan hostages gave Athens an upper hand in negotiations, among other things putting an end to the annual spring invasions of Attica.

[39] The *parabasis* of *Clouds* claims that Eupolis' *Maricas* and Hermippus' *Breadsellers* were straight knock-offs of *Knights*, attacking Cleon's successor, Hyperbolus. A fragment of Eupolis seems to respond to this, claiming that *Knights* was his work in the first place and that he had made a gift of it to Aristophanes – implying, no doubt disingenuously, that he was the author and Aristophanes merely the director.

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Clouds (Dionysia, 423, 3rd prize).[40] Aristophanes' dark, Faustian comedy about the dangers of too much cleverness has the dim-witted farmer Strepsiades, in hock for his son's debts, turn to Socrates' Brain Shop to help him outwit his creditors, only to find that the reduction of persuasiveness to a set of teachable and entirely truth-free techniques has unleashed a genie that refuses to go back in the bottle.

This first appearance of Socrates in literature is notoriously unlike the portrait we find in Xenophon and Plato. Plato, in particular, is keen to demonstrate that, far from being representative of the sophists as a whole, Socrates is not actually a sophist at all, lacking as he does three essential qualifications: he does not teach rhetoric, and indeed does not claim to be a teacher of anything at all; he does not have a school or charge fees; and he is entirely uninterested in the scientific researches and speculation with which Aristophanes has so much fun in *Clouds*. There is no particular reason to doubt Plato's account on the matters of fact – though a famous article by Nussbaum makes a strong case for Aristophanes' portrait as showing a surprisingly close and deep understanding of Socratic ideas, and we may in any case doubt whether Plato's highly tendentious attempt to deny Socrates the label 'sophist' would have convinced even his contemporaries who remembered him, let alone the Athenians of the 420s. Probably, Socrates is made the comic figurehead of the sophistic movement for no better reason than that he was the most publicly visible, was a native Athenian, and had a face that was already halfway to being a comic mask.[41]

The play's notorious failure (on its production in 423) and revision (around 418) have both been picked over without conclusion. Aristophanes himself, in the revised part of the *parabasis*, blames the flop on his play's sophistication; but it was perhaps not the best moment to attack Socrates, who seems to have been something of a war hero after his conduct at the battle of Delium the previous summer, which included saving the life of the young Alcibiades. It is also notable that Strepsiades is the first and last of Aristophanes' heroes to be a loser rather than a winner, a brilliantly realized but

[40] Editions by Dover (1968) and Sommerstein (1980–2002, vol. 3 [1982]), and see C. Segal 1969; Adkins 1970; Green 1979; Nussbaum 1980; R. K. Fisher 1984, 1988; R. Olson 1984; Hubbard 1986; Davies 1990; Kopff 1990; Nevola 1990–3; Tarrant 1991; Marianetti 1992, 1993; O'Regan 1992; Jeffrey Henderson 1993a; Storey 1993; S. D. Olson 1994; Vander Waerdt 1994; Reckford 1987; Rosen 1997; Gaertner 1999; Meineck 2000; Erbse 2002; Papageorgiou 2004; Major 2006; Revermann 2006: 179–235, 326–32.

[41] How widely, and even whether, 'portrait masks' were used remains debated; but it would be astonishing if a generic mask were used in this case.

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unsettling prototype of Homer Simpson; and the sheer darkness of the ending, which at least in the revised version has the hero burn down the stage building, is so unlike anything else in Aristophanes that it is hard not to wonder whether the play was simply asking its audience to forge too unfamiliar a relationship with its hero and his scheme. Aristophanes, at least, refused to let the play die, and partly reworked it: the first of his attested *diaskeuai* or revisions, though if he ever intended for it to be staged he must have been refused a chorus before the revision was complete, as part of the *parabasis* remains that of the 423 production while part has been completely overhauled to look back on the play's original reception and the development of comedy over the intervening half-decade or so. The scholia also seem to identify the *agon* (between the personifications of Straight and Crooked, in reasoning and morals alike) and the ending as among the parts of the play that differed significantly in their original version.

Wasps (Lenaea, 422, 2nd prize).[42] Young Bdelycleon ('Loathe-Cleon') tries to reform his father Philocleon ('Love-Cleon') from his addiction to the exercise of his democratic power through jury service by redirecting his activity from the civic to the domestic sphere; but the old dog learns his new tricks imperfectly, and by the end of the play the anarchic comic energies that had previously been contained by being channelled into civic participation have been unleashed in their full force on household and city alike.

Often felt to be the most accomplished of the early plays, *Wasps* packages a blistering satire on the failures of popular democracy as a generation-gap comedy of manners in the mould of *Banqueters*. The key scene is the *agon*, in which Philocleon's argument that his democratic power is *arche*, imperial dominion, is overthrown by Bdelycleon's paradoxical demonstration that it is in fact *douleia*, slavery: that the demos is being fobbed off with the illusion of power while the real power, and wealth, resides with Cleon and other radical-democratic politicians who use that illusion to control them. This is strong stuff, and the final third of the play, like the closing scenes of *Knights*, knows well enough to retreat gracefully from its implication that the very institutions of democracy are fundamentally flawed. In notable contrast to the treatment of Strepsiades in *Clouds*, *Wasps* allows the incorrigible Philocleon to traverse the full path from

[42] Editions by MacDowell (1971) and Sommerstein (1980–2002, vol. 4 [1983], revised 2007), and see Borthwick 1968, 1992; Vaio 1971; MacCary 1979; Banks 1980; Horsley 1982; Konstan 1985; Storey 1985; A. M. Bowie 1987; Sidwell 1990, 1995; Crichton 1991–3; S. D. Olson 1996; McGlew 2004; Jedrkiewicz 2006.

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sneakily lovable villain of the piece to comic hero triumphant. The play modulates with astonishing deftness from an initially domestic comedy of psychopathology to a rabble-rousing demonstration that the failings of the legal system are merely symptoms of a wider corruption endemic in the operations of democracy itself, only to settle back into a domestic comedy of personalities, slapstick, and a barnstorming close that reaffirms the old man as the embodiment of the irrepressible energy of comedy itself.

Peace (Dionysia, 421, 2nd prize).[43] The most fantastic of the early plays reworks themes from *Acharnians* for a world now on the brink of peace, as the Dicaeopolis-like farmer hero Trygaeus flies to heaven on a giant dung-beetle (spoofing Euripides' *Bellerophon*) to find out why the gods have allowed the war to drag on; there he rescues the goddess Peace from her dungeon with the help of a Panhellenic chorus of farmers, and, on his return to earth, marries the goddess of Harvest as a reward.

The military and diplomatic obstacles to a peace settlement had fallen dramatically away with the deaths at Amphipolis the previous summer of Cleon and the Spartan general Brasidas, each a popular and successful advocate of continued hostilities. In both Sparta and Athens the doves seized the opportunity to establish a climate for negotiation and, by the time of *Peace*, the treaty known as the 'Peace of Nicias' (after Cleon's old rival, eclipsed in the Pylos affair) was a done deal, ratified within days of the festival. The play addresses this transitional situation by allegorizing the peace process as the result of a comic hero's adventure behind the scenes, and following up with an *Acharnians*-style second half back in the real world, where the hero enjoys what is now a merely temporary monopoly on the benefits of peace before her release into the wider community.

Other plays. Several lost plays from this period are of interest in addition to *Banqueters* and *Babylonians*. The plot of ***Proagon*** (Lenaea, 422) remains mysterious, but Euripides featured as a character and the title refers to the pre-festival preview day at which the competing tragedians introduced their choruses out of costume as a kind of live trailer; the play may have been the first full-length comedy about tragic theatre and its making. ***Farmers*** and ***Merchant-Ships*** were both peace plays in the mould of *Acharnians* and *Peace*; the interesting chorus of *Merchant-Ships* comprised the vessels of Athens'

[43] Editions: Platnauer 1964; S. D. Olson 1998; Sommerstein 1980–2002, vol. 5 (1985), revised 2005; and see Cassio 1985; Slater 1988b; McGlew 2001; Whitehorne 2001; Hall 2006: 321–52.

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trading fleet, presumably as victims of the war and beneficiaries of a truce, and the fragments seem to show an Athenian sympathizing with a Spartan over their mutual sufferings.

The middle group (414–405)

The four plays that survive from this decade, the zenith of Aristophanes' powers, are more complex and ambitious in their choice of theme – no longer single-issue plays but multi-layered satires, which find poetic connections between a range of targets and ideas in a way that can make it significantly more difficult now to say what each play is really 'about'. Plotting is tighter, and the tyranny of elements such as the *agon* and *parabasis* over the shape of the play is beginning to give way to a much more sustained dramatic control, with stories that resolve in the closing minutes rather than halfway through. There is less intertextual reference to, and criticism of, the plays of his rivals, who were by now mostly younger and less established – though the decline of the anapaestic section of the *parabasis* may also be a factor here.

Birds (Dionysia, 414, 2nd prize).[44] The ethereal plot has much in common with *Peace*: the speakingly named Peisthetaerus ('Persuasion-Friend') seeks a utopian refuge from the madness of Athenian life but instead ends up founding a city of birds, and imposes an embargo on traffic between earth and heaven until the gods hand over Zeus's sceptre to the birds and award our hero the goddess of Sovereignty in marriage.

Birds is Aristophanes' most expansive play, its length and production values presumably reflecting a larger choregic budgetary pot after seven years of formal peace. It has also been, even by the standards of middle Aristophanes, the most impervious to interpretation, viewed variously as topical satire or escapist fantasy, comic utopia or dark Thucydidean parable. Political readings have tended to founder on the combination of a notable lack of specific topical references and the difficulty of chronological fit with Thucydidean time-mates (the Melian massacre, the Sicilian expedition, and Alcibiades' recall and defection). Arrowsmith's reading remains broadly attractive at one of the play's levels, seeing it as a panoramic satire on the Athenian

[44] Editions: Sommerstein 1980–2002, vol. 6 (1987), revised 2007; Dunbar 1995. See also Arrowsmith 1961, 1973; Epstein 1981; Pozzi 1986; Craik 1987; Zannini-Quirini 1987; Dobrov 1990, 1993, 1997; Konstan 1990; Perkell 1993; Vickers 1995; Dunbar 1996.

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national character and its virtue/vice of *polypragmosyne* or inability to mind one's own business. But it is also hard to deny the play's Thucydidean resonances, particularly in its central situation of third-party states exploited by Athenian (as by Spartan) military advisers to fight others' wars for them on dubious claims of ultimate local self-interest. Already a familiar feature of the Archidamian war and the more recent Mantinean campaign, this pattern would be used against Athens with devastating success within weeks of the play's premiere, as Sparta dispatched the dauntingly effective Gylippus to mobilize Syracusan resistance to the rudderless Athenian attack – a decision prompted in turn by the still more Peisthetaerean figure of Alcibiades. Aristophanes and his audience could hardly have imagined these developments, and would hardly have borne so airy a treatment if they had; but the play is embedded in a deep and brutal realist understanding of how the world of late fifth-century warfare worked.

Lysistrata (411, probably Lenaea; prize unknown).[45] Under the leadership of the visionary heroine Lysistrata, the women of Athens force their menfolk to make peace with Sparta by occupying the Acropolis and imposing an international sex strike.

This (probable) first of Aristophanes' plays on contemporary women's lives mingles earnest Panhellenism with wall-to-wall sex jokes and *double entendres*, characteristically developing poetic mappings between the politics of gender and of war, and offering a surprisingly complex and thoughtful analysis of Athens' situation in the immediate aftermath of the Sicilian debacle of 413 and the subsequent revolt of allies, Persian involvement in the war, and anti-democratic stirrings at home.

Generalization from silence is dangerous, but Aristophanes' plays of 411 seem to have been the first fully female-centred comedies; plays with mythical or allegorical females go back to Epicharmus, and hetaera comedies such as Pherecrates' *Corianno* were probably an established subgenre, but there is no trace of a comedy centred on respectable citizen females before *Lysistrata*, and it seems quite probable that the opening-up of comedy to the female was Aristophanes'

[45] Editions: Jeffrey Henderson 1987; Sommerstein 1980–2002, vol. 7 (1990), revised 2007. See also D. M. Lewis 1955; Hulton 1972; Vaio 1973; Sommerstein 1977, 1980; Rosellini 1979; Jeffrey Henderson 1980b; Loraux 1981; N. G. Wilson 1982; Harriott 1985; Dillon 1987a; Levine 1987; R. P. Martin 1987; Konstan 1993a; Taaffe 1993: 48–73; F. D. Harvey 1994; Fowler 1996; Faraone 1997, 2006; Fletcher 1999; Ruden 2003; Stroup 2004; Revermann 2006: 236–60.

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own invention in the plays we have from 411.[46] *Lysistrata* pioneers the distinctive Aristophanic vision of Athenian women's segregated world as a society-within-society from which men are paradoxically the ones excluded – particularly at the women's festivals at which their great conspiracy plots are hatched – and which is collectively bonded by its housewifely networks of gossip, mutual assistance, and *de facto* collusion against their menfolk. Like its successors, *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Ecclesiazusae*, *Lysistrata* spins from this comic observation a fantasy of conspiracy, revolution, and the radical inversion of gendered worlds, playing on male citizens' latent paranoia both domestic and political, at a time when the air was thick with real and imagined plots to overthrow the democracy.

The speaking name Lysistrata, 'Army-Dissolver', alludes to the celebrated priestess of Athena Polias, Lysimache, whose name means 'Battle-Dissolver'. But it is a misunderstanding of the nuances of Aristophanic play with names to claim that she is in any meaningful sense 'based on' the real-life priestess; we are in Dicaeopolis territory here, with a fictional character referencing a real one in name and some attributes, but with the substitution of one name-element for a close synonym to make it clear that this is something more complex and flexible than a mere stage version of that real-life individual. In developing a female counterpart to the traditional male 'comic hero', Aristophanes plays safer than he will in later plays, allowing Lysistrata the comic vision and civic initiative of Dicaeopolis and Trygaeus without the appetitive enthusiasms for food, sex, and power, and keeping her character high-minded and largely humourless as a foil to the other women's surrender to what will be a stereotype of alcoholism, sex addiction, and shameless duplicity.

Thesmophoriazusae ('**Women at the Thesmophoria**') (411, probably Dionysia; prize unknown).[47] Euripides tries to forestall a plot against him by the women of Athens, who are outraged at his notorious representation of female conduct in the tragedies, by sending a dubious relative along to infiltrate their festival in drag, only to have to rescue him once the ruse is exposed.

Aristophanes' second comedy of gender is a wildly surreal literary fantasy in which the reassuringly segregated worlds of male and female, comedy and tragedy, and theatre and reality are all turned

[46] So Jeffrey Henderson 1987: xxviii; reservations in Storey 2003: 315–17.

[47] Editions: Sommerstein 1980–2002, vol. 8 (1994); Austin and Olson 2004. See also Hansen 1976; Sommerstein 1977; Muecke 1982; Zeitlin 1982; Hall 1989; Taaffe 1993: 74–102; Habash 1997; Gamel 2001.

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upside-down by a series of actual and metaphoric transvestisms. As in *Acharnians*, the first half is traced over Euripides' own *Telephus*, with the disguised hero delivering a speech in Euripides' defence in the midst of his enemies and fending off exposure by playing the hostage scene with a baby that turns out to be a wineskin. But, as infiltration becomes captivity, the second half of the play rewrites the swashbuckling rescue tragedies with which Euripides had recently been experimenting, and specifically his two extraordinary plays of the previous Dionysia, *Andromeda* and *Helen* – casting the transvestite hero as the successive damsels in distress, and Euripides himself as the would-be heroic rescuer. Particularly fascinating is the extended parody of Euripides' extant *Helen*, whose text has been taken apart (Aristophanes is evidently working from an actual script) and reassembled in comically reduced form as a two-hander, with a third character unwittingly written in as the scene unfolds.

Frogs (Lenaea, 405, 1st prize).[48] Dionysus, god of theatre, descends to the underworld to bring back the recently deceased Euripides and save tragedy (and Athens itself) but, after a hotly fought literary debate, decides to take Aeschylus back instead.

Frogs uses the history of tragedy as an opportunistic metaphor for the state of Athenian politics in what were to prove the fateful closing months of the Peloponnesian War, while simultaneously making fun with (and of) contemporary literary-critical ideas about the nature and function of poetry. Two key events are repeatedly invoked: the abortive oligarchic coup of 411, with the dispossession of the surviving participants after democracy was restored; and the naval battle of Arginusae in 406, where slaves were permitted to make up the manpower shortage by rowing in the fleet at the reward of their freedom, and where an Athenian victory was clouded by the commanders' decision not to risk further losses by picking up survivors from the choppy seas. Back in Athens, the assembly approved a motion of the Council that the generals involved should be executed for dereliction. Socrates' famous solitary dissent from his fellow councillors' decision was not enough to prevent the executions, which probably contributed to the disastrous decisions at Aegospotami the following year,

[48] Editions: Dover 1993; Sommerstein 1980–2002, vol. 9 (1996). See also C. Segal 1961; Stanford 1963; Littlefield 1968b; Higgins 1977; Hooker 1980; Havelock 1982; Allison 1983; Epstein 1985; Vaio 1985; R. P. Martin 1988–9; Goldhill 1991; Heiden 1991; Padilla 1992; Borthwick 1994; Lada-Richards 1999; Vickers 2001; Habash 2002; R. Edmonds 2004; Rosen 2004.

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which saw the fleet destroyed and Athens besieged into unconditional surrender.

Frogs was granted the rare, perhaps unique, privilege of a second production 'because of its *parabasis*' (*Hypothesis* I), which argues for the restoration of citizenship to the exiled oligarchs on the grounds that Athens needs all the talent it can muster and is already extending citizen rights even to slaves. It is no coincidence that the first half of the play centres on the first of western comedy's great master–servant double acts, with the slave Xanthias sharing the spotlight and the laughs on even terms with his master Dionysus, culminating in a superbly constructed first-act climax in which master and slave repeatedly exchange roles to the point where no reliable way can be found to distinguish them. Throughout the play, the mythical pattern of *catabasis* or descent to the underworld is used as a powerful metaphor for political death and rebirth, with the recall of Aeschylus to life symbolizing the return of Athens' most gifted political exiles. In the event, the amnesty came too late to save the city, and merely led to the still bloodier oligarchic regime of the 'Thirty Tyrants'. If the second production of *Frogs* took place at the Lenaea or City Dionysia of 404, it is hard to avoid the implication that Aristophanes, never a vocal enthusiast for radical democracy, was uncomfortably complicit in these high-stakes games.

Other plays. The lost plays of the middle period are less easy to pin down, but ***Phoenician Women*** appears to have been a full-length parody of Euripides' compendious tragedy on the Theban civil war, which was produced around 410; Aristophanes' play probably appeared soon after (compare the parody of two 412 tragedies in 411's *Thesmophoriazusae*), and seems to have been part of a general vogue for full-length mythological paratragedies. The lost second ***Thesmophoriazusae*** [49] does not seem to have been a reworking of the play we have; the prologue was spoken by the goddess Calligenia, personification of the final day of the festival, and an alternative title, *Thesmophoriasasae* ('Women after the Thesmophoria'), suggests that the rites were essentially over at the time of the play's action, which has resisted reconstruction despite the relatively abundant and indicative fragments.

[49] Butrica's bold suggestion (2001) that the lost play was a work of the 420s has not found acceptance; see Austin & Olson 2004: lxxvii–lxxxix, with Butrica's response to their points (2004).

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The late group (393–385)

After *Frogs*, there is an even longer gap – not this time in Aristophanes' writing, although his output does seem to have fallen off somewhat in the early post-war years. Some twelve years separate *Frogs* from the next surviving play, *Assemblywomen*, but the final years of Aristophanes' life were a third phase of high productivity and innovation. His most influential plays from this period were mythological comedies that seem to have anticipated some of the features of later fourth-century comedy, though these are unfortunately lost. What we do have is two fascinating plays that show the genre already starting to reinvent itself for the changed world of a post-imperial Athens. *Assemblywomen* and *Wealth* are less theatrically extravagant plays than their predecessors, reflecting the comparative lack of cash available to spend on theatrical performances. The chorus not only has its theatrical and formal presence severely reduced but is beginning to disappear from the script, with a stage direction *CHOROU* ('[song] of the chorus') marking in the manuscript tradition some points in the later part of the play where ancient scholars understood a choral song to have been performed.

But what these plays lack in production values they make up in intellectual ambition: both are fantasies of social revolution, apparently reflecting a contemporary climate of speculative social engineering among early fourth-century intellectuals in an Athens that was consciously rebuilding itself after the loss of its empire and the restoration of democracy following Spartan occupation. Both explore issues of poverty and inequality in contemporary Athenian society, and scholars have been divided over whether or not to see this as a response to serious and widespread deprivation in the post-war condition of Athens, notwithstanding the elements of fantasy and illogic in both plays' scenarios, which imagine the social consequences of radical redistribution of wealth: in *Assemblywomen*, through the establishment of a new communist utopia in which all property (including the family) is held in common; in *Wealth*, through the mythological fantasy of applying modern medical techniques to the eyesight of the god of wealth himself, so that now he can tell the difference between the deserving and the undeserving. How seriously these unsettlingly thoughtful, yet problematically coherent, plays ask to be taken is one of the great cruces of Aristophanic criticism, with readings largely polarized between face-value and 'ironic' interpretations; the insufficiencies

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of these polarities to make sense of these plays are the subject of important discussions by McGlew (2002) and Ruffell (2006).[50]

Ecclesiazusae (‘**Women in the Assembly**’) (393?).[51] Led by the resourceful Praxagora, the women of Athens infiltrate the assembly in male disguise and persuade the city to turn power over to them, whereupon they institute a radical and increasingly bizarre communistic utopia.

This intricately worked-out fantasy of feminist conspiracy and utopian social engineering has curious parallels to Plato’s (as yet unwritten) *Republic*, which have been variously explained in terms of a putative influence of Aristophanes on Plato, of Plato’s embryonic project on Aristophanes, of a lost common source on both, of generalized roots in a wider intellectual context of utopian social models, and of meaningless coincidence; none is very convincing, but no new solution seems forthcoming. The surprising details of the women’s utopia, which emerge only after they have been handed a constitutional blank cheque, centre on the abolition of personal property, including familial and sexual forms of ownership – not entirely inappropriately, in view of Athenian women’s restricted property rights and their status as virtual chattels, but it is far from clear what response the play seeks to the scenario proposed. Ironic readings see the various incoherences and dissident sentiments of the final third of the play as indicating that the new utopia is doomed to failure; others relate the measures closely to the state of post-war Athens as a fantastic but intellectually ambitious response to serious social and economic hardship.

Wealth (388).[52] An ingenious citizen uses the modern medical technique of incubation to cure the legendary blindness of the god of wealth, overnight creating a world in which only the righteous are wealthy.

A sober, moralistic, often unfunny play (‘the possibility that Aristophanes had had a stroke,’ wrote Dover, ‘cannot be entirely discounted’[53]), for most of the history of Aristophanes’ reception this

[50] The key discussions of the plays as a pair are Flashar 1967; Sommerstein 1984; McGlew 2002: 171–211; and Ruffell 2006.

[51] Editions: Ussher 1973; Sommerstein 1980–2002, vol. 10 (1998), revised 2007. See also Ussher 1969; Saïd 1979; Foley 1982; S. D. Olson 1988, 1989c, 1991a; Rothwell 1990; Taaffe 1991, 1993: 103–33; Slater 1997; Dettenhofer 1999; Zeitlin 1999; Compton-Engle 2005.

[52] Editions: Sommerstein 1980–2002, vol. 11 (2001); and note the student commentary by S. D. Olson (1989a). See further Barkhuisen 1981; Konstan and Dillon 1981; David 1984; Dillon 1987b; S. D. Olson 1989b, 1990b; Groton 1990–1; Sfyroeras 1995; McGlew 1997; Revermann 2006: 261–95.

[53] Dover 1974: 195 n. 7.

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has nevertheless – or rather for that very reason – been by a huge margin his most popular play. Like *Ecclesiazusae*, it is a puzzling work, which presents a fascinating thought-experiment in terms so ambivalent that modern criticism is divided on how it intends itself to be taken or indeed how coherent or successful is the attempt. Discussion has centred on two particular problems: the debate between Chremylus and the personified Poverty, whose articulate points in defence of her own essential role in society are never really answered; and the shift from a conception of the consequences of Wealth's cure in which only the righteous are wealthy to one in which the blessings extend to all alike. A fruitful approach has been to see the play as attempting to articulate, but not necessarily to resolve, tensions and contradictions in popular conceptions of wealth: in effect, the first sustained text in economic theory, as *Frogs* is the first sustained text in the history of western literary criticism.

Other plays. Two major lost mythological plays from the years after *Wealth* were seen by ancient critics as anticipating the plots of New Comedy. ***Cocalus*** is said by the ancient *Life of Aristophanes* to have introduced 'rape and recognition and all the other things imitated by Menander', though it is far from clear how these fitted into a play named after the mythological Sicilian ruler who took in the fugitive Cretan inventor Daedalus and had his daughters execute the Cretan king Minos when he came in pursuit. ***Aeolosicon*** means 'Sicon as Aeolus', and follows a pattern of title familiar from such comedies as Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros* or 'Dionysus as Paris'. Evidently it had a low-life character called Sicon (probably a comedy cook, like other characters of this name in later drama) somehow taking on the role of the hero of Euripides' notorious tragedy of forbidden love, *Aeolus*. Like *Wealth*, it was apparently a *diaskeue* or updated revision of a play from twenty years earlier, which would place its first version in the period of *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Phoenissae* when extended Euripidean comedy seems to have been something of a fad.

Some constants

Aristophanes was working in a fast-evolving genre, and seems himself to have been one of the main forces pushing it in new directions. But, despite the many changes in the genre itself over the course of his career, and with due allowance for the way our sense of Aristophanes'

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distinctiveness is limited by the loss of the plays of his contemporaries, there are a number of consistent qualities we can observe across his surviving work taken as a whole.

Staging ideas. Aristophanes is particularly adept at finding ways of *making ideas theatrical* – of giving complex, abstruse concepts or themes a concrete and dynamic dramatic form, working with the strengths of Old Comedy's traditional patterns and conventions. A key technique is to build the play around a confrontation between opposing forces or interests, represented by a pair of antagonists who can compete both in formal debate (the comic *agon*) and in other kinds of personal rivalry; a recurrent device in the early plays is to embody the outlooks of different generations in a father and son in conflict. Often the rewards of success for the victor are encapsulated in a specific prize that gratifies the physical appetites for food, sex, power, and pleasure: a wedding, a feast, a celebration of newfound wealth or status.

Verbal and theatrical invention. The ingenuity with which Aristophanic comedy finds ways to turn themes into theatre is part of a wider quality of inventiveness in language and staging. The style of Old Comedy covered an enormously wide range, and Aristophanes clearly relishes the opportunity for relentless wordplay, verbal coinages, and dislocations of style and register. But he is no less inventive in the non-verbal business of comedy: stage routines, sight gags, the communication of theme and meaning through the concrete language of performance.

Intellectual dexterity. Aristophanes was a clever writer. He liked to say so himself, and for his rivals it may have been one of his less attractive trademarks; a famous fragment of Cratinus (342) describes someone as 'an oversubtle *bon-mot*-making[54] Euripidaristophanizer', implying that Aristophanes could be recognizably caricatured to the traditional comic audience as appealing to the same intellectual faddists whom he presents as the admirers of Euripides, particularly in his play with words and ideas. Nor is this limited to the way he writes; Aristophanes engages in surprisingly deep ways with new-wave intellectual figures, ideas, and arguments. Sophists and poets were familiar targets of Aristophanes' rivals as well, but *Clouds* includes some remarkably adroit satire on actual sophists' teaching (which quite possibly amused its author more than his audience); and he

[54] A less likely reading has '-chasing'; see Kassel and Austin 1983–2001: ad loc., and Luppe 2000: 19.

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seems to have been the first comedian to make extensive use of contemporary tragedy, particularly that of Euripides, as a target for satire and a source of story ideas.

Metaphoric richness. The plays are rich in both verbal and visual metaphors. Like the choral lyric poetry of Pindar and tragedy, Old Comedy is uninhibited by any worries about mixing metaphors, and likes to surprise its audience with bold, striking combinations of imagery. But Aristophanes is also intensely aware of theatre's special power to create images from the stage action as well as from the words, and to link verbal metaphor with theatrical image. Because Old Comedy is relatively unconstrained by real-world logic, the range of possible visual images is wide. Thus, in *Acharnians*, peace treaties of different durations are physically embodied as wines of different vintages, and the flavour of each is characterized in terms of the real-world associations conjured up by the different lengths of truce. This single image allows ideas to become physical props, abstract qualities to become sensory experiences, and the political to be assimilated to the vividly sensual.

Comic coherence. Yet Aristophanes is also remarkably adroit at keeping his material under purposeful control. Comedy's very licence to do as it will with the laws of logic, character, and stage convention makes it a particular challenge to maintain focus and coherence. But Aristophanes' comic routines are carefully structured, and segue together with a sense of overall direction; the play is careful to give a sense of where it is heading from moment to moment; the stage space is organized in a shapely, intelligible way; the conflict is kept in view; different targets and kinds of comic material are united by an overall coherence of theme, complex though this often is.

Finger on the pulse of change. Finally, Aristophanes is an extremely astute observer of his times and, as well as a rich source for social history,[55] is often the principal contemporary analyst of momentous historical and cultural changes of the era. The extant plays engage directly with some of what remain the most significant and intensely analysed developments of his age: the use and abuse of radical democracy (*Knights*, *Wasps*); the impact of the sophists, and the implications of a teachable art of verbal persuasion (*Clouds*); the birth of literary criticism (*Frogs*); the rise of constitutional theory and the principles of social engineering (*Assemblywomen*); the emergent

[55] Ehrenberg 1951 remains a classic, and see Sparkes 1975.

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theory of monetary economics (*Wealth*).[56] He is also an important witness to the rise of the book as a technology with far-reaching implications for the way information is used in society, including drama itself.[57] No other ancient writer shows so wide an awareness of the significance of the changes going on in the world around him – changes that we can see in hindsight to have been fundamental to the formation of western culture and thought.

Formal and theatrical structure[58]

As we have seen, the formal organization of Aristophanic comedy is highly complex – far more so than that of tragedy – and shapes both plot and performance values in fundamental ways, though this is generally obscured in translations. We have also seen that comedy is free to breach the essentially illusionistic conventions of tragic space, time, logic, and theatricality. Aristophanes is master rather than servant of these formal and theatrical frameworks, but he is also alert to their usefulness in shaping action and theme in a genre denied the convenience of pre-existing characters and plots.[59]

The most important theatrical fact about Old Comedy is the size of its chorus: twenty-four members in contrast to the twelve or fifteen of tragedy and satyr-play. This is reflected in the higher preponderance of choral titles (nine out of the extant eleven), particularly when the identity of the chorus promises fantastic, exotic, or otherwise spectacular costume and choreography. Two particular choral moments acquire disproportionate theatrical force: the *parodos*, when the chorus is introduced to the audience in a theatrical set piece that shows off their distinctive character and performance; and the *parabasis*, when the plot stops midway through for an extended choral routine with its own distinctive form and conventions. Because the choral impact is particularly strong in the first half of the play, there is some tendency for the chorus's identity and significance in the plot to recede somewhat in later scenes. Even the comic prologue and *exodos* are pulled into non-tragic shapes by the chorus's sheer gravitational mass. The prologue, as the one part of the play in which the chorus are not yet

[56] Spielvogel 2001.
[57] N. J. Lowe 1993; Slater 1996.
[58] See especially Gelzer 1960, 1993; Sifakis 1971; Zimmermann 1984–7; Totaro 2000; and, on plot structure generally, Sifakis 1992; Silk 2000: 256–300.
[59] On this aspect of comedy, see the famous fragment of Antiphanes' *Poiesis* (189 K.–A.).

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on stage, is much longer than its tragic counterpart and tends to build up the story and its setting more gradually rather than plunging the audience straight into a pre-existing world; there are warm-up routines, in monologue or two-hander form, in which the dramatic illusion is especially light and the audience liberally acknowledged, and the setting can be dissolved and reconstituted freely before the chorus arrives and fixes the identity of the setting.[60] The comic *exodos*, where everyone including the chorus leaves the stage, will overwhelmingly tend to be dramatized as a *komos* or processional revel – one reason why comedy becomes so keen on weddings, whose central ritual was the escort of the bride to her new home.

The chorus is also central to those formal elements that have no parallel at all in tragedy. At the heart of these lies the *epirrhematic syzygy*: a symmetrical scene alternating responding recitative sequences with the two halves (strophe and antistrophe) of a lyric ode. On its own, this is merely a powerful incentive to the organization of the action in a way that will lend itself to symmetrical or antithetic structures involving the chorus – such as the splitting of the chorus into two battling factions in *Lysistrata* (where the epirrhematic passages reveal elaborately symmetrical choreography in the fight scenes) and (more briefly) *Acharnians*. But it is also the basis for two further formal sequences whose effect on the shape of the play is more profound. The *parabasis* expands the epirrhematic nucleus by prefixing an extended sequence in anapaestic metre, in which the chorus drop their specific characterization and address the audience directly on behalf of Aristophanes himself; the epirrhematic section then marks the resumption of the chorus's stage identity with a continuation of the appeal, but now on their own behalf and in character rather than on the poet's behalf and as a generic comic chorus. The *agon* expands the epirrhematic nucleus into a formal debate between two opposing solo voices, in which the play's central thematic conflict is spelled out and brought to a head, with the second speaker triumphing over the first and winning the chorus round.

Both of these elements pull the play into a particular kind of shape around them. The *parabasis* introduces a protracted break in the action that effectively splits the play into two distinct movements, and requires a degree of closure at the end of the first and a new phase to be opened up in the second. Early plays especially favour a solution in which the hero's plan is essentially fulfilled by the end of the first

[60] For a fuller discussion, see N. J. Lowe 2006.

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movement, and the second then illustrates its consequences with a series of sketches in which he interacts with a succession of new characters in turn: so in *Acharnians*, *Peace*, and *Birds*, and the pattern persists as late as *Wealth*, though other plays find more ingenious solutions. The *agon* pushes the play towards a clash of antagonists who embody the play's conflictual thematics – yet not as part of a final resolution, but somehow as a midpoint of the plot's progress, presenting the poet with the challenge of how to make the *agon* simultaneously decisive and yet non-final. The simplest solution is that found in the plays just mentioned: to use the *agon* to engineer the first-movement close, and to devote a more episodic second movement to the consequences that ensue. But only a minority of plays are content to settle for this, and in practice each has to crank up a new conflict to give the second phase a dramatic spine.

Both the *parabasis* and *agon* start to mutate early on. Only early plays have the full *parabasis* structure, and even *Clouds* is already experimenting with alternatives to the traditional metre of the anapaestic section. From *Peace* on, the *parabasis* is starting to be truncated of some of its full-form features, and by the time of the late plays has disappeared altogether; a *parabasis*-like epirrhematic sequence in the second half of the play, sometimes known as a 'second *parabasis*', also disappears after *Birds*. The *agon* is even more varied: some early plays (*Knights* and *Clouds*) have two, but the still-earlier *Acharnians* is already abandoning the epirrhematic nucleus for a freer structure using the metre and spoken form of less formally marked iambic dialogue.

Epirrhematic and related structures in Aristophanes

(A) BASIC EPIRRHEMATIC SYZYGY

A	*epirrhema*	recitative by chorus leader
B	*ode*	short lyric segment by whole chorus
A′	*antepirrhema*	responding recitative by chorus leader
B’	*antode*	responding lyric segment by whole chorus

(B) THE *PARABASIS*: FULL STRUCTURE

1	*kommation*	2-line farewell to main characters
2	*anapaests*	chorus drop stage persona
3	*pnigos*	climax to anapaests in short, fast lines

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4	*epirrhema*	recitative by chorus leader
5	*ode*	short lyric segment by whole chorus
6	*antepirrhema*	responding recitative by chorus leader
7	*antode*	responding lyric segment by whole chorus

(C) THE *AGON*: FULL STRUCTURE

0 (The sequence usually begins with the antagonists entering in mid-dispute.)
1 *ode*
2 *katakeleusmos*: 2 introductory lines in A's metre from chorus
3 A's speech (with interruptions)
4 *pnigos* (climax to A's speech in short, fast lines)
5 *antode*
6 *antikatakeleusmos*: 2 introductory lines in B's metre from chorus
7 B's speech (with interruptions)
8 *antipnigos* (climax to B's speech in short, fast lines)

Play	***Parabasis***	**2nd *parabasis***	***Agon***
Acharn.	full	(quasi: 971–99)	loose iambic *syzygy* (490–625)
Knights	full	1264–1315	one in each half of play: 303–460, 756–941
Clouds	Eupolideans for *anapaests* and *pnigos*	1115–30	two in 2nd half: 949–1104 (Straight and Crooked); 1345–1451 (father-beating debate)
Wasps	full	1265–91	526–724
Peace	no *epirrhemes*	1127–90	none as such
Birds	full	1058–1117	303–460
Lys.	2 pairs of 10-line *epirrhemes*	none	476–607
Thesm.	single odeless *epirrheme* for *syzygy*	none	none as such
Frogs	no *anapaests*, just the *syzygy*	none	895–1098 (part of larger contest sequence)
Eccles.	none	none	one side only
Wealth	none	none	one side only, without *ode*

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Politics and the problem of 'seriousness'

No issue has bedevilled Aristophanic criticism like the question of how we should read comedy's engagement with issues of social or political concern. A seminal article by Gomme (1938) argued that the political content of Aristophanic comedy was entirely explicable in terms of its entertainment function and should not be regarded as attempting to persuade its audience on matters of politics, let alone to assert its author's private views; and in recent years a more sophisticated version of this position has been powerfully argued by Malcolm Heath (1987, 1997). On the other hand, the plays do appear to show consistent political and other value-laden biases that would not seem natural crowd-pleasers given the constitution of Aristophanes' audience; and, however much comedy's claims to civic didacticism are taken as part of its rhetoric of professional self-advertisement, the genre did perform de facto a unique civic function of public free speech (so Jeffrey Henderson 1989).

Politically, de Ste Croix's reading (1972) of Aristophanes' self-positioning has not been substantially refuted.[61] It is hard to deny that the plays of the fifth century, at least, do choose their targets selectively, with a broadly consistent bias, across a number of issues, that de Ste Croix termed 'Cimonian'. Radical democrat politicians are satirized, while conservative figures such as Nicias are comparatively spared; the 'Knights' are commended rather than resented; Sparta is viewed with sympathy even at times of war, Athens' natural partner in a joint hegemony over the lesser poleis; the era of the Persian wars is nostalgically idealized as a political golden age. None of this is particularly surprising for someone of Aristophanes' generation and background; it is, for example, essentially the outlook of Thucydides, whose list of heroes and villains would look very similar to Aristophanes'.

What is less clear is how far this position is personal rather than generic. The fragments of Aristophanes' rivals show a similar tendency to attack democrats such as Pericles and Hyperbolus preferentially, to view the Cimonian era as Athens' finest hour, and to attack avant-garde intellectual, artistic, and musical fashions. If it seems surprising that an essentially popular art form should take an essentially anti-popular stance, it is worth reflecting that the *choregoi* or 'angels', who were assigned by the archon to fund the performance, would by

[61] It is now essentially restated in Jeffrey Henderson 2007: 188–9; for a critique, see Chapman 1978.

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definition have belonged to the propertied class, and there is no reason to imagine that the poets themselves came from any but elite backgrounds. But biographical interpretation is neither necessary nor safe. Avant-garde music, tragedy, and teachers are targets in a way that establishment intellectual and artistic figures (notably Sophocles) are not; and audiences may simply have regarded comedy's gentle conservative bias as an appropriate part of its civic role and voice. Certainly there is no indication that comedy ever had the slightest effect on actual voting, even if it did succeed in irritating some of its victims; and the various attempts at legislative control, whose number and scope were in any case exaggerated in ancient tradition, all proved ineffective and short-lived.[62]

As Silk pointedly observes, much of the problem lies in the word 'serious' itself, which is a very blunt tool indeed with which to chip at the intricacies of comic drama's construction of relationships between play, author, audience, and subject of discourse: 'The whole discussion of "seriousness in Aristophanes" is bound to be complicated by the fact that there are different kinds of seriousness.'[63] The term invites particular confusion between issues and intentions – the latter always problematic, but particularly so in a public, populist, competitive art form whose defining affective feature, humour, is evoked by a poetics of irony. We saw in the first chapter that comedy that deals in charged issues is likely to seem edgier than comedy that makes jokes from safer material. But, even on a personal level, Aristophanes may personally be deeply serious about his art without being serious about the things his art professes to be serious about; he may be perfectly sincere in his personal political opinions without feeling the need to use his comedies to persuade anyone else of them; and, conversely, he may be absolutely committed to the proposition that comedy has a claim to a civic voice without feeling any concomitant obligation to use that voice to express personal opinions. Nor is it clear that the positions taken on different topics should be accounted for in the same way, and indeed many scholars have, in practice, been happy to see, for example, Aristophanes' attack on Cleon as personally felt but his similarly consistent attacks on Euripides as affectionate opportunism. This is not simply, as might be felt, a case of scholarly self-projection; Aristophanes shows quite a wide, deep, and close understanding of Euripidean drama on many different levels and can be

[62] Sommerstein 1986, 2004; Halliwell 1991; Carey 1994; MacDowell 1996.
[63] Silk 2000: 305.

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seen working from personal copies of the texts,[64] whereas his treatment of Aeschylus in *Frogs* is much less penetrating, and seems largely determined by the needs of the play in conjunction with very broad-brush contemporary impressions of the poet's theatrical trademarks, so that it is not absurd to conclude that Aristophanes is interested in the detailed workings of Euripidean tragedy in a way that Aeschylus does not inspire.

One fruitful approach, particularly when we are confronted with apparent incoherence, is to view the difficulty not as a flaw but as an expression of significant tensions and essential contradictions in the desires the play attempts to address and exploit. On this reading, the striking inconsistencies of *Knights* reveal deep tensions in the ideology of democracy in the 420s; those of *Ecclesiazusae* in the unresolved gaps between the radical aspirations of post-democratic social engineering and the resistant actuality of real-world human desire; those of *Wealth* in unreconciled popular conceptions of public and personal wealth. This ideological approach, championed most visibly and influentially by Konstan, can sometimes run the risk of underplaying the plays' polemical, argumentative, and didactic rhetoric of engagement. But it does offer a way of talking about comedy's engagement with issues of social concern that avoids the difficulties both of authorial intention and of the language of 'seriousness', and has already become more or less standard in the criticism of Roman comedy, which has generally felt comfortable to do without either.

Bibliographic note

The bibliographic surveys of Storey (1987, 1992) are an invaluable resource. After a century of weary deprecation, the Oxford Classical Text by Hall and Geldart (1900–1) has been decisively replaced by a far superior edition by Nigel Wilson (2007b), with an important companion volume of notes on textual points (2007a). For the fragments, the edition of Kassel and Austin (1983–2001) supersedes all predecessors; a generous selection in translation is forthcoming from Rusten et al. J. M. Edmonds' notorious *Fragments of Attic Comedy* (1957–61) cannot be recommended for any purpose; it would be easier to learn Greek to an appropriate level than to fathom Edmonds' impenetrable English renderings of his impulsive and chaotic text.

[64] N. J. Lowe 1993.

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The great Groningen edition of the scholia by Koster et al. (1960–) now covers all eleven plays, with the 2007 volume including *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Ecclesiazusae*.

Of the first wave of Clarendon editions of individual plays, MacDowell's *Wasps* (1971), Dover's *Clouds* (1968), and Jeffrey Henderson's *Lysistrata* (1987) remain essential, and Ussher's *Ecclesiazusae* (1973) by default; the series rebooted in a larger format with Dover's *Frogs* (1993) and Dunbar's *Birds* (1995), S. D. Olson's *Peace* (1998) and *Acharnians* (2002), and Austin and Olson's *Thesmophoriazusae* (2004), with Henderson's *Knights* forthcoming. Each is now the key edition of its play, but Sommerstein's editions of all eleven comedies for Aris & Phillips (1980–2002) offer text, translation, and commentaries of increasing expansiveness and significance; the last four (*Thesmophoriazusae*, *Frogs*, *Ecclesiazusae*, *Wealth*) are especially full, while the separate index volume is the single most useful reference tool on Aristophanes for non-linguistic purposes. *Wealth* includes extensive addenda to previous volumes, including bibliographies for the early volumes that lacked them; *Clouds*, *Wasps*, *Peace*, *Lysistrata*, and *Ecclesiazusae* have since been individually reissued with the supplementary material and further addenda. Note also the series of Italian editions from the Fondazione Lorenzo Valla by del Corno et al. (1985–), which now cover *Clouds*, *Birds*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, *Frogs*, and *Ecclesiazusae*.

Aristophanes does not translate easily, but Barrett 1964 is a small classic, and Halliwell 1998 strikes an unusual and impressive balance between fidelity and performability; Sommerstein's solo Penguin volume (2002a) should only be used in its second edition. For study purposes, Sommerstein's Aris & Phillips translations (1980–2002, revised 2005–) vie with Jeffrey Henderson's Loeb (1998–2002) – as well they might, given that they were originally commissioned for that same series. (The story is engagingly told in Sommerstein 2006.)

Among general works on Aristophanes, Dover 1972 remains unsurpassed as a single-volume overview, while Cartledge 1990 is an excellent single-sitting introduction, and von Möllendorff 2002 a helpful introductory guide. MacDowell 1995 is especially lucid and helpful on the complex political background, though it probably simplifies the complexities of Aristophanes' own engagement with it. The major literary study is now Silk 2000; Revermann 2006 is a wide-ranging and sophisticated theatrical treatment, though there is still much of value in Dearden 1976 and Russo 1992, translated 1994, and Wiles 1997 offers an outstanding synthetic introduction to

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fifth-century tragic and comic performance. Note also the specialized studies by Bierl (2001) (chorus), Stone (1981) (costume), and L. P. E. Parker (1997) (lyric). Other notable book-length treatments include McLeish 1980, Harriott 1986, Thiercy 1986; and Hubbard 1991 on the authorial persona, Taaffe 1993 on women, A. M. Bowie 1993 on intertexts with myth and ritual, Slater 2002 on theatricality, Robson 2006 on Aristophanes and modern humour theory, and the Bakhtinian studies of von Möllendorff (1995) and Platter (2006). Dover, Russo, MacDowell, and Slater all devote a chapter to each of the eleven plays. Three important collections of essays are Bonnamour and Delevault 1979, Bremer and Handley 1993, Thiercy and Menu 1997.

Aristophanes' rivals, and his own lost plays, have been a subject of renewed interest with the effective completion of Kassel and Austin's edition, and wider study of the fragments will be boosted by S. D. Olson's commentary (2007) and the translation by Rusten et al. (in press); Olson's volume also includes translations as an appendix. As well as the monographs of Storey (2003) on Eupolis and Bakola (forthcoming, based on Bakola 2006) on Cratinus, the collection by Harvey and Wilkins (2000) includes a number of important snapshots of the field, and Eupolis' *Demes* is now the subject of an important large-scale edition by Telò (2007). There is an excellent short survey by Storey in Storey and Allan 2005: 195–208.

Aristophanes' reception, briefly surveyed in Louis Lord 1925 and Pauw 1996, is the subject of important studies by Hall and Wrigley (2007), van Steen (2000) (modern Greece) and Holtermann (2004) (Germany).

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