



Greek Comedy

Greek comedy: Common issues

- With time performed both at the Great Dionysia (March) and at the separate Lenaea (January) festival
 - Inclusion of comedy varies over time
- Set in an Athenian/Attic present (although how much this is featured changes over time)
 - Urban or domestic varies over time
- Use of masks (although the style changes over time)
- Written by a specific set of playwrights – there is no overlap between comedy and tragedy

Greek Comedy: Divisions

- Old Comedy: 5th and (beginnings of) 4th century
 - Aristophanes (11 plays)
- Middle Comedy: $\approx$ first 2/3s of 4th century
 - No whole surviving examples, but several names known
- New Comedy: last quarter of 4th century
 - Menander, along with several other known names without surviving texts
 - Stage buildings developed further

Old Comedy

- Differs from tragedy in material and language:
 - Less mythological, more focus on the contemporary world
 - More colloquial
- Nonetheless, Old Comedy frequently engages with tragedy as intertexts

Old Comedy – and other genres?



- A motif from tragedy (seeking sanctuary at an altar) is reused in a comedy setting
 - (Aristophanes *Thesmophoriasusae*, 689-759)
 - Stock jokes – old women prone to drink
- This particular scene continues on into New Comedy
- Made funny by costumes and change in language
- Masks: exaggerating the mouth – ‘megaphones’



Comedy masks: Old Comedy



- Masks are static – rely on audience co-operation ('make-believe')
- ...despite the occasional need to allude to contemporary people:
- “And don’t be afraid; he’s not portrayed to the life, because the property-makers were so afraid that not one of them was willing to make a likeness of him. All the same, he’ll be recognised; the audience is smart.” (On depiction of Kleon in Aristophanes, *Knights* 230-233)

Costumes



Contemporary Setting

- Instead of mytho-historical events, Old Comedy describes fictional events in contemporary Athens
 - Often making reference to contemporary characters
 - Socrates (e.g. Aristophanes' *Clouds*) and Euripides (Aristophanes' *Frogs*, *Acharnians*)
 - Focussed on public issues and on the interaction of individuals with society and generally set around public spaces rather than the home
 - Interaction with political events
 - ...but also with a strong element of slapstick humour, supported by exaggerated comical masks and fake phalluses

Divisions of Comedy?

- Patterns emerge even in Aristophanic comedy
- The hero is often a middle-aged Athenian farmer unhappy with the way his interests are overlooked in a world focussed on greater things
 - Cf. Dikaiopolis of the *Acharnians*, or Strepsiades in the *Clouds*
- Stock plots are present but balanced by detailed characterisation and specific details provided in the plot:
 - The hero conceives a fantastical scheme to right his wrongs
 - Despite encountering opposition, he is able to carry it through
 - ‘Hostile intruders’ try unsuccessfully to spoil or usurp the hero’s achievements
 - Celebration
- Often inset in the first half: address to the audience by the chorus speaking out of character

Stage use

- Both Old, (Middle?) and New Comedy rely on the physical space of the theatre
 - Height difference between orchestra, logeion and skene, cf. *Wasps* 1341-1344
- In all Greek Comedy, there is an element of swing-door comedy
 - Arrivals and departures matter, adding comic value – or drama
 - “But I’ll be off. I rather think that he [War] is just going to come out; anyway, he’s making a noise from the inside.” (*Peace*, 232f)
 - Despite this, most stage directions (often included in translations) are likely to be much later than the actual text



New Comedy

- Via Middle Comedy, a number of changes occur:
- A five-act structure is firmly established in New Comedy
- A gradual move from Athenian to 'generally Greek' characters and situations
 - How does this fit with historical developments and where theatre was performed?
Compare Classical tragedy!
- The chorus becomes gradually more separate and less involved in the action – a move to accompaniment
 - Sometimes the chorus will comment from an outsider's point of view on what is being put on stage
- Costumes seem to become less specific
- Stock characters and stock plots become more prominent

Stock characters & plots?

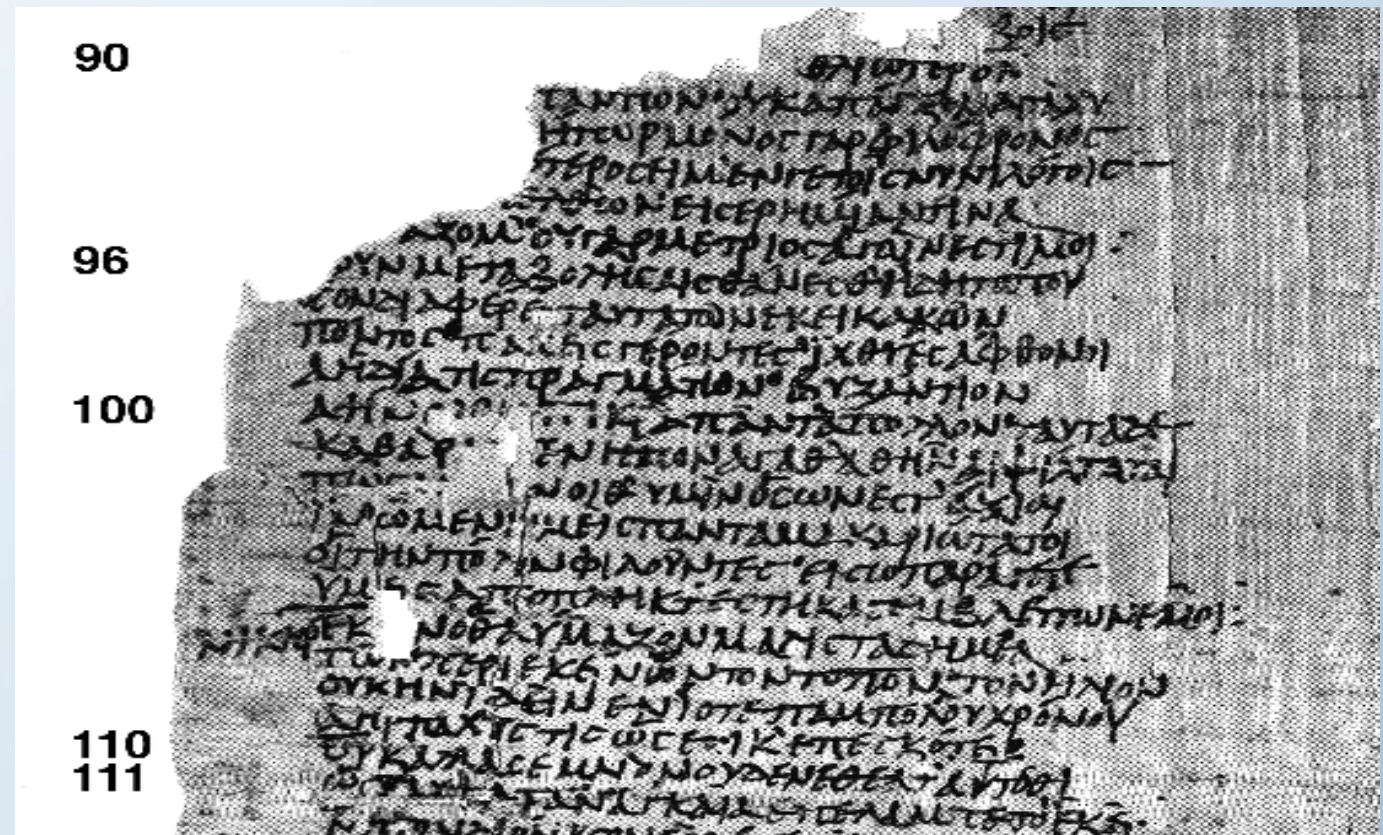
- The clever but devious slave
 - The dense soldier
 - The young love-struck son
 - The young (orphaned) soon-to-be prostitute
 - The fooled father
 - The pretentious show-off
 - The cuckolded husband
 - The stupid slave
- A young lover overcoming obstacles to gain his girl (often surprisingly revealed to be marriage material rather than a prostitute)
 - Negotiation of intergenerational conflicts and society's expectation on the individual

New Comedy as Sitcom?

- Stock characters
- Confusions that upset the lives of the main characters, but come out right in the end
- Predictability of plot
- Asides by characters
- Talking to the audience
- Domestic location

More complicated

- New Comedy continues the dialogue with tragedy
 - Remember: this is the period when tragedy is collected and edited: its authors still highly relevant and valued
- Some of the structural features of Classical tragedy are observed:
 - Recognition scenes
 - Reversal of fortune
 - Narrative speeches
 - Divine prologues





Roman Drama – and Greek?

Mosaic from Villa di Cicerone in Pompeii, depicting a group of actors on stage playing either a scene from Menander – or one from Plautus' *Mostellaria*