

CLCS4009

READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF ANCIENT LITERATURE



Lecture 10: Greek
Comedy: Staging
Reality

Old and New
Comedy:
Aristophanes and
Menander

Dr. Crystal Addey

Origins of Comedy

- City Dionysia: 486 BC
- Lenaea: granted competition status in 440s BC
- Aristotle *Poetics* 1448b29-1449b20:
 - Homeric origins: *Margites*
 - Develops from “the phallic songs”
 - Shared much originally with *iambos*

Comedy Labels

- **Old Comedy (Attic Comedy or Aristophanic Comedy):**
 - Eupolis, Cratinus and Aristophanes; c. 440-385 BC
 - Aristotle: operates through *aischrologia*
- **Middle Comedy [fragments]**
 - Platon and Antiphanes; c. 385-320 BC
 - Aristotle: operates through *hyponoia*
- **New Comedy**
 - Menander; c. 325-290 BC

Structure of Comedy

■ Key Features

- Parodos/Prologue
- Agon
- Parabasis

■ Problem

■ Solution: absurd and plausible

■ Celebration and Triumph

Make up of Old Comedy

- Actors and chorus.
- Music and lyrics: “A Comedy Musical”
- Real, contemporary world
- Escapist fantasy plots
- Comic:
 - Costumes and masks
 - Action
 - Puns

The *Choregoi*-vase: a scene from an unknown Old Comedy



Red-figure bell-krater: bird choristers and aulos-player (*auletes*)



Tragedy and Comedy

■ Euripides and Aristophanes' *Acharnians* 391-557:

■ Satire

- Language (Dik: *Need have I none, yet I desire to have it*)
- Personality (Dik: *Euripides! Sweet Euripides! If e'ery ou answered mortal's prayer ...*)
- Tragic Style (Dik: *all these tragic rags, sorry, 'piteous garb'*)

Tragedy and Comedy

Comic tragic language: Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 706-15:

Chorus Leader: Queen of our great design and enterprise,
tell me, why hast thou come so frowning forth?

Lysistrata: The female heart and deeds of evil women
cause me to walk despondent up and down.

Chorus Leader: What say'st thou?

Lysistrata: Truth! Truth!

Chorus Leader: What is amiss? Tell it to us who love thee.

Lysistrata: 'Tis shame to speak and grievous to be silent.

Chorus Leader: Do not, we beg, conceal the ill we suffer.

Lysistrata: We need a fuck. Such is my tale in brief.

■ CHORUS

Never since our poet presented comedies, has he praised himself upon the stage; but, having been slandered by his enemies amongst the volatile Athenians, accused of scoffing at his country and of insulting the people, to-day he wishes to reply and regain for himself the inconstant Athenians. He maintains that he has done much that is good for you; if you no longer allow yourselves to be too much hoodwinked by strangers or seduced by flattery, if in politics you are no longer the ninnies you once were, it is thanks to him. Formerly, when delegates from other cities wanted to deceive you, they had but to style you, "the people crowned with violets," and at the word "violets" you at once sat erect on the tips of your bums. Or if, to tickle your vanity, someone spoke of "rich and sleek Athens," in return for that "sleekness" he would get anything he wanted, because he spoke of you as he would have of anchovies in oil. In cautioning you against such wiles, the poet has done you great service as well as in forcing you to understand what is really the democratic principle. Thus the strangers, who came to pay their tributes, wanted to see this great poet, who had dared to speak the truth to Athens.

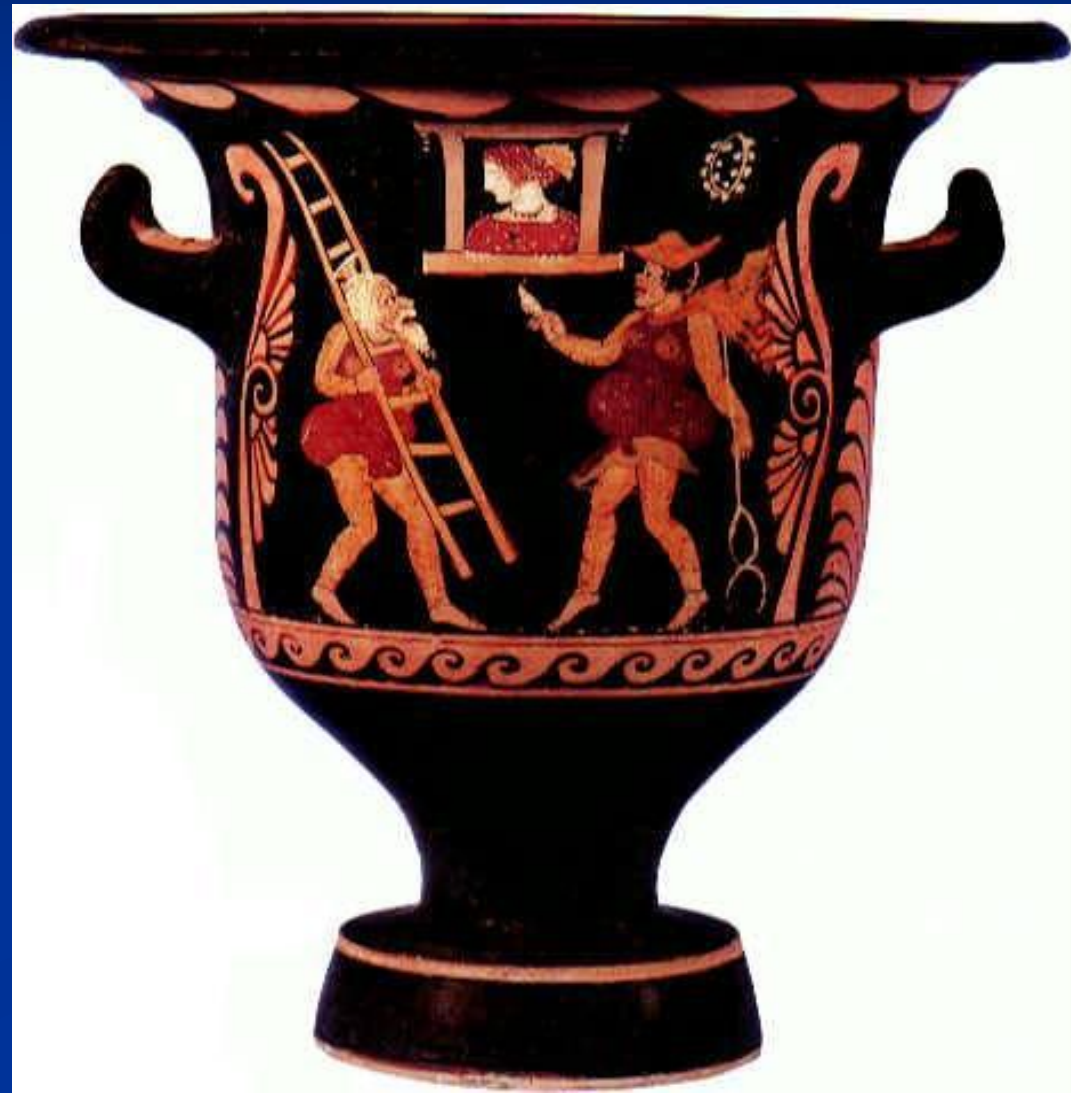
Old Comedy: Staging Politics

■ Need for Peace/Consequences of War/Peace:

- *Acharnians*: trade disrupted; corrupt ambassadors; motives for war:
- “Then how comes it that you lot are always on paid missions somewhere or other, and none of *these* people [indicating the chorus] ever is?”
- Ending : differentiation between Lamachus and Dikaiopolis
- *Lysistrata*: war about money; Athenian bellicose nature; lack of men; leaving Greece weak to Persian attack.
- Death vs. Fertility and Life

Old Comedy: Staging Politics/Life

- Attacks on Cleon
- Sophistry and Philosophy: *Clouds*
- Law courts and jury service: *Wasps*
- Men and Women: *Assembly Women*
- Wealth: *Wealth*
- Poetry: *Frogs*
- Gods: *Frogs*, *Wealth*...



Old Comedy: Polis-centred

■ Politics of Comedy:

- Promotion of unity at the end of every play.
- Festival context: unity and freedom of speech
- We are here by ourselves, the contest is that at the Lenaea, foreigners are not yet here. The tribute is not coming, nor allies from the cities. Here we are then, clean-hulled (so to speak), for I consider the metics to be the bran of our population. Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 504-8

■ Never forget: politics/reality cased in fantasy:

- Caricatures
- Utopias
- Impossible situations

Comedy, Tragedy and Satyr-Drama

■ Satyr-Drama:

- Fourth play in tetralogy at City Dionysia.
- Written by tragedian, performed by tragic actors and chorus.
- Chorus of satyrs led by Silenus(or Papasilenus), their father.



Satyr-Drama vs. Comedy

■ Shared:

- Humour and obscenity
- Aim: relaxation and entertainment
- Comic motifs: courtship, wedding, thefts, ruses, banquets, competitions
- Characters: pimps, cooks, funny and crafty slaves ...

■ Different:

- Location
- Subject choice
- Level of metatheatricity
- Nature of the humour: different levels of vulgarity and parody.

New Comedy: where's the *Polis*?

- Romantic, idealistic comedy:
 - Young men in love; mistaken identities (tokens), long-lost children, intergenerational conflict.
- Different structure
 - Five acts
- Role of chorus
 - Intermissions

Menander's *Samnian Women*

Moschion is the adopted son of Demeas, a wealthy Athenian merchant who, along with his neighbour Nikeratos, has been away for the winter. Demeas' "wife," Chrysis("Goldie") the woman from Samos, has had a child which died, while Moschion has fathered a child secretly on Nikeratos' daughter. To direct suspicion away from Moschion and his girl, Chrysis has taken the child and pretended that it is her own, as all await the return of Demeas and Nikeratos. When the two arrive, they discuss a marriage between Moschion and Nikeratos' daughter, a prospect which Moschion welcomes (perhaps too readily). In the third act the complications arise. Demeas hears Moschion's old nurse talk of Moschion as the baby's father and thinks that Moschion has seduced (or rather been seduced by) Chrysis. He drives Chrysis into the street, where she takes refuge with Nikeratos.

Moschion, informed by his father that he “knows all,” cannot understand why his father is so upset, but Nikeratos, appalled at Chrysis’ supposed infidelity, goes in to drive her out of his house, only to find his daughter nursing the child. Moschion puts Demeas in the picture, Demeas takes Chrysis back into his house, and an angry Nikeratos is placated by the prospect of a marriage-feast. In the final act a petulant Moschion threatens to run away and join the foreign legion, but is cajoled back to his own wedding.

New Comedy: Where's the *Polis*?

■ Societal Rules:

- Dependence of sons on fathers (*Samian Women*)
- Position of mistress in society (*Samian Women*)
- Laws of inheritance
- Proper behaviour of women ...

■ Politics

- Late 4th c. Athens
- Post-Alexander
- No Democracy

5th century Athenian Drama

- The principal role of Athenian theatre [of the 5th century] was “the making, unmaking and remaking of the citizen body”.

Whitmarsh, 2004, 85

Questions?



Reading for next week

- For next Thursday, please read some of:
- **Aristotle's *Poetics* (as much as possible)**
- Aristotle, *Poetics*. Tr. M. Heath, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1996 (the introduction and commentary of this edition is useful).
- Halliwell, S. *Aristotle's Poetics*. London, Duckworth: 1986 (note this is different to his translation and commentary of 1987).
- **Plato's *Symposium* (as much as possible)**