



THE BIRDS AND OTHER PLAYS

ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

ARISTOPHANES was born, probably in Athens, c. 448–445 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 prosecuted 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 nineteen or twenty, 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

The Birds and other plays

The Knights • Peace • Wealth The Assemblywomen

Translated with Introductory matter by

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and

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6

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CONTENTS

About the Author (*Alan H. Sommerstein*)

Aristophanes in Antiquity (*Alan H. Sommerstein*)

Aristophanes, Comedian and Poet (*David Barrett*)

THE KNIGHTS (*translated by Alan H. Sommerstein*)

PEACE (*translated by Alan H. Sommerstein*)

THE BIRDS (*translated by David Barrett*)

THE ASSEMBLYWOMEN (*translated by David Barrett*)

WEALTH (*translated by Alan H. Sommerstein*)

Notes

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About the Author

Aristophanes was active as a writer of comedies at Athens from 427 to about 386 B.C.; for of his plays were known to ancient scholars, and eleven of these have come down to us: *The Acharnians* (425), *The Knights* (424), *The Clouds* (a partly revised version of a play produced in 423), *The Wasps* (422), *Peace* (421), *The Birds* (414), *Lysistrata* and *The Poet and the Women* (*Thesmophoriazusae*) (411), *The Frogs* (405), *The Assemblywomen* (*Ecclesiazusae*) (probably 391), and *Wealth* (*Plutus*) (388).

We know very little of the man except through his work. He does not seem to have taken any direct part in politics: he was probably one of the 500 Councillors for a year in the 390s, but this was an office it was hard to avoid. His comedies, though, were highly political, and a comedy was then expected to be, and twice landed him in court (see the Introduction to *The Knights*). From Plato's *Symposium*, written not long after Aristophanes' death, we get an impression of him as a pleasure-loving man, frivolous on the surface but serious underneath, a little like some of his heroes.

Comedies were produced once only, competitively, at two annual festivals, before an open-air audience of some 14,000 (of all ages, but predominantly male); thereafter (apart from occasional re-productions at theatres in outlying parts of Attica) they existed only as written texts. The stage directions in this translation are our own; we hope they are a fair approximation to Aristophanes' or his producer's instructions to actors and chorus, but in many cases anything like certainty is impossible.

With trivial exceptions, Aristophanes' comedies are written wholly in verse. This is of three main types: the six-foot iambic metre of ordinary spoken dialogue; various eight-foot metres (iambic, trochaic, anapaestic), delivered in a more strictly rhythmical manner with musical accompaniment, which predominate in two types of scene of capital importance in Aristophanic drama – the scene of physical and/or verbal conflict (*agon*) in which the main issue of the play is often decided, and the address by the chorus to the audience (*parabasis*) and sung lyrics, performed (with dancing) mainly by the chorus but also by some of the principals. We have followed the pattern of our previous translations, presenting the spoken scenes as prose, the lyrics generally as verse (and in production they certainly ought to be sung), and the 'recitative' passages of the original as one or the other depending on the character of the scene.

Aristophanes in Antiquity

In Aristophanes' time literary criticism was in its infancy; indeed, his own *Frogs* ranks among its earliest monuments. It is not therefore surprising that we have very little in the way of contemporary critical appraisal of Aristophanes, most of what usually passes under that name being either the small change of comic insult, or later romance about Plato.

From an older contemporary of Aristophanes, the comic poet Cratinus (c. 490–c. 420 B.C.) we have one precious word. Cratinus characterized a certain type of poet as 'a hair-splitting master of niceties, a Euripidaristophanist'. In other words, he asserted that Aristophanes resembled Euripides in his concern for verbal precision and dexterity (*dexiotēs*, Aristophanes always a term of praise) in preference to the bolder, rougher strokes typical of those who, like Cratinus himself, had grown up under the spell of Aeschylus. Aristophanes himself was quite aware of this, but he drew a sharp distinction between Euripidean technique and Euripidean thought; or, as he put it in his lost play *The Pitch-Grabbers* (*Skeniazomenoi*, *Katalamban-ousai*) with his unmatched *chutzpah*,

I use the rounded polish of his style,

But make my heroes' minds somewhat less... vulgar.

The only other judgement on Aristophanes we have from a person who had seen his work performed is that of Plato (427–347 B.C.). Plato could not help being somewhat equivocal. Socrates' trial and condemnation had, as he believed, been in part due to the misleading picture of Socrates' activities and interests that had gained currency as a result of the portrayals of him in comedy, above all in *The Clouds*. (Before dismissing this as an absurd overrating of the power of comedy to influence popular views, consider what in our time might be the effect of a series of satirical shows on television, regularly attacking the same person, if that person, like Socrates, did not regard himself as in public life and never in a quarter of a century troubled to respond to the attacks.) On the other hand, as the *Symposium* makes clear, Plato recognized and admired Aristophanes' powers of imagination and fantasy and even felt a kinship between the comedian's mind and his own; for the myth he makes Aristophanes relate on the origin of sexual love is not unlike the myths with which Plato himself regularly crowns the dialogues of his middle period (*Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*), which called for the same powers, applied (as Plato would claim) to a higher end.

What he objected to was the way in which, quite generally, comedy (at least Old Comedy) held everyone and everything up to ridicule – and in particular, philosophers and philosophers. Even the complaint about *The Clouds* in Plato's *Apology* is coupled with the observation that the allegations there made are 'regularly used against all philosophers'.

I have left out of account the epitaph on Aristophanes supposed to have been composed by Plato:

The Graces sought to occupy a shrine that ne'er would cease:

They found that shrine within the soul of Aristophanes,

because I find it very difficult to believe that Plato could have written it. The author of the epitaph used the word *temenos* to mean 'temple' in Plato's time it meant 'area of ground which was sacred'. The syntax is also clumsier than I would have expected from Plato. And as I have already mentioned, there was much late romancing about the relationships between Socrates, Plato and Aristophanes.

Old Comedy quickly went out of fashion. Fifth-century tragedies were regularly revived from 386 onwards at the City Dionysia (quite apart from the many performances known to have taken place in other parts of Attica), but never fifth-century comedies. And already for Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) Old Comedy was so antiquated that he can define comedy in a way that altogether excludes it. Part of the definition of poetry given in the *Poetics*, which distinguishes it from history, is that poetry deals with universal rather than individual matters. 'This is already clear,' he goes on, 'from a consideration of comedy; for the poets construct their plot from probable events and assign random names to their characters, and unlike the writers of invective they do not discuss particular individuals.' Thus on this definition Old Comedy is not only not comedy but not even poetry!

However, the plays of Aristophanes (and those of the other Old Comedians) continued to circulate as literary texts, though with no stage directions and inadequate indication of who was speaking they must often have been extraordinarily hard to understand; and eventually thirty-nine plays* found their way to the great library of Alexandria, where during the third, second and first centuries B.C. their texts were as far as possible purged of the corruptions that had arisen in a century of uncontrolled copying, and extensive commentaries were written. All this, however – or at least what we can trace of it – was scholarship rather than criticism.

Alexandrian scholarship established the viewpoint that the outstanding representatives of

Old Comedy were Aristophanes, Cratinus and Eupolis, though they never attained the same exclusive degree of supremacy as the tragic trinity of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; and Aristophanes is universally regarded as the greatest of the three. But most ancient discussions of his work runs in predictable channels: the insolence and indecency of his satire, the turpitude of his attack on Socrates... in short, Aristophanes is discussed in entire isolation from the occasions and the society for which he wrote, and with no reference to literary or dramatic criteria. There are exceptions, to which we will come.

One of these exceptions is Horace (65–8 B.C.), who is particularly interested in Old Comedy because he regards it (somewhat inaccurately) as the remote ancestor of one of his own genres, the chatty verse-essays known as *saturae* or satires (Horace himself preferred the term *sermones* or chats). As a poet himself he is able to appreciate Aristophanes' ability in the manipulation of language and style. The fullest treatment is in the concluding (tenth) satire of his first book, which is a reply to criticisms of Horace's views on satire and particularly on his great Roman predecessor Lucilius:

Yes, I did say that Lucilius' verse is incompetently
composed. Who is so besotted an admirer of Lucilius
as not to admit this? But I also, and on the same page,
praised him for vigorously massaging the City with his wit.
In conceding the latter, though, I would not withdraw the former: if I did,
I might just as well praise the poetic beauty of Laberius' variety shows.
It is therefore not enough to make one's audience open-mouthed
with laughter (not that that isn't desirable too);
brevity is needed, so that the thought runs smoothly and is not
obstructed by words that are a burden on tired ears;
and language now grave, now gay,
playing the part now of an orator and poet,
now of a man of culture who spares or spends
his strength with due deliberation. Laughter is in general
stronger and better at cutting down great objects than is acidity.
Those men by whom Old Comedy was written

were strong in this, and in this should be imitated: they have never been

read by that beauty-king Hermogenes, nor by that ape-critic

whose 'learning' consists only in being able to sing

(sorry, recite) the works of Calvus and Catullus.

Aristophanes would have agreed with much of that. Perhaps, after *The Knights* had entirely failed to affect the political standing of Cleon, he might have agreed with the remark about laughter being better than acidity. And it is certainly the case that pungent brevity and enormous variety of language are among the salient characteristics of Old Comedy, particularly in comparison with New.

Horace discusses Old Comedy briefly in two other passages (*Serm.* i. 4,1-5, *Ars Poetica* 28-4), but mainly in reference to the freedom with which the Old Comedians assailed everything and everyone they considered dangerous. He even asserts that the disappearance of Old Comedy is to be explained by an alleged law which by abolishing this freedom deprived the genre of its *raison d'être*. (In point of fact, the evidence is that no such law or decree was more than temporarily effective.)

Another rare gem of insight comes in a brief reference by the unknown author (first century A.D.?) of the treatise *On the Sublime*, whom we habitually if incorrectly call Longinus. For him Aristophanes, with Euripides and the historian Philistus of Syracuse, was a prime example of the 'many poets and prose writers who have not sublimity by nature, but may even be entirely without stature, and use for the most part common, familiar, unevocative words, [but] nevertheless through the mere matching and combination of these words clothe their work with dignity, class and elevation'.

For a thoroughly negative judgement on Aristophanes we may turn to Plutarch (c. 45 – 125 A.D.), into whose literary categories Old Comedy simply did not fit. I translate the relevant passages from his *Comparison of Aristophanes and Menander*:

In Aristophanes there is vulgar diction, vulgar action and general lack of culture. Ordinary, uneducated people are attracted by Aristophanes' language, but the educated man will wince. I am thinking of antitheses, jingles and puns... Aristophanes uses them with frequency and inappropriateness which are nauseating. The sort of thing that is usually praised is:

(1) He gave the Treasurers a dip that day –

Not *Treasurers*, but *Treacherous*, I should say.

(2) Nor'-easterly gale getting up, blowing straight from Informer-land!

(3) Let's see you launch
Punishing punches at his paunch!

(4) I'm laughing so much, before I know where I am I'll be in
Giggleswick!

(5) Where shall I chuck you, you rotten pot, when you've given me
the chuck?*

(6) He's that wild, the way he treats us. Comes of being brought up
on the wild-vegetable stall, I suppose.

(7) Don't say the moths have eaten my crests!

(8) Now bring the circle of my Gorgon shield.
– Now bring the circle of a cheesy cake.†

And there are many others of the same kind. His use of words combines the tragic and the comic, the grandiose and the prosaic, the obscure and the commonplace, bombast and elevation, verbal diarrhoea and plain sickening rubbish. But despite all these variations and incongruities, he does not even allot to each style its suitable and appropriate place, such as dignity to a king, ingenuity to an orator, simplicity to a woman, prosiness to a man of the people, vulgarity to a layabout; rather he distributes to his characters, as if by lot, whatever words happen to be lying around, and one cannot tell if the person speaking is supposed to be son or father, rustic or god, hag or hero...

Some dramatists write for the vulgar mob, others for the few, and it is not easy to say which of all of them had the ability to adapt himself to both. Aristophanes, however, neither pleasing to the many nor tolerable to the discerning; his poetry is like superannuated *cocotte* pretending to be a respectable married woman...

Aristophanes' wit is briny and bitter, rough and sharp, and apt to wound and to bite. No wonder do I know where to find his much-discussed 'dexterity' in language or characterization. Where even what he imitates loses by the portrayal. Roguery is not a civilized prank but really malicious; rusticity is not simple but stupid; jokes are not playful but absurd, and joyous love is replaced by sheer unbridled lust. The fellow seems not to have written for respectable

people at all; rather his indecent and licentious scenes were designed for the immoral spectator, and his stinging libels for those possessed by the sin of malicious envy.

It will be seen that Plutarch's sense of outrage has not been restrained within the bounds of consistency; at the beginning and end Aristophanes is a poet of the vulgar to be abhorred by the respectable, in the middle he is intolerable even to the vulgar. Apart from this point Aristophanes would probably have accepted most of Plutarch's remarks (off the record) with the comment that in the intervening five centuries people must have forgotten how to laugh.

But he would wryly have had to admit at least the last count in the briefer indictment presented by one Diogenianus in Plutarch's dialogue 'What should one listen to over dinner' (Book VII, No. 8 of his *Dinner-table Discussions*):

As for comedy, the Old variety is unsuitable as an accompaniment to drinking, because it is so uneven. The *parabasis*, as it is called, has a seriousness and outspokenness that makes it too potent and intense; while the licence given to jesting and buffoonery is so open as to be nauseating and full of words and expressions of shameless obscenity. What is more, just as at the banquets of great men every guest has his personal wine waiter, so we would each need our personal commentator to explain all the allusions to individuals, like the identity of Laespodias in Eupolis' play, or Cinesias in Plato's,^{*} or Lampon in Cratinus', or anyone else that was mentioned, and either we'd have to turn our dining-room into a classroom or all the jokes would fly meaninglessly and unintelligibly past us.

For all this, Aristophanes (and indeed some of the other Old Comedians) went on being read. Some of the reasons may be gathered from the brief but warm remarks of Quintilian (c. 38 – c. 100 A.D.), who is discussing, in *The Orator's Training* (10. 1.65–6), the utility, in the major field of upper-class education in the imperial age, of the study of various types of literature:

Old Comedy, almost alone, retains the pristine charm of the Attic dialect, and is also distinguished by a most eloquent freedom of expression. If it is at its best in the reprobation of vice, it nevertheless has great power in other respects also. It possesses grandeur, elegance and attractiveness, and perhaps no kind of poetry, after Homer (who like Achilles must always be excepted from generalizations of this kind^{*}), is either more similar to oratory or more suitable for the training of an orator. There are numerous authors, of whom Aristophanes, Eupolis and Cratinus are the most outstanding.

A lucky break for Aristophanes was the revival in the second century, both in Greek and

Roman literary circles, of interest in the archaic and out-of-the-way. It became fashionable to write in the long-dead dialect and style of the great Athenian writers of the fifth and fourth century B.C.; and among these it was recognized that the comic poets, particularly Aristophanes, and the orators, particularly Lysias, represented that dialect and style in its purest form. So Aristophanes became a school text in the language class as well as the oratorical class, and from this time an upsurge of interest in him can be deduced from the preserved ancient manuscripts (customarily but rather inaccurately called papyri); for Aristophanes these are rare before the second century A.D. and rise to their highest frequency in the fifth, whereas papyri of Menander, for example, are most frequent in the third century and fall off fairly rapidly thereafter, suggesting that Menander (who lived at a time when Attic was already losing some of its distinctive features, and whose style is rich in naturalness but poor in vigour and elevation) was less used in the schools. It was during this long period that interest in Aristophanes gradually concentrated upon the eleven plays we now possess, and when in the ninth century the scholars of Constantinople, eager to salvage what they could of ancient literature after two centuries during which it had been largely neglected, hunted out the surviving Aristophanic manuscripts, these eleven were all that they contained.

Near the beginning of the Attic revival, to which, in all probability, we owe the fact that we can read Aristophanes today, stands the prose satirist Lucian (c. 120 – c. 190 A.D.). Discussion of Lucian's debt to Old Comedy is not made easier by the fact that he very rarely makes explicit reference to it, and then usually in connection with the treatment of Socrates in *The Clouds*. But time and again he can be detected using a familiar Aristophanic turn of phrase, so much so that it is occasionally possible to use him as evidence for correcting the text of Aristophanes;^{*} and he also pays Aristophanes the compliment of imitation. It will be fitting to conclude this survey with a specimen. A discussion is being held in heaven on what to do about the misanthropic Athenian, Timon, and it is decided to send him Wealth. Wealth himself objects. Asked why by Zeus, he replies:

Because Timon used to assault me and dig me out of the ground and divide me into little pieces, and me an old family friend of his! He practically drove me out of his house with a pitchfork, as if I'd caught fire in his hands. Am I to go back to him to be handed over to parasites and toadies and women of pleasure? Please, Zeus, send me to someone who will appreciate the gift and treat me well, do me honour and long for me. Let these cormorants live with Poverty; they prefer her to us. Let them get a leather smock and a fork from her

and enjoy making their four obols, poor things, if they're careless enough to throw away
gift of sixty thousand drachmas.

Zeus assures him that Timon is now quite a changed person, and continues:

But really, Wealth, you never seem to be satisfied! You object to Timon because he opened
his doors and let you free to wander where you would instead of jealously shutting you up.
At one time you'd say just the opposite. You said the rich shut you up with keys and bolts and
seals so you never got a peep at the light. At least that's what you complained about to me.
You said the darkness was suffocating you. And you looked pale and careworn, with your
fingers bent from long years of counting on them, and you always said you'd run away if you
got half a chance. And you thought the whole thing was an absolute scandal, that you should
have to live a celibate life in a bronze or iron chamber, like my old flame Danae, under two
appallingly strict tutors called Interest and Bookkeeping. Why, you said your jailers were
acting quite incredibly, because they loved you to distraction but didn't dare enjoy you,
though you were in their power and they could indulge themselves with impunity; instead
they stood wakeful guard, staring at seal and bolt, thinking apparently that the only real
enjoyment was not to enjoy you themselves but to ensure that nobody else did, dog-in-the-
manger-fashion. And you laughed at them, pinching and scraping, keeping watch over you
and ending up jealous of themselves, never thinking that some contemptible slave or fettered
steward would sneak in and play merry hell with you, leaving his miserable and unloved
master to burn the midnight oil (feeble little lamp but thirsty little wick) over his compound
interest tables.

Wealth defends himself against the charge of inconsistency by appealing to the doctrine of
the golden mean:

I mean, Zeus, look at it this way, in Zeus's name! If someone marries an attractive young
woman and then shows no possessiveness or jealousy at all, but on the contrary lets her roam
where she will night and day and go with anyone who takes a fancy to her, or to be more
precise takes her round himself to commit adultery, opening doors and inviting all comers
like a pimp, would you say that he loved her? I'm sure *you* wouldn't, Zeus, with your vast
experience of love. On the other hand, if someone legally takes a free woman into his house
'legitimate children for the procreation of', a beautiful virgin in her prime, and then doesn't
touch her himself and won't let anyone else even look at her, but locks her up, sterile and

barren, like a single girl, and all the time says he's in love with her, and his pale skin, wasted flesh and sunken eyes prove he's telling the truth – wouldn't you say he was insane? When he ought to be reproducing himself and enjoying his marital rights, he lets this radiant, lovely girl wither all her days like a priestess of Demeter Thesmophoros! And that's what I object to. One lot of people care so little for me that they kick me around, gulp me down and drain me to the dregs, while another lot put me in fetters like a branded runaway.

But on receiving further assurances, Wealth agrees to go with Hermes to enrich Timon ('O Hermes,' adds Zeus, 'on your way back fetch a Cyclops or two from Etna; I need my thunderbolt sharpening'). They descend to Attica, Wealth on his way explaining some of his habits to Hermes; but as they reach Timon's fields, Hermes sees Poverty and Labour there along with Endurance, Wisdom, Courage and 'all that crowd that march under the banner of Hunger'. Wealth displays his proverbial cowardice (cf. *Wealth*, p. 278), but Hermes with stiff upper lip replies 'We must do the will of Zeus.' Now, however, Poverty intervenes:

POVERTY: Where are you leading that god by the hand, noble Slayer of Argus?

HERMES: We have been sent by Zeus to Timon there.

POVERTY: Wealth sent to Timon! After the state I found him in when I took him over from Luxury! I handed him over to my friends here, Wisdom and Labour, and made him an upright and worthy man. Do you think that Poverty is so contemptible, or that she takes injustice lying down? To deprive me of my sole possession, which I have toiled and toiled to bring to virtue, so that Wealth can take him over, entrust him to Arrogance and Conceit, and make him soft, ignoble and stupid as before, preparatory to returning him to me no better than a rag!

HERMES [*doggedly*]: That is Zeus's decision.

POVERTY: Then I'm off. Come on, Labour, Wisdom and the rest of you, follow me. He'll know soon enough what a treasure he's abandoned, a good fellow-labourer and a teacher of virtue, with whom he could lead a healthy life in body and mind, the life of a man, thinking of himself, and regarding all these superfluities – for that is what they are – as having nothing to do with him. [*Exit*]

Hermes and Wealth approach Timon and persuade him, rather against his will, to accept the presence in his soil of Wealth's servant Treasure. And before long we find ourselves

transferred from *Wealth* to *The Birds*, as a variety of parasites swoop on the newly-enriched Timon like vultures (his word) and are driven off with blows. One of these is a politician, Demeas, for whom Timon had once paid a fine of 96,000 drachmas to secure his release from prison, but who more recently, when Timon, now a poor man, applied to him for the statutory allowance to enable him to attend the state festivals, said he was not aware that Timon was a citizen. Demeas enters, holding an official document.

DEMEAS: Greetings, Timon, great benefactor of your family, stay of Athens, bulwark of Hellas. The assembled People and both the Councils have long been awaiting you. But first hear the decree which I have carried on your behalf. ‘Whereas Timon, son of Echekratides, of Collytus, a man not only virtuous but wise beyond all other Greeks, has continually acted to the utmost for the welfare of the City and has won the boxing, wrestling and foot-race at Olympia on the same day and has also won the major chariot-race and the chariot-and-pair race for two-year-olds—’

TIMON: But I’ve never even *seen* the Olympics.

DEMEAS: So what? You will one day. It’s as well to include a lot of that kind of thing. ‘And fought heroically for the City last year at Acharnae, cutting two Spartan divisions to pieces—’

TIMON: What do you mean? I’m not even on the Army list; I can’t afford the equipment.

DEMEAS: You’re very modest, but we would be most ungrateful if we forgot your services. ‘And whereas the said Timon has greatly benefited the City by the resolutions he has proposed, the advice he has given, and his service as General: Be it therefore resolved by the Council and the People and the High Court tribe by tribe and by all and singular the Demes of this state, That a golden statue of the said Timon be erected next to Athena on the Acropolis, having a thunderbolt in his right hand and rays of glory over his head: And that he be crowned with seven golden crowns, and that the crowns be proclaimed today at the Dionysia when the new tragedies are performed (for he is to be responsible for holding the Dionysia today). Proposed by the orator Demeas, being the closest kinsman and disciple of the said Timon, who is himself outstanding in oratory and in every other art to which he cares to apply himself,’ That’s the decree. I also wanted to bring you my son; I’ve named him Timon after you.

TIMON: But you’re not even married – not that I’ve heard of anyway.

DEMBAS: I shall marry next year, God willing, and have a child, and I now in advance name the child Timon, since it will of course be a boy.

TIMON [*striking him*]: *New* are you still so keen on getting married?

DEMEAS: Help! What's the idea? Are you attempting to set up a dictatorship, striking free citizens, and that when you are neither properly free nor a citizen? I will see that you will quickly pay the penalty for your crimes, in particular for the offence of setting fire to the Acropolis!

TIMON: There hasn't *been* a fire on the Acropolis, you villainous trumper-up!

DEMEAS: Do you not owe your wealth to the burglary of Athena's Sacred Treasury?

TIMON: There's been no burglary there; you'll have to think of a better one than that.

DEMEAS: I don't care if you've burgled it already or you'll burgle it later – you've got the money from it.

TIMON [*striking him again*]: Then take that!

DEMBAS: Ooooh, my back!

TIMON: Don't shout or I may give you another. It would be absurd if I could cut two Spartan divisions to pieces unarmed and not be able to beat up one miserable little nobody like you – especially with my Olympic crowns for boxing and wrestling as well. [*Exit DEMEAS, rapidly.*]

That scene is Aristophanic through and through; not for many centuries was the great comedian again to be appreciated as a comedian.

Aristophanes, Comedian and Poet

I don't know whether ancient Athenian audiences were in the habit of groaning at feeble puns, but they certainly appreciated good ones. Aristophanes gave them a good many of both kinds, little realizing the groans of despair they would elicit from his translators some 2,380 years later. Only very occasionally, by some amazing linguistic fluke, will some piece of Aristophanic word-play slip straight into English: as when, in *The Birds*, a prudent soothsayer is reported as swearing 'by Goose' instead of 'by Zeus' (*nê ton Khêna* instead of *nêton Zêna*) or when the slave in *The Frogs* describes the occupations of a true gentleman as 'soaking and poking' (*pinein* and *binein*). What is the poor translator to do about the speech defect which makes Alcibiades, in *The Wasps*, say *kolax* (a toady) when he means *korax* (a raven), thus demolishing a well-known political figure with a single letter of the alphabet? How can he convey the comic overtones, so gleefully exploited in the comedies, of so many innocent place-names – the Chipping Sodburies and Steeple Bumpsteads of ancient Attica?

Double meanings abound on every page; there may be even more of them than the scholars have yet discovered. Many have perforce to be ignored, when there seems to be no way at all of reproducing the effect in English. Sometimes a whole scene is built upon them, as when in *The Acharnians*, a Megarian disguises his two little daughters as piglets, and tries to barter them for garlic and salt. The word-play on the two meanings of the Greek word for 'pig' is kept up for thirty solid lines: it is a very funny scene indeed – in Greek. Then there is the scene in *Lysistrata* where the sex-starved Athenian and Spartan delegates, gesturing over a map of Greece, discuss the naval and military implications of an armistice. Between them, perhaps holding the map, stands the nubile (if allegorical) figure of 'Reconciliation'. In this situation, everything they say manages to sound like a reference to some part of human anatomy. It is very cleverly done – but the devil to translate.

Then there are the stock jokes associated with particular people and places, many of which are hard to put across without recourse to footnotes or ponderous insertions in the text ('Such-and-so, that tiresome fellow who, as you know, always...'; 'Such-and-such a place, which as you know, is famous for the export of...'). Any mention of Salamis, for example, is liable to imply a joke about sex. Why? Because, to get to Athens, the Salaminians had to *row* across to the mainland, and *rowing* has a double meaning, see? Just a piece of everyday un-intellectual Athenian humour; just enough to get a laugh in passing and keep things lively. But by the

time the translator has written his eighth footnote to this effect, the joke (both for him and for the reader) has begun to wear a bit thin. Often, of course, the stock jokes about people can be guessed from the context. This, in fact, is often all the ancient commentators have been able to do: their learned notes on many individuals turn out to be nothing more than deductions from the passage they are commenting on. In the case of well-known people like Euripides, Socrates and Cleon, and others who are less well known historically but who appear frequently in the plays (like Cleonymus and Cleisthenes), the stock jokes soon become familiar through repetition, or because they are developed in extended scenes. But what of the scores of others whose names occur perhaps once or twice, and of whom (to quote our most frequent footnote) 'nothing is known'? Who on earth was Smicythion, and why should it have been easier for his wife than anyone else's to get out of the house unseen? How far are we justified in guessing what the joke might have been, and slanting the translation so as to imply it?

Fortunately the comedies of Aristophanes do not live by wit alone. Gilbert Norwood, in his admirable book on *Greek Comedy*, maintained that Aristophanes, though endowed with 'superb wit, splendid poetical genius, immense vitality', lacked humour. But then Norwood's conception of humour is a somewhat idealized one, implying something more like what we would now call compassion. If a sense of fun, a sense of proportion, a delight in the unexpected, and an eye for the eccentricities, the appetites, the stupidities, the pretensions, and the basic simplicity of human beings, add up to a sense of humour, it is hard to think of anyone who had it in more abundance than Aristophanes. It may be true that he was 'without pity or reverence', as Norwood maintains; but whether he had these qualities or not, they are not the ones most needed by a man whose job is to make people laugh. The audience wants to see the pompous man made ridiculous, the braggart forced to eat his words, the cheat caught cheating; for this is right, this is what *should* happen to them; these characters are allegorical; this is what they exist for; they are facets of ourselves, isolated expressly to be ridiculed, not to be pitied or revered. This kind of humour is the essence of comedy and wit is the salt wherewith it is salted. Whatever else has changed over the centuries, the deeper springs of laughter have not. 'How modern it all seems!' is a comment frequently overheard after an Aristophanes performance. 'How ancient all our jokes are!' would be a better way of putting it.

Lovers of Aristophanes all have their favourite funny bits. There is the scene in *The Frogs*

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