

Aristophanes: Entertainment of the Ancient World

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When imagining the ancient city of Athens, intriguing philosophy, beautiful art, and advancement in mathematics and science may be brought to mind. However, one man, Aristophanes, seemed to be the complete opposite of the portrayed picture of the Athenian people. He was a comedian, and a very unrefined one. His vulgar, sexual, uncouth plays were extremely popular, viewed by citizens of all statuses. The Ancient Greeks, so well known for laying the intellectual foundation of the Western world, enjoyed Aristophanes' inappropriate and crude humor so much because his comedy was an entertaining, relatable outlet for their frustrations at the time and provided satirical advice on current problems with society for all.

A major component in the immense appeal of Aristophanes theater was the fact it was not a high brow occasion. The language was simple, and not used superfluously. Its function was to propel the plot of the comedy forward and to tell an easily digestible story. Dialogue was unchallenging and understandable for everyone in the audience, even those that were poorly educated. Jokes were unexpected, raw, and highly amusing, featuring double entendre, phallic symbols, and a strong use of slapstick comedy. Nobody was exempt from Aristophanes' critique, even the gods, demonstrating an unimpeded expression of ideas without repercussions. Edith Hall (2015, p.10-12) sums up the bawdy works of the playwright well: "It did not glamorise long-dead mythical heroes...it insulted rulers and well-known citizens. Its performers dressed in bizarre costumes. They talked freely about sleaze, corruption and personal toilet habits." The unpretentiousness of Aristophanes' theater drew in crowds of all types of people, but the

underlying wit and satire kept them in their seats. The playwright turned complex ideas into a straightforward narrative that all could comprehend.

Satire is a significant element of the ancient playwright's works, and was possibly the main draw for the Athenian audiences. Exaggeration was used to demonstrate issues with the political and social atmosphere at the time. Opponents of the story's hero are usually "individuals who represent the machinery of social authority and discipline" and are displayed as "laughable, grotesque, and unsympathetic, "adding comedy to figures like political leaders, officials, and government ambassadors (Sutton, 1980, p. 35). Political jokes were the norm, and the crowd loved to partake in the comedy because often the butt of the joke - the government leaders - were sitting in the stands watching.

The presence of political humor is a cornerstone for Aristophanes' comedy. It was essential to the democratic system that leaders could be openly criticized, and the playwright took full advantage of this freedom of speech. Hall (2015, p. 12) comments, "The relationship of comedy to political power – the question of who gets to laugh publicly at whom. A good test of any society is its ability to tolerate unfettered freedom of comic expression." The presence of satire was a result of the strength of Athens ability to see their own faults. The audience enjoyed seeing any dishonest government figure be ridiculed publicly. In turn, it is possible that Aristophanes humiliating portrayal of political members may have encouraged them to act so the public favors them. Aristophanes went to court several times to defend himself after angry leaders watched an unfavorable portrayal of themselves.

Aristophanes strove to make the performance on stage relatable to his vast audience. His comedies mostly feature an average person that gets swept up in some kind of extravagant issue. The situations, though mythical and extreme, still remained relatable - heroes went up against

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everyday problems and dealt with current events like corrupt leaders and the “trivial” pursuit of philosophy. Sutton (1980, p.84-85) states, “In our own lives, we are oppressed and intimidated by the real-life equivalents of the comic hero’s antagonists...(the hero is) not markedly different than the average theatergoer.” Viewers were able to project themselves onto the characters and make their struggles their own, enhancing not only the humor, but strengthening the underlying themes of the plays. Watching a hero overcome a difficulty encouraged the audience to do the same. Whether they were faced with corrupt politicians, a seemingly unwinnable war, or something as outlandish as a journey to the underworld, Aristophanes’ protagonists tend to prevail, which in turn empowers the crowd to stand against their own issues.

Parody is another element utilized throughout Aristophanes’ writings. Current events were portrayed in elaborate, fantastical ways that the viewers could easily relate to. Imitation and personal ridicule were often present. McLeish (1980, p. 61) accurately notes why this method was so successful with the statement “audiences approach what is new with caution...the comedian finds favour more by mocking new ideas than by advocating them.” People are often portrayed in one dimensional stereotypes. Ancient Greeks enjoyed the upbeat lightheartedness and loved recognizing the imitation of others within the production.

The use of extended metaphors was prevalent throughout all of Aristophanes’ plays. At some point, “often for long stretches of dialogue, political and satirical comments are made which are quite external to the play” (McLeish, 1980, p.91). This is where the playwright delivers advice about current events through the mouths of his characters. The words may stray from the plotline to address the audience, and tell them a message about particular issues.

Lysistrata, one of Aristophanes most famous works, tells the story of a sex strike in Athens to bring an end to a war. When the play made its first premiere in 411 BCE, the city was

at war with Sparta, and the battle was not going smoothly. Peace was short lived and instantly followed by fighting and revolution throughout Greece and the Aegean (MacDowell, 1995).

In the end, the message of *Lysistrata*, the meaning lying underneath the sexual innuendo and vulgarity, was one of peace. The comedic image of abstinence to stop violence is a ridiculous notion, but that is not that point of the play - that is the vessel for advice about what could actually feasibly be done by citizens to end the current war. It is funny, but also serious. *Lysistrata* speaks at length about how war is like working with wool. The action and comedy of the play briefly stops to make valid remarks about preventing war: “get rid of those who can hurt, sort out the burrs and the thistles...aliens, residents, treat them the same way...you’ll make one good bolt of cloth out of the entire lot” (MacDowell 1995, p.229-230). This message about purging the threats and treating foreigners as equals instead of being discriminatory does not fit in with the flow of the comedy - these are the words of Aristophanes, not *Lysistrata*. He also invites the men of the audience to take a moment and think of war from a woman’s standpoint when *Lysistrata* states, “It is our sons who go off to battle...we are left alone at home while off our husbands go” (Aristophanes, 1983, p.194-195). These are the moments the audience truly came for - the serious breaks that advise.

A second well-known play is *The Clouds*, a work that lampoons the study of philosophy and rhetoric. The comedy utilized the current political situation, and the viewers knowledge of important figures in educational advancement, mostly Socrates.

The goal of this play was to make people skeptical. Aristophanes used character’s arguments to demonstrate that wrong points could seem correct due to wording. He sent a warning with this play to this viewer to be careful what they believe regarding philosophy. Author MacDowell (1995, p. 142) says Aristophanes did not “expect the audience to be

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convinced, but to laugh, and at the same time to realize” and be wary of arguments based on sounding smart instead of actually communicating ideas.

Socrates was made the figurehead for most of the theories of others at the time - almost no philosophers or scientists are mentioned by name except for him. The picture of him is not entirely false, but is definitely inflated and distorted for the purpose of entertainment and is a bit unfair and flawed. The effect of the play was actually so strong in casting a negative light onto him that the real Socrates later said in a speech defending himself against the death sentence that “his reputation had been damaged by comic caricatures of himself as a crazy natural scientist” (Hall, 2015, p.14). So many people went to Aristophanes plays to hear his underlying messages that it may have actually had a hand in the death of Socrates due to fear mongering about the new scientific method and rhetoric.

Comedy was an important outlet for the frustrations people had. Unrealistic but enjoyable scenes like women winning a war with a sex-strike and enrolling in a school for bums were a kind of fantasy that allowed escapism while still connecting to current events. The valid points made throughout the productions were underneath shocking, inappropriate comedy that could either be taken at face value for entertainment, or could provide insightful arguments about complex topics like war, corruption, education, and society. Laughter is the best medicine, and this medicine helped aid the Ancient Greeks through their problems.

At first it may seem surprising that the intellectuals of Greece were so incredibly enamored with a playwright that on the surface seems to be crude and sleazy. However, the fun and fantasy allowed audiences of all genders, statuses, and riches to question current events and release frustration in the positive form of laughter. Aristophanes was enjoyed because through

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his satirical works he was able to provide quality advice without sacrificing the aspect of entertainment.

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