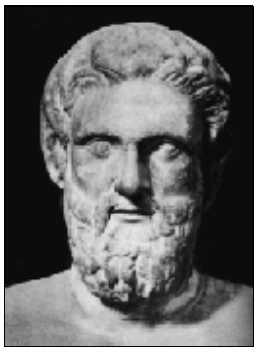
Aristophanes



Of all the writers of "Old Comedy", only one remains. Lost forever are the works of Chionides, Magnes, Ecphantides, Cratinus, Crates, and Eupolis. All the extant comedies of the fifth century B.C. belong to one man--Aristophanes. On his shoulders alone rests the reputation of an entire age of comedy. Fortunately, by most accounts Aristophanes was the greatest comic writer of his day.

By the time Aristophanes began to write his comedies, democracy had already begun to sour for the Athenians. The people were increasingly demoralized by the ongoing conflicts of the Peloponnesian War and the loss of their greatest hero, Pericles, had been taken from them and replaced by unscrupulous politicians such as Cleon and Hyperbolus. It is little wonder, therefore, that Aristophanes laughter is tinged, even from the beginning, with tones of apprehension and grief.

Aristophanes' first two comedies, *The Banqueters* and *The Babylonians* have been lost. His first surviving play, *The Acharnians*, was written in the sixth year of the War and, coincidentally, happens to be the world's first anti-war comedy. Inspired by the suffering of the rural population of Attica, the area surrounding Athens which was exposed to continual invasions, the poet built his plot around a hard headed farmer who, tired of the hostilities, determines to make a private peace with the Spartans. Denounced as a traitor by his fellow citizens and forced to plead for his life, Dicaeopolis turns to the tragic poet Euripides who lends him a whole assortment of tragic stage effects. His collection depleted, Euripides complains, "You miserable man! You are robbing me of an entire tragedy!"

In his next play Aristophanes turned his satirical powers on Cleon, the demagogue who had succeeded Pericles. However, the dictator's power was so great that no actor dared impersonate him, and legend has it that the poet played the role himself, his face smeared with wine dregs in mockery of Cleon's bloated and alcoholic countenance. The people of Athens were quick to recognize their tyrannical leader as the Paphlagonian tanner in *The Knights*, and although the play had no real political effect, it took first prize at the festival.

Aristophanes barbs, however, were not reserved exclusively for political figures. In fact, he often saved his sharpest attacks for other cultural figures. In *The Clouds*, he turns his attentions to the great thinker of the day--Socrates. The story revolves around an old man named Strepsiades. Deeply in debt because of his son's gambling and desperate to preserve his fortune, he enrolls in Socrates' Thinking Shop in order to learn how to confute his creditors with logic. What he finds on the first day of training, however, is the great thinker suspended in a basket and contemplating the sun. Only confused by this first lesson, Strepsiades

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determines to have his son educated instead. The young man responds quickly to Socrates' teachings and is soon able to prove, after beating his father, that he was morally justified in doing so.

In *The Wasps*, Aristophanes returned to his favorite theme--the deterioration of Athens. In this satire of an overzealous legal system, Philocleon ("Lover of Cleon") becomes so addicted to the courtroom drama that he has to be confined to his house by his son. Desperate to return to the Tribunal where cases are being tried, the old man becomes more and more extravagant in his attempts to escape. At one point, he tries to squeeze through the chimney pretending to be "only smoke". In the end, he is rescued by his fellow jurors who appear, appropriately enough, as a swarm of wasps.

Aristophanes favorite target, however, was another literary figure--the tragic poet Euripides. Already satirized in *The Acharnians*, Euripides was later to became the subject of two more plays: *Thesmophoriazusae (Women at the Festival of Demeter)* and *The Frogs*. In the second of these--set sometime after Euripides' death--Dionysus has become annoyed at the absence of a major dramatist on the stage and resolves to bring Euripides back from the dead. Dressed as Hercules, he braves the underworld, pleading with Pluto to allow Euripides to return with him to Athens. However, there are *three* tragic poets stuck in Hades, and the great warrior-poet Aeschylus is not convinced that the upstart Euripides is the best choice to return to the world of the living. The literary duel that follows is perhaps one of the most remarkable parodies in dramatic literature.

Aristophanes would return to his political theme of pacifism in *Lysistrata*. Written twenty-one years into the Peloponnesian War, the play revolves around the women of Athens who finally tire of losing their sons on the battlefield and conspire to deny their husbands sexual intercourse until they make peace with the Spartans. Lysistrata, who leads the revolt, is one of Aristophanes' most completely realized characters. Although the play is light-hearted, it was written out of the poet's grief over the thousands of Athenians who had recently lost their lives in the terrible defeat at Syracuse.

After *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes seems to have given up on politics. It would be nineteen years before he would again devote an entire play to a political issue, and by that time it had become far too dangerous to launch a direct attack on state policies. Athens had long since been crushed by the Spartans and its liberties had decreased significantly. It was during this turbulent period that Socrates was put to death. Thus *Ecclesiazusae (Women in Parliament)* and *Plutus* are far less pointed than the poet's earlier works in their call for a new utopian society. Mercifully, however, Aristophanes would not have to hold his tongue for long. Three years after the production of *Plutus*, the comic poet passed away, leaving behind approximately forty plays--eleven of which have survived to this day.

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