

Aristophanes and Athens

Sheet 1:

Satire and Seriousness

Relevant syllabi: SQA Classical Studies Advanced Higher: 'Comedy, Satire and Society'; SQA Classical Studies Higher: 'Social Aspects of the Classical World: Classical Drama'; AQA Classical Civilization AS Level: 'Aristophanes and Athens'; OCR AS and A Level: 'Comic drama in the ancient world'.

1. Key Questions

Recent exam papers have contained the following questions:

'In the passage, how seriously do you think Aristophanes mocks **both** individuals **and** Athenian citizens as a whole?' (AQA May 2012).

'Is it true to claim that Aristophanes' stature as a satirist is largely, if not wholly dependent on his opposition to the involvement of Athens in the Peloponnesian war?' (SQA May 2012)

'Are any of the three satirists whose works you have studied really trying to change the societies of which they were a part?' (SQA May 2012)

'Using the passage as a starting point, discuss how successfully Aristophanes uses debates and arguments in *Frogs* **and** *Wasps* to make serious points.' (OCR June 2011).

All of these questions ask candidates to think about whether Aristophanic comedy has a serious side. Beneath the humour, is it advocating particular political policies? Is it seeking to promote actual social and political change? Is it using 'satire' and 'mockery' to provoke serious thought or teach Athenian citizens? Classical scholars have also been asking these questions for a long time and they continue to inform current research. This sheet is designed to give you an overview of some of the arguments and evidence which researchers have recently brought to bear on the subject in the hope that they might be useful for classroom teaching and learning. More detailed analysis of passages from the plays will take place on other sheets.

2. Festivity and the 'Dionysiac'

Aristophanes' plays were staged as part of the comic competitions at the two main Athenian dramatic festivals: 1) the Great Dionysia - this took place in March and is sometimes called 'the City Dionysia; 2) the Lenaea (January/February). Both festivals took place at the Theatre of Dionysus (on the south slope of the Acropolis). Comedy was also performed at the various Rural Dionysia festivals which took place at theatres in demes throughout Attica. Although we have no firm evidence that

Aristophanes' plays were part of those smaller-scale dramatic festivals, it is quite possible that they were. It is always worth pointing out to students that the Greek word for comedy (*kōmōidia*) means 'revel song'. It is derived from two Greek words: *kōmos* denotes a festive procession full of carousing, singing, dancing and even ritualized mockery and abuse; *ōidē* means 'song'.

The importance of Dionysiac festivity for our understanding of Aristophanes is apparent in the action and imagery of the comedies themselves. For example, in *Acharnians*, Dicaeopolis marks his acquisition of a private peace treaty with Sparta by immediately celebrating his very own Rural Dionysia (*Ach.* 201-3, 241-79). The point here is that the war has displaced Dicaeopolis and his family from their home in the countryside. The fantasy of a 'private peace' leads to the fantasy of a private return home and the enjoyment of all the food, wine, revelry and rituals associated with this country festival. Indeed, one scholar has argued that Dicaeopolis' phallic procession and song at 247-79 is one of several examples where Aristophanic comedy 'internalizes' various important aspects of Dionysiac ritual: renewal, fertility, sex, obscenity, laughter and mockery, intoxication (Halliwell 2008: 206-214). For Halliwell, the scurrilous humour and bodily excesses which are the very essence of Old Comedy are rooted in the rituals and symbolism of Dionysiac worship (for more, see **section 6** below).

The sense that the period of the dramatic festivals was a special time of pleasurable release from everyday concerns is underscored by the fact that much civic, legal and political business was suspended during these festivals.¹ There is even evidence that prisoners were bailed from the city's jails so that they could take part in the Great Dionysia (Demosthenes, *Against Androtion* 68).

But the Great Dionysia was not just an occasion for the enjoyment of ritual practice and processions or the watching of tragic, comic and dithyrambic performances. Nor was it just an excuse for having a good time through the pleasures of food, wine and togetherness. The audience were also treated to public 'pre-play' ceremonies which were more sober, serious and civic in character (Goldhill 1990). These rituals were clearly designed to remind both Athenian citizens and foreign guests of Athens' military and economic power and the preparedness of its past and future citizens to die in defence of the city and its values. For example, when the Athenian empire was at its height, the tribute from its subject states was displayed in the theatre (Isocrates, *On the Peace* 82). Young men whose fathers had died fighting for the city processed in hoplite armour which had been provided for them by the state (Aeschines, *Against Ctesiphon* 153-4). Citizens who had done good works for the city and been awarded honorific crowns by the assembly had their names read out by a herald (Demosthenes, *On the Crown* 120). And one late source suggests that the ten elected generals came together to perform a libation before the plays commenced (Plutarch *Cimon* 8.7-9).

Aristophanes' *Acharnians* – which was not itself performed at the Great Dionysia – makes reference to the tribute ceremony (*Ach.* 504). This play also underlines the international and patriotic nature of Great Dionysia through its references to a previous play by Aristophanes called the *Babylonians* (*Ach.* 496-507, 628-664). We can infer from these references that the politician Cleon regarded that play as inappropriately critical of Athens in the presence of non-Athenian foreigners. Although the details are obscure and Aristophanes' characters may be exaggerating what actually happened, it looks as if Cleon laid some sort of complaint about the play and its author before the steering council of the Athenian democracy (the *Boulē*).

3. Festivity and Seriousness

Now, we could point to the more 'serious' and 'political' aspects of the Great Dionysia and Cleon's reaction to *Babylonians* in order to argue that Aristophanes' comedies were themselves felt to be a serious and political form of satire which set out to influence public opinion. But one can also argue that Cleon took *Babylonians* too seriously and that any complaints he made can't have got very far. Aristophanes certainly wasn't deterred from making fun of Cleon in subsequent years: he is a major target in *Acharnians* and *Knights* (although it is interesting that both these plays were performed at the less 'international' Lenaea). Whatever form it took, Cleon's action against Aristophanes 'cannot be adduced to establish anything about the predictable and usual impact of comedy' (Halliwell 2008: 249). It might simply be a sign that the 'even the Dionysiac freedoms of comedy, as exercised in front of visiting envoys, may come under strain' during periods of exceptional crisis' (Halliwell 2008: 249).

It is also important to see that Aristophanic comedy sets out to *invert* the 'seriousness' of the festival's civic-military elements and to *promote* its more 'exuberant' elements. For example, at *Peace* 1270ff. the idea of indoctrinating the young with patriotic-military values is exposed to the ridicule of the play's protagonist (Trygaeus) as he pursues his own agenda of 'festive self-gratification' (Halliwell 1998: xix). But it would be hard to claim that this sequence constitutes a serious argument against a very embedded Athenian ideology to the effect that citizens must sometimes fight to defend their fatherland and its interests. The play certainly celebrates the benefits of a widely hoped-for peace (and one that was imminent by March 421 when *Peace* was performed) but that does not make it a satire which pushes pacifist ideas.

Another way to think about this is to ask this: did *any* fifth-century comic dramatist write a play which positively advocated *war* and its benefits? It is hard to be one hundred percent certain because we only have small fragments of plays by Aristophanes' predecessors and rivals, not to mention lots of tantalizing play titles. But what survives certainly does not contradict the likelihood that it was *typical* of the genre of Old Comedy as a whole to depict war as inimical to the pleasures associated with festivity and normal agricultural life.

Just as figures such as Cleon and Lamachus were Aristophanes' targets due to their association with the continued prosecution of the war, it seems likely that his predecessors had analogous targets. For example, a surviving papyrus summary of Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros* which was performed in the 430s tells us that 'in the play Pericles is made fun of (*kōmōideitai*) very skilfully by innuendo as having brought war upon the Athenians' (P.Oxy. 663; Bakola 2009; Ruffell 2002). Aristophanes' *Knights* makes fun of Cratinus as an alcoholic 'has-been' whose powers and popularity are waning (526-537). But Cratinus responded the following year with a play which beat Aristophanes' *Clouds* into third place. The reality was that *both* Aristophanes *and* Cratinus were at the top of their game at this time. *And both* would have been producing comedy that was fundamentally festive and Dionysiac in the senses I have been outlining.

3. The arguments for seriousness

But why can't Aristophanic comedy be *both* an exuberant celebration of obscenity, fantasy and scurrility *and* a serious satire which opposes certain policies or cultural trends while prescribing others? Why can't it constitute a genuine and coherent

attack on the corruptions and excesses of the lawcourts and the assembly *at the same time* as being 'festive' and Dionysiac? Well, for some scholars, it *can* be both of these things, although there is little agreement on what we mean precisely when we characterize Aristophanes as 'serious' or 'political'. One eminent scholar goes so far as to argue that the Old Comedy should be thought of as an important element of the Athenians' democratic oversight of their leaders:

'The precise effects of comic ridicule and comic abuse are impossible to gauge. But surely no prominent Athenian imagined that the laughter of the *dēmos* at his expense could possibly do him any good, and the better the joke the less comfortable he would be thereafter. For this very reason the *dēmos* institutionalized the comic competitions. In return for accepting the guidance of the 'rich, the well-born, and the powerful' it provided that they be subjected to a yearly unofficial review of their conduct in general at the hands of the *dēmos*' organic intellectuals and critics, the comic poets.' (Henderson 1996: 93)

Another fine scholar, whose excellent translations are very familiar to three generations of school pupils and university students, argues that Aristophanes and his rivals did use their plays to influence public opinion and change policy and that they did so from a particular political standpoint:

'...Old Comedy typically has a right-wing political agenda. 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. 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 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), Hyperbolos (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, 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.' (Sommerstein 2002: xix-xx)

Of course, as Sommerstein concedes, Aristophanes' attempts to change opinion or policy were rarely successful: peace was not made after *Acharnians*, Cleon remained popular and influential even after *Knights* and the proposal made in the *parabasis* of *Frogs* to restore rights to those disenfranchised after 411 was only acted on several months later when Athens' predicament had become desperate. But that does not mean that Aristophanes' *intentions* were not serious. And, for Sommerstein, these right-wing, crypto-oligarchic intentions help us to understand why Athenian characters in *Acharnians* and *Lysistrata* are so keen to see things from the Spartans' point of view and to make peace with Sparta. Sparta was an oligarchic state which had tried to prevent Athens becoming a democracy in 508/7 and since

then it had lent support to Athenian conspirators who sought to overthrow the democracy. It was deeply distrusted by ordinary Athenians, even when they were not directly at war with it. And yet, until 404 and the Spartan-backed regime of the Thirty Tyrants, Aristophanes used comedy to promote his ideal vision of Athens and Sparta 'ruling Greece together' in friendly and peaceable collaboration (*Peace* 1082). For Sommerstein, this pro-Spartan and 'right-wing' stance is more successful in the theatre than in the political assembly because the cost of attending the former would have affected its social composition.²

It should be clear that Henderson and Sommerstein lend Aristophanic comedy a serious role to play and both see it as aiming to affect the opinion of the *dēmos*. But it is there that the similarities between them end. For Henderson, Aristophanic comedy is very much in the service of the mechanisms by which the poorer masses held their elite leaders to account. It is a truly democratic art form. For Sommerstein, Aristophanic comedy has a much more subversive and antagonistic relationship to democracy in its most radical, late fifth-century incarnation.

These views are interesting to explore with pupils or students because they show that there is more than one way to flesh out a view that there is something 'serious' and 'political' about Aristophanes. It is important to say *in what sense* he is serious and political and to concede that his comedies may have not had much effect on policy or the popularity of certain figures. It should also be said that there are real dangers in taking certain Aristophanic claims to seriousness at face value or out of their wider context. We will explore this issue **on sheet 4** in relation to *Acharnians*. On the other hand, there *is* some external evidence which suggests that Old Comedy had a material effect on public opinion (Sommerstein 2004). For this evidence, see **sheet 2**.

4. Ritual Laughter

We have seen how claims to Aristophanic comedy's underlying seriousness are bound up with the view that it is either a part of, or else sustains a critique of, Athens' democratic processes. But there are those who question whether Old Comedy had such a close or straightforward dependence on the democratic structure of classical Athens. They also doubt the possibility of divining particular political allegiances in Aristophanes or a general model in which Aristophanic mockery has real consequences for its targets. Instead, these scholars stress Aristophanes' artistry and comic techniques, the exuberance of his language and joke routines, the cleverness of his parodies, the topsy-turvy logic and fantasy of his plots, the discontinuous nature of his characterizations, and the exaggerated and ironic nature of its claims about the role of comedy.³

There are many different positions and emphases within this broad church. But here, I want to focus on the approach of Stephen Halliwell. There are three main strands to his argument:

1) Freedom of expression.

The evidence that the Athenian democracy censored the Old Comedians' freedom to ridicule, mock and abuse named individuals is highly suspect and cannot in any case be taken to show that there were substantial or long-term restrictions on the form and content of their attacks (Halliwell 1984 & 1991). The relevant material will be discussed and dealt with on **sheet 2**, but the upshot of this is that Old Comedy 'can say and do what cannot otherwise be said or done with impunity in public life, and

the behaviour of its audience is part of that special contract. [...] the audience of Old Comedy can laugh without danger, even when the victims of comic abuse are in reality powerful and influential.' (Halliwell 2004: 137).

2) Mock seriousness

Aristophanic Comedy in particular and Old Comedy in general contain elements of *mock-seriousness* – especially in the parabases where choruses often claims to put forward the opinions of their poet. We should not confuse the plays' 'posturing rhetoric' and 'the pretence of didactic influence' with something genuine. Old Comedy is a 'perpetual creator and fabricator of illusions about itself as about everything else' (Halliwell 1998: xlv).

3) Ritual laughter and *aischrologia*

The features outlined under 1) and 2) above are rooted in Comedy's *pre-democratic* origins and the fundamental importance of *ritualized* mockery, obscenity and laughter within Greek festivals and religion (especially those in honour of Dionysus and Demeter). A key point here is that Old Comedy and festivals in honour of Dionysus share a phenomenon known as 'aischrology' or *aischrologia* – 'shameful speech'. This covers obscene and sexualized joking and personal mockery which induces laughter.

In a modern context, we associate religious worship and ritual with an atmosphere of quiet reverence and solemnity. Modern religious occasions do foster a shared sense of joy through a schedule of song, dance, call-and-response (etc.). But they do not schedule periods where participants are to mock and rail at each other with taboo language and obscenities!

The ancient Greek context is quite different. Many festivals contained scheduled rituals of *aischrologia* and associated laughter from their participants, often in the form of stage-managed events laid on for spectators. So, for example, in Plato's *Laws*, a Spartan called Megillus praises his own city's prohibition of the sorts of scurrilous antics associated with festivals of Dionysus in Athens:

The rules about pleasures at Sparta seem to me the best in the world. For our law banished entirely from the land that institution which gives the most occasion for men to succumb to excessive pleasures, to acts of outrageous offensiveness (*hubris*) and to every kind of derangement; neither in the country nor in the cities controlled by Spartiates is a drinking-club to be seen nor any of the practices which belong to such and foster to the utmost all kinds of pleasure. Indeed there is not a man who would not punish at once and most severely any drunken reveller he chanced to meet with, nor would even the Dionysia serve as a pretext to save him—a revel such as I once upon a time witnessed "on the wagons" in your country. (Plato *Laws* 1.637a-b)

Other sources indicate that the activity taking place 'on wagons' was that of scurrilous performances of raillery, mockery of individuals and obscene joking.⁴ And it seems that these ritual performances of laughter-inducing *aischrologia* were a feature of the Lenaea festival as well as the Great Dionysia, Anthesteria and Rural Dionysia. The evidence also points to a connection between the Dionysiac festivals' phallic processions (visually obscene) and the laughter-inducing abusive performances on wagons (verbally obscene). For example, Aristotle states that comedy originated from 'improvisation' by the 'leaders of the phallic songs which remain even now a custom in many cities' (*Poetics* 1.1449a10-13).

What is clearly disapproved of as drunken, excessive and shameful behaviour by Plato's Megillus was a normal part of Dionysiac festivity. But to call it 'normal' is not to take away from the fact that these were ritual displays were of indecent, foul-mouthed and transgressive language and abuse. For Halliwell, the point is that these displays are *licensed* and a crucial component of Dionysiac ritual. Without scheduled performances of *aischrologia*, the religious rites are not being performed properly or completely. That sense that Dionysiac cult has a special licence to put on processions and performances which would otherwise be regarded as grossly shameful behaviour is well expressed in a fragment of the philosopher Heraclitus from around 500 BC (fr. 15 Diels-Kranz): 'if it were not Dionysus in whose honours they process and chant a song to genitals (*aidioa*, lit. 'parts that induce shame'), their behaviour would have been most shameful (*anaidestata*)'.

The early date of this is noteworthy: for it shows that a licence to say and do what is shameless pre-dates the official institution of comic drama at the Athenian theatrical festivals in honour of Dionysus. For Halliwell, as Old Comedy developed as a genre and got its own competitions, it was also allowed a special licence to be shameless, and that shamelessness involves the audience in the pleasure of laughter which would in other contexts be inappropriate and a cause of shame in itself (2008: 243-63). Aristophanes' *Knights* is a particularly good example of how Dionysiac *aischrologia* translates into Old Comedy: it is full of tit-for-tat exchanges of obscenity and threats of (physical and sexual) violence between the Paphlagonian slave (aka Cleon) and his sausage-selling nemesis Agoracritus.

On the one hand these exchanges are a form of 'low' humour and explicitly associated with the back-and-forth banter of prostitutes and street vendors. On the other hand, they are actually very carefully paced, well-crafted and clever (e. g. *Knights* 284-302, 367-83 and 696-7). They are full of novel coinages and imaginative vocabulary and imagery (e.g. *Knights* 284-302, 367-83, 429-481, and 694-724). To risk a modern parallel (mine not Halliwell's), one might compare the moments when fictional spin doctor Malcolm Tucker launches into his tirades of swearing and personal abuse on BBC Television's satire *The Thick of It*. We undoubtedly laugh at these because they are so crude, humiliating to their targets, taboo-breaking and inappropriate (even within what we imagine to be the bruising world of real government and politics). But it is the originality, paradoxical cleverness and creativity of his swearing, coinages and denigrating comparisons which truly delight us.

In the case of *Knights*, argues Halliwell, these passages of hilariously excessive and yet poetically original verbal and visual *aischrologia* are proof positive that Old Comedy cannot be reduced to, or rationalized as, a stable form of drama which offers serious and positive critiques which are intended, or accepted, as having any real effect or consequences in politics. The fact that *Knights* depicts the real politician Cleon as a grotesque monster who is defeated by a low-life even more despicable than he, actually gives the game away: 'its powers of demonisation are only available because they carry no answerability to scrutiny or challenge or testing in the practical political realm' (Halliwell 2008: 248).

In normal Greek life and politics, derisive laughter is shaming and requires retaliation from its targets. This is because it diminishes the honour and standing of the person on the end of it. But Old Comedy is not a part of normal life and politics: it is allowed to go to the extremes of mockery and derision of real-life figures precisely because it of its festive setting and its ritual associations. Its exaggerated and exuberant representations do not carry over into political life. This leads Halliwell to conclude that, while Old Comedy is undoubtedly an institution of

democratic culture and organization it is 'not a functioning "organ" of democracy, and certainly not in anything like the sense of the Assembly or courts' (2008: 249):

'In fact, it makes good sense to understand comedy as both *predemocratic* in inspiration (that is, in terms of its 'folk' roots, including such practices as phallic songs) and psychologically *subdemocratic* in its appeal to impulses (whether individualist, utopian, or simply anomic) that run below the level of political ideology or principle ... On this second level, democracy is assuredly *not* in control, since nothing and no one is – not even the gods. And it is here, if anywhere, that we can locate Old Comedy's 'unofficial' voice, with the scope which it gives to the pre- and subdemocratic shamelessness of unrestrained laughter.' (Halliwell 2008: 249-250)

5. Conclusion

This sheet has surveyed various recent scholarly arguments for and against Aristophanic 'seriousness'. I would stress that I have not covered all the relevant scholarship. Nor have I gone into great detail with particular plays. Further detailed evidence and relevant passages from the plays is presented on other sheets.

It may be frustrating to learn that there is little scholarly consensus on this issue. But these disagreements also show how useful this material can foster debate among pupils and students. And it forces them to back up their own opinions on the subject with textual and contextual evidence and to learn the hard art of dealing with evidence which does not appear to fit with one's theories or preconceptions.

6. References and Further Reading

(* = relatively accessible and easy. ** = University of St Andrews research which underpins this sheet)

E. Bakola (2009) *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy* (Oxford)

P. Cartledge (1990) *Aristophanes and his Theatre of the Absurd* (Bristol)*

E. Csapo and W. Slater (1995) *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Michigan)*

S. Goldhill (1991) *The Poet's Voice* (Cambridge).

S. Goldhill (1990) 'The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology', pp. 97-129 of J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin (eds.) *Nothing to do with Dionysos?* (Princeton).

S. Halliwell (1991) 'Comic Satire and Freedom of Speech in classical Athens', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 111: 48-70.**

S. Halliwell (1998) *Aristophanes Birds and Other Plays* (Oxford) */**

S. Halliwell (2004) 'Aischrology, Shame, and Comedy', pp. 115-144 in: *Freedom of Speech in Classical Antiquity*. Rosen, R. & Sluiter, I. (eds) (Leiden) **

S. Halliwell (2008) *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge) **

S. Halliwell (2013) 'Laughter' in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy*. Revermann, M. (ed.). (Cambridge). */**

M. Heath (1987) *Political Comedy in Aristophanes* (Göttingen).

J. Henderson (1996) 'The Demos and Comic Competition', pp 65-97 in E. Segal *Oxford Readings in Aristophanes* (Oxford).*

D. M. MacDowell (1995) *Aristophanes and Athens: an introduction to the plays* (Oxford).*

I, Ruffell (2002) 'A total write-off. Aristophanes, Cratinus and the rhetoric of comic competition', *Classical Quarterly* 52.1: 138-63.

M. Silk (2000) *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (Oxford).

A. Sommerstein (2002) *Aristophanes. Lysistrata and Other Plays*. (London).*

G. van Steen (2007) 'Politics and Aristophanes: watchword 'Caution!', pp.108-123 in M. McDonald and J. Michael Walton (eds.) *The Cambridge companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*.*

¹ Aeschines *Against Ctesiphon* 66-7 suggests that the assembly did not usually meet during the Great Dionysia. But inscriptions do contradict this. Demosthenes *Against Meidias* 10 suggests there were restrictions on making arrests during the Dionysia and Lenaia.

² On the vexed question of the social composition of the audience and the equally difficult question of when the state subsidy (the *theorikon*) for ticket-buying first started, see the discussion and key sources in Csapo and Slater 1995: 286-305.

³ See (e.g.): Heath 1987; Goldhill 1991; Halliwell 1998; Silk 2000.

⁴ See (e.g) Demosthenes *On the Crown* 122-4; Menander *Perinthia* fragment 8 (Sandbach); Philemon fr. 44. All the evidence is at Halliwell 2008: 166-206.