



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

ARISTOPHANES

LYSISTRATA
AND OTHER PLAYS

PENGUIN



CLASSICS

LYSISTRATA AND OTHER PLAYS

ARISTOPHANES was born, probably in Athens, c. 449 BC and died between 386 and 380 BC. Little is known about his life, but there is a portrait of him in Plato's *Symposium*. He was twice threatened with prosecution in the 420s for his outspoken attacks on the prominent politician Cleon, but in 405 he was publicly honoured and crowned for promoting Athenian civic unity in *The Frogs*. Aristophanes had his first comedy produced when he was about twenty-one, and wrote forty plays in all. The eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes are published in the Penguin Classics series as *The Birds and Other Plays*, *Lysistrata and Other Plays* and *The Wasps/The Poet and the Women/The Frogs*.

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ARISTOPHANES

Lysistrata and Other Plays

THE ACHARNIANS,
THE CLOUDS, LYSISTRATA

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
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REVISED EDITION

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Chronology

(D) Produced at City Dionysia (March/April)

(L) Produced at Lenaea (January/February)

449/8 BC? Aristophanes born.

441 Euripides' first victory at the City Dionysia.

438 Production of Euripides' *Telephus* and *Alcestis*.

431 Outbreak of Peloponnesian War.

430-426 The Great Plague of Athens.

430-428 Aristophanes trains to be a dramatist, collaborating anonymously with other authors.

429 Death of Pericles.

428 Aristophanes submits *The Banqueters* to Archon for production, in the name of Callistratus.

427 *The Banqueters* (D): second prize.

426 *The Babylonians* (D): first prize.

Cleon attempts to prosecute Aristophanes for 'slandering the City'.

425 *The Acharnians* (L): first prize.

Pylos-Sphacteria campaign; Spartan invasions of Attica cease.

424 *The Knights* (L), the first play Aristophanes produced himself: first prize.

Cleon indicts Aristophanes for falsely pretending to be a citizen, but the prosecution is withdrawn.

423 *The Clouds* (D) proves a failure.

Truce of one year (begins day after City Dionysia).

422 *The Preview* and *The Wasps* (L): first and second prizes.

Truce expires; fighting resumed (in Thracian region only).

- Cleon killed at Amphipolis (summer); peace negotiations follow.
- 421 *Peace* (D): second prize.
Peace of Nicias (takes effect twelve days after City Dionysia).
- 419/18 Aristophanes revises *The Clouds*, but the new version is not produced.
- 415 Sicilian expedition sets out.
- 414 *The Birds* (D): second prize.
- 413 Total destruction of Sicilian expedition.
- 411 *Lysistrata* (L?).
The Poet and the Women (*Thesmophoriazusae*) (D).
Oligarchic coup of Four Hundred, who rule for four months (summer).
- 410 Restoration of full democracy.
- 406 Death of Euripides.
Athenian victory at Arginusae; successful commanders tried and executed for failing to pick up shipwrecked men.
Death of Sophocles.
- 405 *The Frogs* (L): first prize.
Athenian fleet annihilated at Aegospotami (summer); Athens besieged.
- 405/4 Public honours awarded to Aristophanes, and *The Frogs* restaged (404, L).
Surrender of Athens. Installation of junta of Thirty.
- 403 Expulsion of Thirty. Restoration of democracy.
- 399 Trial and execution of Socrates.
- 395 Outbreak of Corinthian War (Athens/Thebes/Corinth/Argos vs. Sparta).
- 391 *The Assemblywomen* (*Ecclesiazusae*).
- c. 390 Aristophanes chosen by lot to serve on the Council of Five Hundred.
- 388 *Wealth* (*Plutus*).
- 387 *Cocalus* (D), produced by Aristophanes' son Araros: first prize.
- 386? *Aeolosicon*, produced by Araros: Aristophanes' last play.
- 386 End of Corinthian War; Sparta retains her hegemonic position.

- c. 385 Death of Aristophanes, leaving two sons, Araros and Philippus, who later become comic dramatists themselves.
- 384-379 Plato makes Aristophanes a character in the *Symposium*.

Introduction

The eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes are all that we have, apart from fragments preserved on papyri or quoted by other ancient writers, of one of the most remarkable branches of the literature of antiquity, the Old Comedy of Athens. Of Old Comedy I will say more presently: first something on Aristophanes himself, his life, times, work and ideas.

ARISTOPHANES' LIFE AND WORK

Aristophanes, son of Philippus, of the 'deme' or district of Cydathenaeum within the urban area of Athens,¹ was born close to the mid-point of the fifth century BC. He may have served an apprenticeship in the early 420s helping other dramatists with their scripts and production;² his own first comedy, *The Banqueters*, was written presumably in 428 and produced (by a collaborator, Callistratus) at the showpiece festival of the City Dionysia in the spring of 427, where it was placed second in the comic competition. The following year Aristophanes won first prize with *The Babylonians* (again produced by Callistratus), and afterwards either he or his producer was threatened with prosecution by Cleon, the most powerful politician of the day, for allegedly slandering the Athenian people and state, though the case apparently never came to court. In 425 the team of Aristophanes and Callistratus won another first prize with *The Acharnians*, the earliest of his plays to survive,³ and in 424 Aristophanes for the first time produced a play in his own name when he made his most ferocious attack yet on Cleon in *The*

Knights. This apparently resulted in another threat of prosecution by Cleon; Aristophanes' (anonymous) ancient biographer says it was on the serious charge of falsely pretending to be an Athenian citizen, for which the penalty on conviction was sale into slavery. A rather obscure passage in *The Wasps* (lines 1284-91) suggests that Aristophanes saved himself (probably, once again, before the matter got as far as the courts) by promising to treat Cleon more mildly in future; if so, the promise was not kept.

Altogether in a career of some forty years Aristophanes wrote at least forty plays.⁴ Only eleven of these were still being read to any significant extent in late antiquity,⁵ but these eleven all survived through the Middle Ages⁶ to reach the security of printed editions between 1498 and 1525 and to be read and performed today: *The Acharnians*, *The Knights*, *The Clouds* (423, but revised later), *The Wasps* (422), *Peace* (421), *The Birds* (414), *Lysistrata* and *The Poet and the Women*⁷ (both 411), *The Frogs* (405), *The Assemblywomen*⁸ (probably 391), and *Wealth*⁹ (388). Of these, *The Acharnians*, *The Knights* and *The Frogs* are known to have won first prize, and *The Wasps* was only defeated because Aristophanes had entered another play for the same competition; *Peace* and *The Birds* came second, *The Clouds* failed badly, and in the other four cases the competition result is not known. Some months after the production of *The Frogs*, when the Assembly decided to implement a proposal, advocated in the play (lines 686-705), to restore citizen rights to many who had lost them on political and other grounds, they also passed a decree commending Aristophanes, conferring upon him a crown of sacred olive,¹⁰ and ordering the play to be restaged; in one sense this was the climax of Aristophanes' career, but he may have recalled it afterwards with somewhat mixed feelings, since many of those to whom rights were restored proceeded to use them to overthrow the democratic regime and install the rule of a narrow and bloody junta (the Thirty). Aristophanes himself, however, does not seem to have been regarded as one of the Thirty's supporters, since around 390 his name appears on an inscribed list of members of the Council of Five Hundred, who had to

undergo, before entering office, a scrutiny at which any dubious aspect of their past life might be brought up against them.

Wealth was the last play that Aristophanes produced in his own name. He wrote two more comedies subsequently; these were produced by his son Araros,¹¹ and one of them won first prize. Aristophanes probably died between 386 and 380.

ARISTOPHANES PORTRAYED BY A CONTEMPORARY

It was most likely not long after Aristophanes' death that Plato wrote his *Symposium*,¹² which purports to be an account of a dinner party given by the tragic poet Agathon in 416 at which both Socrates and Aristophanes were present. This work, fictional though it no doubt is, is nevertheless the only source we have that might give us a glimpse of Aristophanes independently of his plays; and it is a source with some authority, since Aristophanes was only recently dead at the time of writing, had been a prominent figure in Athenian life for four decades, and will have been well known both to Plato and to many of his readers.

The first we hear of Aristophanes in the *Symposium* is that like all the other guests (except Socrates), he has a hangover from the previous night's party, or, as he puts it, 'I had a bit of a dip yesterday too' (176b). When his neighbour Eryximachus, a medical man, proposes that all the guests should make speeches in praise of Love (Eros), Socrates comments that Aristophanes can hardly refuse, 'seeing that he devotes his whole life to Dionysus and Aphrodite'¹³ (177e). Aristophanes' turn to speak eventually comes, but he is in the middle of an attack of hiccups (185c), and Eryximachus has to speak before him, as well as prescribing treatment for his complaint (185d-e). By the end of the doctor's speech Aristophanes has recovered, and is ready to begin (188e-189a); but he is almost immediately accused of trying to be funny at Eryximachus' expense (189a-b). He apologizes, but says (189b) that he *is* afraid his speech may seem - not funny (*geloia*), since 'that would be a plus point,

and just right coming from me, artistically speaking' – but contemptible (*katagelasta*). He then makes his speech (189c–193e). Originally, he says, human beings were spherical in shape, with four legs and double the present number of all the other organs, and there were three sexes, male, female and hermaphrodite; but when they tried to fight against the gods Zeus punished them. Rather than destroy them (which would have deprived him and the other gods of their sacrificial offerings), he sliced them all in half, thus simultaneously increasing their numbers (and hence the number of sacrifices they offered) and reducing their strength; and subsequently, finding that the separated halves of each former individual passionately sought each other out and were ready to stay locked in permanent embrace until they died of starvation, he made such anatomical adjustments as were necessary to enable them to give each other sexual satisfaction as we know it today. And that is why even now there are three kinds of persons – straights, gays and lesbians as we would call them¹⁴ – because 'each of us is always looking for his other half' (191d); and it is this desire and pursuit that we call love, and in its fulfilment that the hope of happiness lies.

There is a good deal that is ludicrous here, some of it repeating themes frequent in Aristophanes' comedies (such as that gods would starve if mortals did not sacrifice to them, or that all politicians had been homosexually promiscuous in adolescence); nobody, to be sure, derides Aristophanes, but this may well be because it would not be appropriate to do so in this convivial atmosphere. What is perhaps more significant is Aristophanes' own anxiety to be taken seriously: at the end of Socrates' speech, the climax of the whole dialogue, everybody congratulates him except Aristophanes, who 'tried to raise a point about the reference that Socrates had made to his speech' (212c) – for Socrates, or rather the wise woman Diotima whom he professed to be quoting, had criticized Aristophanes, without naming him, on the ground that 'neither a half nor a whole can be the object of love unless it is something good' (205d–e). Socrates never has to answer him, because the proceedings are immediately interrupted by the arrival of the

drunken Alcibiades; but whether we are to see Aristophanes as hoping to rebut Diotima's criticism or just as wanting to draw the company's attention to the fact that she had taken notice of his thesis, the effect is still to portray him as someone who wanted to be thought of as something more than a laughter-maker.

It is striking that Socrates is not made to show any resentment, nor Aristophanes any embarrassment, on the subject of *The Clouds* – even though Plato believed, as we know from his *Apology*, that *The Clouds* was a significant factor in creating the prejudice against Socrates that contributed to his condemnation and execution in 399, and even though there is significant further evidence that contemporary Athenians took it for granted that comic satire, at least if large-scale or persistent, was likely to be believed and to injure the reputation of the person satirized.¹⁵ We should remember that Socrates is elsewhere represented by Plato as caring very little for his reputation (unlike most ancient Greeks) and as believing it wrong to retaliate for an injury received; the Socrates that Plato portrays simply would not have regarded Aristophanes as an enemy, and those who knew him well would have been aware of this. Neither he nor Aristophanes could be supposed to have had any idea in 416 of what was to happen in 399, a lost war and five revolutions later.

THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Aristophanes' lifetime was a time of extreme political turbulence. When he was in his teens, Athens was at the height of her power and fame. For a generation the city had been governed by a radical form of democracy, under which all adult male citizens had an equal share in policy decisions (which were taken by an Assembly of the whole citizen body, voting by show of hands), while those over thirty had also an equal opportunity to take an active part in the administration of justice (most trials being held before popular juries numbering several hundred, who judged both factual and legal issues and from whom there was no appeal) and an equal chance of appointment (by lot) to

executive office¹⁶ or to the Council of Five Hundred which dealt with routine public business and prepared the agenda for the Assembly. During most of this time Athenian politics had in practice been dominated by a single man, Pericles ('Zeus' as he was dubbed by Cratinus and other comic dramatists), through his personality, his oratory, his popular policies and the power that comes from success. Under his leadership Athens survived a war¹⁷ in which at one time she was fighting half Greece and Persia too, on three continents at once; she converted what had been a military alliance directed against the Persian empire into a league of subject states paying tribute to herself; and while using a large part of this revenue to build and maintain an unchallengeable navy, she spent much of the rest on a programme of public building then unparalleled anywhere in Greece. The peace of the Greek world depended, however, on the balance of strength between Athens as the greatest sea-power and Sparta as the greatest land-power, and in the 430s it increasingly seemed to Spartans (and even more to their allies, the Corinthians) that this balance was tipping too much Athens' way; at any rate, when a series of disputes arose between Athens and various members of the Spartan alliance, the outcome, in the spring of 431, was war.¹⁸

Despite occasional sanguinary or spectacular episodes, despite regular invasions and devastations of Athenian territory, despite the great plague of 430-426 which probably killed more Athenians than all the campaigns of the war combined, and despite a heavy run-down of Athenian financial resources, the conflict was indecisive, since Sparta could not defeat Athens at sea and Athens could not defeat Sparta on land. It was ended in 421 by a compromise peace - psychologically a heavy defeat for Sparta, whom at the outset most neutrals had expected to be victorious within three years - and before long a supremely confident Athens was forming alliances, and deploying her troops, in the heart of the Peloponnese. In 415 the Athenians invaded Sicily, some of them at least aiming at the conquest of the whole island, and the next year, by an attack on Spartan home territory in conjunction with their Argive allies, they casually provoked the Spartans into a new war. Then, in 413,

everything went wrong. The Sicilians defeated and destroyed the Athenian expedition; Sparta, on the advice of the brilliant former Athenian general Alcibiades (in exile for alleged offences against religion), seized and fortified a permanent base a few miles from Athens; and the crisis resulted which forms the background to *Lysistrata*. A few months later, in the early summer of 411, a strictly constitutional *coup d'état* overthrew the Athenian democracy; the new regime of the 'Four Hundred', however, failed to make peace as its leaders had hoped to do, and was soon itself deposed, in favour first of a broader oligarchy (the 'Five Thousand') and then, early in 410, of an even more radical version of the old democracy. By now many of Athens' subject states were in revolt, but she more than held her own at sea until, in 407, the Persian king, Darius II, decided to back Sparta. From then on the Athenians could survive only by winning every naval battle until such time as Darius died; in summer 405 they suffered a catastrophic defeat at the Hellespont, were soon subjected to a land and sea blockade, and in spring 404 surrendered unconditionally. Darius II died a few weeks later.

Athens was not destroyed, as many Athenians feared it would be, but she was deprived of all her overseas possessions and of all but an insignificant remnant of her navy, and subjected, with Spartan approval, to the rule of a junta of thirty.¹⁹ Other neighbouring states, however, seem to have feared that Athens would become an instrument of Spartan policy to control and coerce them, and supported the initially small band of rebels who, within eighteen months, had overthrown the Thirty, restored democracy, and enacted a wide-ranging amnesty for past offences. The political settlement of 403 ushered in eighty-one years of unbroken internal peace and unchallenged democracy which ended only when Athens fell under Macedonian domination. Externally Athens spent most of this period in a series of attempts, always with inadequate resources, to regain something like her old position of power; the first of these, known as the Corinthian War, began in 395 with an alliance of all the leading Greek states (Athens, Argos, Corinth, Thebes), with Persian backing, against Sparta – but the Persians changed

sides, and the war ended in 387/6 with a peace dictated by them which gave Sparta everything she wanted, Athens a little, and the other allies nothing. At just about the same time, Plato was founding the first permanent school of philosophy near the park and gymnasium called the Academy. Athenians did not yet recognize the fact, but the transformation of their city from the political to the intellectual centre of Greece was under way.

Aristophanes' later work reflects the early stages of this transformation. His last two surviving plays, as much as their predecessors, are concerned with real, identifiable evils afflicting society; but the comic remedy for these evils is not (as in *The Acharnians*, *The Knights*, *Peace* or *Lysistrata*) a single political act ('make peace', 'get rid of Cleon'), nor (as in *The Clouds* or *The Frogs*) the rejection of contemporary trends in thought and literature in favour of an idealized past, but the construction of a new society on the basis of a theoretical principle (in one case communism, in the other universal and equal wealth), much as was done by Plato in his *Republic* a decade or two later.²⁰ The audience of these plays, while recognizing the evils (and recognizing that they *need* to be remedied), is certainly not expected to endorse the actual remedies applied. It is otherwise in Aristophanes' earlier works, where, for the most part, we find not only real evils but practicable prescriptions for them.

ARISTOPHANES' IDEAS

The statement made in the last sentence of the preceding section is a controversial one. Probably the dominant trend in present-day Aristophanic criticism²¹ is one that stresses (with every justification) Aristophanes' immense, kaleidoscopic artistry and inventiveness in word and image, theme and structure, sound and sight, but denies to him any serious aims in the political and social fields.²² The evidence clearly shows, however, that fifth- and fourth-century Athenians themselves thought that comedy could exert an influence on public opinion and even sometimes on public policy, and it must be presumed that comic dramatists were aware of this. The comic dramatists, too, were

themselves Athenian citizens, to whom, as to most of their audiences, it was of literally vital importance that the Athenian citizen body should take the right decisions on key political issues – for a wrong decision, especially in wartime, could only too easily lead to Athens suffering the same fate that she inflicted on Scione in 421 and on Melos in 415, the destruction of the city, the extermination of its adult male inhabitants, and the enslavement of the rest. And the dramatic festivals gave them perhaps the biggest citizen audience that any kind of public discourse could ever hope to have in Athens.²³ If, then, a comic dramatist seems on the face of it to be giving his plays a consistent slant in a particular direction on one or several political issues, it is not unreasonable to suppose that this slant represents his own opinion and that he is hoping that after the performance, this opinion will be shared more widely and more strongly among his audience than it had previously been. Such hopes were doubtless not always fulfilled, and even if they were, this certainly did not always, or even usually, result in policy changes even when the play was well enough received to win first prize: peace was not made after *The Acharnians*, Cleon was not discarded after *The Knights* (indeed, he was soon elected to a generalship), and the proposal in *The Frogs* to restore rights to the disfranchised was adopted only several months later when the war situation had become desperate. This, however, may well be due to differences in social composition between the Assembly and the theatre audience: one had to pay to attend the theatre, and the poorer and less educated sections of the citizen body are likely to have been under-represented. It is no coincidence that Old Comedy typically has a right-wing political agenda.²⁴

Aristophanes takes care never to express open opposition to the democratic system itself; that is only to be expected, since, so far as we can tell, no one addressing the Athenian public ever did express such opposition except at times (such as in 411 and 404) when there seemed a real prospect that the system might be overthrown.²⁵ Repeatedly, however, above all in *The Wasps* but also elsewhere, he ridicules a crucial feature of the system, the use of mass juries dominated (according to the stereotype

he presents) by the elderly poor, and treats the daily payments made for jury service (but for which juries would have consisted mainly of the well-to-do and leisured) as a waste of public money. And though individual politicians may seem to be satirized indiscriminately, those who are singled out most persistently and extensively for hostile treatment, both in Aristophanes' plays and in our fragmentary evidence for those of his rivals – notably Cleon (till his death in 422), Hyperbolus (till his exile in 417 or 416) and Cleophon (in the last years of the war) – are regularly described as relying mainly on the support of the poor,²⁶ gained through financial and other favours, while the rare cases in which politicians receive *favourable* mention in comedy invariably relate to persons described, in comedy or elsewhere, as opponents of these figures or of their brand of politics.²⁷ The intended beneficiaries of the restoration of political rights advocated in *The Frogs* are explicitly (though euphemistically) identified with those who had taken part in the oligarchic regime of 411, and the chorus go on to recommend that the direction of affairs should be entrusted to 'men of good birth and breeding' – and these two categories would certainly overlap at a number of points. Aristophanes – and his rivals too – may well, most of the time, have accepted democracy as the only political system on offer or likely to be; but the evidence suggests that they had no great love for it.

The attitude of Aristophanes to peace and war is coloured by the same political tendencies. It is an egregious mistake to portray him as a pacifist.²⁸ He fully shares, or at least regularly voices, the pride felt by all Athenians in their victories over the Persians at Marathon in 490 and Salamis in 480; he believes Athens may soon have to fight them again (*Peace* 108, 406–13; *Lysistrata* 1133); and even when it comes to relations with other Greek states, we find that in *The Birds*, whenever current or recent campaigns are mentioned or alluded to, the tone is a hawkish one – the only thing wrong with the Sicilian expedition, apparently, is that victory is not coming quickly enough (line 639). But when *The Birds* was produced, Athens was not, and did not expect to be, at war with Sparta; and whenever Athens is at war with Sparta, it is taken for granted that what is needed

is to make peace as quickly as possible – although in *Lysistrata*, given the current situation, it is recognized that it will take a miracle to achieve this on acceptable terms. This is not an anti-war but a pro-Spartan orientation – and it is significant that in the early part of *The Acharnians* the hero, Dikaiopolis, is spoken of half a dozen times, by himself and others, as speaking ‘in defence of Sparta’. Sparta was an oligarchic state; she had attempted to strangle Athenian democracy at birth in 508/7, Athenian anti-democrats had intrigued treasonably with Sparta during the war of the 450s, the Four Hundred hoped (in vain) that Sparta would be readier to make peace with them than with the democrats, and in 404 Spartan generals were intimidatingly present at the Assembly which voted the Thirty into power.²⁹ Aristophanes’ ideal vision of Greek politics, briefly mentioned in *Peace* (line 1082) and given concrete form in dance and song at the end of *Lysistrata*, is of Athens and Sparta ‘ruling Greece together’ in friendly collaboration. It never happened, and never could have happened – and Aristophanes knows very well how deeply many of his fellow-citizens hate and distrust Sparta,³⁰ but at least until 404 and the experience of the Thirty, he never gives up the ideal.

In the literary and intellectual sphere, as we see from *The Clouds* and *The Frogs*, Aristophanes saw a marked contrast between old and new, Aeschylus and Euripides, traditional and sophistic education. His own position is ambivalent. He was, after all, one of the new generation himself – Euripides was old enough to be his father, and had been writing tragedies before he was born – and his characters are quite willing to use sophistic methods of argument when it suits them; his older rival Cratinus thought that it would make an effective thumbnail characterization of an imaginary intellectual spectator to call him ‘a bit of a quibbler, a hunter of clever ideas, a Euripid-aristophanist’.³¹ At the same time, he was very conscious that the intellectual had a social responsibility. He felt that responsibility strongly himself: he was, so far as we know, the only Old Comic dramatist who openly prided himself on being, through his plays, a benefactor of the Athenian people,³² and in *The Frogs* he makes Aeschylus and Euripides agree that it is every poet’s duty to ‘make people

into better citizens' (*The Frogs* 1008–9) – after which Aeschylus argues that Euripides, who has previously made a proud boast of having encouraged his public to question and test received wisdom, accept nothing on authority, and see two sides to every issue, has singularly failed to fulfil this duty. The same criticism would apply to the sophistic thinkers and educators, various (and sometimes conflicting) aspects of whose ideas and interests were embodied in the Socrates of *The Clouds*: it is all very well to deconstruct traditional certainties, but if one deconstructs an edifice without constructing a viable new one, one is left with a useless heap of rubble. And however unfair *The Clouds* may be to the real Socrates, Socrates' own disciple Plato makes him insist that he teaches no positive doctrine, asserts no propositions, does nothing but ask questions – or, as a hostile interpreter might well put it, that he is a negative critic without a constructive idea in his head.

Euripides and Socrates are also both accused of atheism – or rather of not believing in the gods of the community. This may seem surprising, coming from a dramatist who regularly himself portrays the gods in a manner which to modern religious sensibilities seems exceedingly irreverent, and who in three of his eleven surviving plays (*Peace*, *The Birds* and *Wealth*) makes his heroes defeat the designs of Zeus and the Olympians and, in the latter two plays, depose them from power. In none of this, however, was there anything impious. Undignified, even mocking, portrayals of the gods are to be found in Greek poetry all the way back to Homer. The possibility of Zeus falling from power, as his predecessors Uranus and Cronus had done, was a crucial element in such well-established myths as those of the birth of Athena and the wedding of Peleus and Thetis;³³ there was no reason why it should not be played with as a comic fantasy, an amusing impossibility like the building of a city of birds in mid air or the transfer of political power in Athens from men to women – particularly since (as Hesiod had long ago emphasized, and as most Athenians would say they knew from bitter experience) Zeus seemed so persistently and unreasonably hostile to mortals' natural aspirations for security and prosperity.³⁴ What was dangerous, and forbidden, was to do any-

thing calculated to deprive the established gods of the worship to which they were traditionally entitled; for this would be likely to anger the gods, and they might well take revenge not only on the offender but on his entire community, all the more so if it had failed to punish him. And nothing could be more certainly calculated to deprive the gods of worship than an assertion that they did not exist or (as Strepsiades in *The Clouds* is sometimes made to understand, or misunderstand, Socrates as believing) that they had already been expelled from power. To *imagine* a scenario in which such an expulsion takes place is harmless, precisely because we know it is only imaginary: we would love not to be ruled by a capricious and spiteful Zeus (just as we would love it today if there were no Inland Revenue), we enjoy taking a dream-trip to a world in which he can no longer trouble us, but when we wake up, as it were, at the end of the play, we know Zeus is still going to be there. Accordingly, while Aristophanes often makes fun of the gods in large and small ways, he never lets any sympathetic character mock at religious *observances*. After all, the very performance of an Aristophanic comedy was itself part of a religious observance.

THE DRAMATIC FESTIVALS

Comedy at Athens, like tragedy, was always performed in connection with one of the festivals of the god Dionysus – the Lenaea in the lunar month of Gamelion (corresponding roughly to January) and the City Dionysia in Elaphebolion (corresponding roughly to March). The Lenaea, at which *The Acharnians* and probably *Lysistrata* were produced, was essentially a local Athenian affair, since visitors from abroad were unable to attend in any numbers owing to the extreme difficulty of sea travel in winter;³⁵ the City Dionysia was the occasion when the wealth of Athens, political, literary and musical, was displayed to the world. Comedy, to be sure, had relatively greater prominence at the Lenaea, since the tragic contest there was a much slighter affair (probably only four plays were presented, as against twelve at the City Dionysia); nevertheless, for comic as well as

tragic poets, a victory at the City Dionysia, or even permission to compete, carried significantly greater prestige than it did at the Lenaea.³⁶

The City Dionysia lasted four or five days.³⁷ Before the festival began, the statue of its patron god, Dionysus Eleuthereus, was brought in procession from a temple lying just outside the city, near the Academy, to the Theatre of Dionysus, close under the south face of the Acropolis, where the competitions were held; here the god remained throughout the festival, watching the performances and sometimes (as in *The Frogs*) seeing himself take part in them. On the day after this procession there was another, when numerous sacrifices were offered; the sponsors (*choregoi*: see below) of the various performances took a leading part in the procession and dressed themselves magnificently. The rest of this day appears to have been devoted to contests of boys' and men's choruses (representing the ten tribes into which the citizen body was divided) singing and dancing the lyric performances in honour of Dionysus and known as dithyrambs.

Possibly on this day, possibly at the start of the next day when the dramatic performances began, an important civic ceremony was performed: a parade was held of those young men, just reaching their majority, whose fathers had been killed in battle, and they were presented with a set of armour at the public expense; increasingly too, the opportunity of so vast a gathering was exploited to stage other public ceremonials for which the widest publicity was desired.³⁸ Thus the audience which, on the second day of the festival proper, settled down to watch (probably) three tragedies and a satyr-play by one poet, and two comedies by two other poets, could not help being well aware that it (or rather the most important part of it) was also the People of Athens, that courage and public spirit had made their city great, and that it was up to them to keep it so.

This audience was enormous by most modern theatrical standards (though not by those of, say, the amphitheatre of Verona). The capacity of the Theatre of Dionysus was about 14,000, and there can be little doubt that it was always full during the Dionysia. There seem to have been no restrictions of age, gender or citizen status governing attendance: Plato in his

Gorgias (502d) makes Socrates say that 'poets in the theatres' direct their eloquence at a public 'consisting of children, women and men, slave and free, all at once', and one passage in *Lysistrata* (line 1051) – though only one – makes explicit reference to the presence of women. The audience, to be sure, can sometimes be addressed as if it consisted only of men; but then it can also be addressed as if it were identical with the Athenian citizen body, which it certainly was not, since it always contained many resident foreigners (metics)³⁹ and, at the City Dionysia, many visiting foreigners too. Both foreigners and women, in classical Athens, will have been familiar with the experience of being treated, especially on public occasions, as though they did not exist; and the women, in particular, may well have been largely of low status⁴⁰ – both in *The Birds* (793–6) and in *The Poet and the Women* (395–7) it is taken for granted that when a citizen goes to the theatre his wife normally stays at home, and when the women in the latter play are discussing the alleged iniquities of Euripides, none of them ever claims to have actually seen any of his tragedies. Women may have been segregated in the back rows;⁴¹ many seats near the front⁴² were reserved for Athenian priests and officials, the most privileged seat of all, the centre place in the front row, being that of the priest of Dionysus.

Preparations for the festival had begun several months before. Soon after taking office in the summer, the Archon⁴³ took in hand the arrangements for the City Dionysia, and his colleague the Basileus⁴⁴ those for the Lenaea. In connection with tragedy and comedy these magistrates had two main duties. On the one hand, they had to select the poets who were to be allowed to compete (to be 'given a chorus', as the expression was). It is not known how they did this or what advice, if any, they took; being chosen by lot, they would not normally have any special qualifications for the task themselves, and they may well have chosen expert assessors to assist them, though the final responsibility was their own. There are hints that poets, at least sometimes, would recite samples of their work to the magistrate. The task, at any rate, was a very delicate one, and a magistrate who made an unpopular choice (such as one we hear of who refused

a tragic chorus to Sophocles) might never be allowed to forget it. The presiding magistrate also had to nominate sponsors (*choregoi*) to equip the choruses, bear the expenses of their training, and organize the performances generally. He chose men of considerable means, who were then required to undertake the task as a compulsory civic duty. Sometimes he received applications from men volunteering to be *choregoi*, for despite the expense involved, a *choregia* was widely regarded as an honour, and defendants in lawsuits often pointed to the number and magnificence of their *choregiai* as proof of their public spirit.⁴⁵

Each comic *choregos* was responsible for one play. Acting on the advice of the poet (and/or the producer, if the two roles were not combined – see below), he had to organize and finance the training of the chorus, supply costumes and properties, hire the piper who accompanied them and any non-speaking performers who might be required – and, if he valued his reputation (unlike Antimachus, cursed by the chorus of *The Acharnians* for his stinginess), provide a dinner afterwards for all concerned in the production. In the formal competition records, the name of the winning *choregos* regularly appears before that of the producer.

It is not altogether clear how and by whom the actors who played individual parts were selected. It is known that in early times poets had acted in their own plays, and that towards the middle of the fifth century BC they began instead to employ professional actors of their own choice. It is also known that by the early fourth century five principal actors ('protagonists') were being chosen by the state and allocated by lot, one to each poet; but it is not known when this system was introduced. At the Lenaea a prize was awarded to the best comic protagonist (not necessarily the one who had acted in the winning play); surprisingly, it was not till a century after Aristophanes' time that a similar prize was introduced at the City Dionysia.

Traditionally poets had produced their own plays, and it was as producers (*didaskaloi*, literally 'trainers' of the chorus) that their names appeared in the official records of the festivals. By Aristophanes' time, however, it had become common for poets,

especially comic poets,⁴⁶ to collaborate with a specialist producer (and often also with an assistant producer in charge of the chorus), and many of his plays were produced for him either by Callistratus (who was responsible for *The Acharnians* and *Lysistrata* among others), by Philonides (who was also a comic poet himself), or (at the end of his career) by his own son Araros. There can be little doubt that audiences were well aware of the real identity of the author; indeed in *The Knights*, the first play he produced himself, Aristophanes, through the mouth of the chorus-leader, says that many members of the public have been asking him 'why he had not long ago asked for a chorus in his own name',⁴⁷ and the poet Plato⁴⁸ may have presented himself openly, in his comedy *Peisander*, as the author-but-not-producer of the play.⁴⁹

When *choregos*, poet and producer (if any) had completed their preparations, two days before the festival, a preview (*pro-agon*) was held in the Odeon, not far from the theatre. The poet (or the producer, or both?) presented the actors and chorus, without their masks and costumes, and announced the title of the play. In some cases this will have given the public a fairly good idea of what the play was about; after the hints given in *The Acharnians* (7-8, 299-302), they will not have been very surprised when a play announced as *The Knights* turned out to be an attack on Cleon. In other cases the audience would have been put in a mood of mystified expectation (a play called *The Clouds* might have been about anything) or even positively misled (in view of the strong tradition of animal choruses in comedy, no one would have expected the chorus of *The Wasps* to consist, as it did, of elderly jurymen).

Productions at the dramatic festivals were normally always competitive; the only exception that we know of, in Aristophanes' time, was the restaging of *The Frogs*, which was ordered by a special Assembly decree. The prizes were allotted by a panel of judges selected by a complicated procedure designed to ensure that the judging should be both competent and fair: a large pool of candidates was selected by the Council (some of them on the nomination of the competing *choregoi*) and the ten actual judges, one from each tribe, were chosen by lot from this pool

just before the contest. It appears, furthermore, that normally only five of the ten votes (again chosen by lot) were read and counted; this may have been done partly as a further precaution against corruption (doubling the odds against a bribe doing any good to its giver) and partly in order to give the god a share in deciding the destination of the prize (for the decision of the lot was not due to human choice and therefore logically had to be due to divine choice).⁵⁰ Many remarks in comedy, in Aristophanes' time and long after, indicate that the judges were thought likely to be strongly influenced by the perceived preferences of the audience as a whole, though dramatists also often made their choruses address the judges directly to appeal for a favourable verdict.⁵¹

PERFORMERS AND PRODUCTION

Technically the competition at the City Dionysia or Lenaea was not between plays or between poets but between choruses; thus when all was ready for a play to begin, the crier proclaimed *Eisage ton choron* ('Bring on your chorus') – even though it had long been the regular practice for a play to begin with dialogue and for the chorus to come on only later. The comic chorus consisted of twenty-four members. Normally each chorus is given a distinctive identity, but it need not retain this identity consistently throughout the play. In *The Acharnians*, for example, the chorus at its first entry is very plainly identified as consisting of elderly, bellicose charcoal-burners from Acharnae, and it speaks and sings in that capacity for most of the first half of the play; in the second half, however, there is nothing in the script to distinguish it from any other comic chorus (indeed in one song it seems to identify itself with a comic chorus that had performed at the Lenaea in a previous year)⁵² and even before this it speaks at one moment (as other Aristophanic choruses sometimes also do) in the name of the author in the first person.⁵³ Even in *The Clouds*, where the plot requires that the chorus should retain to the end their character as cloud-goddesses, they can speak (lines 1115–30) as a group of performers taking part

in a competition, and demand, with menaces, to be given the first prize.⁵⁴

Lysistrata is exceptional among surviving plays⁵⁵ in having two choruses, presumably of twelve each (though they eventually unite into one). The motive for this is dramatic, not musical, since all female parts whatever were played by men.⁵⁶

The normal expectation was that once the chorus had appeared on the scene it would remain until the end of the play – indeed that its departure *was* the end of the play.⁵⁷ This imposed some restrictions on the plot: in particular, after the first entry of the chorus, nothing could be done of which they disapproved and which they were willing and able to stop. In tragedy this could be a nuisance, and choruses were sometimes made to take oaths whose implications they did not fully realize, so that when they understood the situation and wished to intervene they could not do so without perjuring themselves. In Old Comedy the chorus very frequently does strongly disapprove of what one or another character is doing, and does try to stop them, often by force, as in *The Acharnians*. Only in *The Clouds*, of the three plays in this volume, does the chorus not intervene in the action; and there it turns out that its non-intervention was deliberate, and has far graver consequences than any intervention could have had.

The chorus normally danced as it sang, and the dance-movements were regarded as an important part of the total effect of a choral ode, but unfortunately we know very little about them.⁵⁸

There appears to have been a competition rule limiting the number of actors who could have speaking parts. For tragedy, in Aristophanes' time, the limit was three, but for comedy it was four.⁵⁹ This restriction meant that the author could not, like a modern dramatist, carry a large number of characters through the play, unless he was prepared to have the same part played by different actors in different scenes; some Athenian dramatists did split parts in this way,⁶⁰ but Aristophanes' scripts strongly suggest that he never did. He regularly has only one character, or at most two, who appear in all or most scenes of a play; and characters whom one might have expected to be of some

importance, such as Lampito in *Lysistrata*, can simply vanish. *The Clouds*, with three characters carried through the play, is exceptional in this respect, and presented Aristophanes with a problem for which he found no satisfactory solution – though perhaps he would have found one, had he not abandoned his revision of the play before it was completed. With only four actors at his disposal, he could not have a debate between Right and Wrong with Strepsiades, Pheidippides and Socrates all present; so before the debate begins, Socrates, without giving a reason, has to excuse himself.⁶¹

Another scene in which Aristophanes stretches the four-actor limit as far as it will go is the opening Assembly scene in *The Acharnians*. Here one actor (doubtless the protagonist) takes the part of Dikaiopolis, another that of the Crier (who has relatively little to say, but, given his official role in the proceedings, must be present throughout the Assembly meeting); the other two actors must therefore share the scene's four other roles. This can only be worked if one plays Amphitheus and the Ambassador, the other Pseudartabas and Theorus; and it will be observed that the Ambassador is got off stage fifteen lines before Pseudartabas, to give his actor a chance to change mask and costume.⁶² Even so, two quite rapid changes are required: one actor must exit as Amphitheus at line 55 and return as the Ambassador at line 64, the other must exit as Pseudartabas at line 125 and return as Theorus at line 134.⁶³

The rule about number of actors was rigid, the rule about the continuous presence of the chorus nearly so. More elastic were certain conventions about the structure of the play. The basic form was something like this:

(1) An initial scene or series of scenes (called by modern scholars the *prologue*), in which the opening situation was made clear and the movement of the plot begun.

(2) The *parodos* or entry of the chorus, often marked by a long and varied song-and-dance movement.

(3) A series of scenes interspersed with songs by the chorus; the central scene was usually a formal debate (*agon*) on the crucial issue of the play, containing two opposing speeches each introduced by a choral song.

(4) The *parabasis*, in which the chorus partially or completely abandoned its dramatic role and addressed the audience directly, usually in the absence of the actors. It normally consists of three songs (*S*) and three speeches (*s*), in the order *S*₁-*s*₁, *S*₂-*s*₂, *S*₃-*s*₃; *S*₂ corresponds metrically to *S*₃ and *s*₂ to *s*₃, and the first speech (*s*₁) usually ends with a passage to be rattled off very rapidly (theoretically in one breath), called a *pnigos*.

(5) Another series of scenes interspersed with choral songs. The songs in this section generally contained satirical jibes at prominent individuals (the chorus of *Lysistrata* [lines 1042-8] draws attention to the fact that it is departing from this custom); one of them was normally, in Aristophanes' earlier plays, expanded into a brief second *parabasis*.⁶⁴

(6) A concluding scene of general rejoicing, often associated with a banquet or a wedding.

None of the plays in this volume corresponds exactly to this pattern, and it is evident that poets regarded it only as a basic framework on which variations could be played. The *parados* of *The Clouds*, for example, consists of only a single song (and the chorus are probably not even on stage to sing it; they make their entry a little later [lines 323-8], in silence). *The Acharnians* has no *agon*; this is certainly because, had there been one, somebody would have had to argue in favour of war, and Aristophanes is careful, in all his plays on the theme of peace, not to allow the case for war to be presented.⁶⁵ For the same reason, although *Lysistrata* contains a scene in the form of an *agon*, it is completely one-sided: the Magistrate is hardly allowed to get a word in edgeways.⁶⁶ Again, *Lysistrata*, with its divided chorus, can have no *parabasis*; in place of this we find a scene between the two choruses, with alternating song, dance, speeches and violence – though the speeches are still directed mainly at the audience. Even the final scene of rejoicing is dispensable. The audience of *The Clouds* may well have assumed that when the triumphant Strepsiades took his son home and put his creditors to flight, an ending of that kind was coming, and they have already been told (line 1213) that there is going to be a feast; but the chorus have already (lines 1113-14) given a hint that things are going to develop differently, and instead

of rejoicing the play ends in destruction – after which the leader of the chorus says that it is time to go, and the chorus simply walk off.

More consistent, though less formalized, than the ‘technical’ structure described above is a ‘functional’ structure which appears with little variation in every surviving Aristophanic play.⁶⁷ Each play begins with a person, a situation and an idea. The person is the comic hero or heroine – in our three plays, Dikaiopolis, Strepsiades and Lysistrata, respectively. The situation is one which from this person’s point of view (and often from that of many others as well) is profoundly unsatisfactory. And the idea is the hero(ine)’s plan for putting things right, for restoring happiness to himself,⁶⁸ or his family, or his city, or (as in *Lysistrata*) the whole Greek world, or even the whole of humanity. In relation to this idea, each play can be analysed into four phases:

(1) *Conception*: we learn about the initial situation, and discover what the idea is. Sometimes, as in *The Acharnians*, the idea strikes the hero, like an inspiration, as we watch; sometimes, as in *Lysistrata*, it is evidently already well formed, and in course of being put into practice, before the play begins – but we are always kept mystified for a considerable time as to its exact nature.

(2) *Struggle*: the hero(ine) meets with, and overcomes, difficulties or dangers standing in the way of implementing the idea, often taking the form of the opposition of some person or group. *Lysistrata* has to face not only male opposition (from the men’s chorus and the Magistrate) but also, more than once, that of her own followers.

(3) *Realization*: the idea is put into effect.

(4) *Consequences*: a series of scenes illustrating the effects that follow from the implementation of the idea, effects that are usually highly beneficial, at least in terms of the comic concept of happiness;⁶⁹ occasionally, as in *The Clouds*, the idea proves a failure or worse – but this only (and always) happens when it was purely selfish in aim and could never have brought any benefit to the community generally.⁷⁰

At both the City Dionysia and the Lenaea, comedy and

tragedy were performed in the Theatre of Dionysus south of the Acropolis. The present layout of the theatre dates from long after Aristophanes' time, and the detailed reconstruction of the fifth-century BC theatre remains a matter of great dispute, but certain points are clear, not least from the evidence of the tragic and (especially) comic texts themselves. Centrally placed, with the spectators' seating encompassing it on three sides, was the *orchestra* ('dance-floor') where the chorus usually performed; in the centre of this there was probably an altar, round which the 'circular choruses' of dithyramb danced, and which often served in tragedy, and sometimes in comedy, as a place of sanctuary for the persecuted. Behind (i.e., south of) the *orchestra* stood a building called the *skene* ('booth'), originally perhaps no more than a dressing-room, but in Aristophanes' time regularly representing, both in tragedy and in comedy, a house, temple, cave, thicket or other 'interior' space – or more accurately, perhaps (since only its façade could normally be seen), the boundary between that interior and the exterior space represented by the performing area itself. The *skene* probably had three doors; part of it was on two floors, with a window on the upper storey (used in several comedies), and the remaining, single-storeyed section had a flat roof (on which Dikaiopolis' wife stands in *The Acharnians* to watch the Dionysiac procession, and which in *Lysistrata* represents the battlements of the Acropolis). Painted panels hung on the front walls could be used to indicate unusual scene settings, such as the Hoopoe's thicket in *The Birds*; it is possible that the west front of the Acropolis was thus visually represented in *Lysistrata*, and that when the *skene* had to represent two or more houses at once (e.g. the houses of Dikaiopolis and Lamachus towards the end of *The Acharnians*) an appropriately placed panel gave a *trompe l'oeil* effect of a passageway between buildings.

It was long a matter of controversy whether there was a raised platform in front of the *skene*, but the evidence of vase-paintings, both from Athens and (a little later) from southern Italy, makes it fairly certain that in Aristophanes' time there was an oblong wooden platform, about three feet above *orchestra* level and approached by sets of steps⁷¹ at the corners and possibly also in

the centre. Before the central door stood a small altar (dedicated, it seems, like the altars in front of many real Athenian houses, to Apollo Agyieus), much used in tragedy for prayer and the burning of incense.

The platform was at times a convenient device for marking off the actors visually from the chorus, but the actors were certainly not at this time confined to it, and movement between platform and *orchestra* was easy. On one south Italian vase a character, apparently the centaur Cheiron, is being helped or forced up the corner steps, a slave pushing from behind and another man pulling him from above by the back of the head.⁷²

Between the ends of the platform and the spectators' seating there were broad side passages (*eisodoi*⁷³) for the entrance and exit of the chorus and of actors coming from, or going to, places other than the 'house' or 'houses' in the *skene*. In later comedy the two *eisodoi* were treated as leading to different parts of the offstage world (one to the city centre, the other to the countryside or the harbour), but there is no clear evidence that any such convention existed in Aristophanes' time. It seems likely, however, that the chorus normally entered along the western *eisodos* (on the spectators' right side), so that when they marched in in three files and then turned to face the audience, the left file became the front row.⁷⁴

Two major special-effects devices were available for use in tragedy and comedy. One, known to modern scholars as the *ekkyklema*,⁷⁵ served primarily to bring tableaux and immobile characters (such as dead bodies in tragedy) out of the *skene* into view; it is appropriately employed in *The Acharnians* to bring an immobile tragic poet into view, but Aristophanes seems also to have put it to a wide variety of other uses. It was probably nothing more complex than a wheeled platform or trolley which could be rolled out of the central door of the *skene*. The other device, probably known already in Aristophanes' time simply as 'the machine' (*mechane*), was a crane which was used to stage flying entries by gods and heroes in tragedy⁷⁶ – and by Socrates in *The Clouds*.

The comic actor's costume was traditionally characterized by grotesque padding, and it seems that this was still normal for

THE ACHARNIANS/THE CLOUDS/LYSISTRATA

'We women have the salvation
of Greece in our hands'

Writing at a time of political and social crisis in Athens, the ancient Greek comic playwright Aristophanes was an eloquent, yet bawdy, challenger to the demagogue and the sophist. In *Lysistrata* and *The Acharnians*, two pleas for an end to the long war between Athens and Sparta, a band of women on a sex strike and a lone peasant respectively defeat the political establishment. The darker comedy of *The Clouds* satirizes Athenian philosophers, Socrates in particular, and reflects the uncertainties of a generation in which all traditional religious and ethical beliefs were being challenged.

P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Alan H. Sommerstein



Cover: detail from Greek vase painting depicting a young woman holding a mirror and a jewel or make-up box (c. 420/410 BC) in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, Musée du Louvre, Paris (photo: AKG London/Erch Lessing)

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