

The Audience and its Expectations

THE DRAMATIC FESTIVALS

For the Athenians, a play was a special occasion. Now we are accustomed to seeing plays at any time, but in the fifth century BC plays were performed within the town¹ of Athens at only two periods of the year. Both were festivals of Dionysos: the town Dionysia, which took six days in the month Elaphebolion (which roughly corresponded to our month of March), and the Lenaia, lasting four days in Gamelion (approximately January).² These festivals were celebrations in honour of the god, and they included religious ceremonies, processions, and choral performances as well as plays. There were plays also at local festivals (the rural Dionysia), for example at Peiraieus and Eleusis, but little is known about those. It is possible that new plays were always performed first in the town, and the rural Dionysia saw only revivals.³

In the time of Aristophanes the plays for the town Dionysia were certainly performed in the theatre of Dionysos beside the Akropolis, but it has been questioned whether the Lenaia plays were performed there too. In earlier times that festival had been celebrated at a precinct called the Lenaion, of which the location is uncertain.⁴ Most scholars assume that, once the theatre of Dionysos was established, it was used for the Lenaia plays also; but Russo, adapting an earlier

¹ Throughout this book I use 'town' to mean the urban area (*ἄστυ*), 'city' to mean the political entity of the city-state (*πόλις*).

² For details of the festivals see Pickard-Cambridge *Festivals*.

³ Aelian *Varia Historia* 2.13 suggests that some new tragedies by Euripides were performed at Peiraieus, but the wording is not quite explicit, and anyway this is not contemporary evidence.

⁴ Cf. R. E. Wycherley *Hesperia* 34 (1965) 72–6, Pickard-Cambridge *Festivals* 37–9.

theory of Anti, has maintained that this transfer did not take place until later, so that Aristophanes' Lenaia plays were performed not in the theatre of Dionysos but in the different and less elaborate surroundings of the Lenaion.⁵ Russo's general arguments from the texts of the plays are inconclusive,⁶ but he has one stronger argument to which his critics have given too little weight: in Aristophanes and other texts of the fifth and fourth centuries referring to the dramatic contests at the Lenaia festival the phrase 'at the Lenaion' is regularly found.⁷ The Lenaion has been identified with the precinct of 'Dionysos in the marshes' by Slater, who argues that that was the place where plays were performed at the Lenaia festival.⁸ Yet it seems unlikely that an open space or makeshift theatre would have continued to be used when the theatre of Dionysos was available, and it is probably better to accept that the theatre of Dionysos was used but the phrase 'at the Lenaion' had become conventional and so continued in use even when no longer true literally.

The plays were performed in competitions, in which there seems to have been keen rivalry for the honour of winning. At both the town Dionysia and the Lenaia the number of comedies was normally five, but a widely-held modern view is that the number was temporarily reduced to three during the Peloponnesian War, to save time and expense by making each festival one day shorter.⁹ Since most of Aristophanes' plays were written during those years, that would mean that we should think of him as having two competitors rather than four on each occasion. But the theory is not firmly based. The only evidence for it is the fact that the *hypotheses* (ancient introductions, written probably in the Hellenistic period) to several of his plays specify only the plays which came first, second, and third in the contest. A *hypothesis* of *Peace* is an example.

⁵ C. F. Russo *Aristofane, autore di teatro* (Florence 1962) 1–21, with addenda on pp. 403–4 of the reprint (1984). (This chapter is not included in the English version of Russo's book.)

⁶ Cf. Pickard-Cambridge *Festivals* 39–40, Dearden *Stage* 5–8.

⁷ ἐπὶ Ἀθηναίῳ: *Akharnians* 504, Plato *Protagoras* 327d, Demosthenes 21.10, IG 2² 1496.74, 1496.105.

⁸ N. W. Slater *ZPE* 66 (1986) 255–64.

⁹ A. Körte *Rh. Mus.* 60 (1905) 427–8, followed by many other scholars without discussion.

The poet was victorious with the play in the arkhonship of Alkaios, in town. Eupolis was first with *Flatterers*, Aristophanes second with *Peace*, and Leukon third with *Clansmen*.

(*Peace hyp.* iii)

But this may equally well be interpreted as meaning that only the first three competitors were awarded prizes or had their names inscribed in the records, an interpretation that may be supported by the way in which, in this particular case, Aristophanes is said to have been victorious (that is, won an award) with the play which came only second.¹⁰ On the other hand, there is evidence that the comic dramatist Platon came fourth in a comic contest around this time,¹¹ and it has been argued by Luppe that the total number of comedies known to have been performed during the Peloponnesian War is too large to have been fitted into the programme if only three were put on at each festival.¹² The evidence on both sides of this argument is tenuous, but on balance it is preferable to accept that there were always five comedies at each of the two festivals.

If more than five poets, then, wanted to present comedies at the same festival, a choice among them had to be made by the magistrate in charge (the Arkhon for the town Dionysia, the Basileus for the Lenaia). Some time beforehand each poet would 'ask for a chorus',¹³ and the magistrate would select five. The criteria of selection are not known; perhaps none were laid down and each magistrate chose in any way he liked. He is unlikely to have read complete scripts; he may have been guided by the previous successes and reputations of the various authors. The town Dionysia were regarded as more important than the Lenaia, and may have been more difficult to get into. The same papyrus fragment which tells us that Platon came fourth on one occasion goes on to say that in consequence he had to go back to the Lenaia; this may mean that the Arkhon would not accept the next play that he offered for the Dionysia.¹⁴

The two festivals also differed in the order of the plays. At the

¹⁰ A similar phrase is used about Kratinos in *Horsemen hyp.* i.

¹¹ P. Oxy. 2737 col. ii lines 10–17.

¹² W. Luppe *Philologus* 116 (1972) 53–75. Some objections made by G. Mastromarco *Belfagor* 30 (1975) 469–73 and N. W. Slater *ZPE* 74 (1988) 43–57 are answered by Luppe *ZPE* 46 (1982) 157–9, 77 (1989) 18–20.

¹³ *Horsemen* 513. On the distinction between asking on his own account and 'through' someone else, see pp. 34–6.

¹⁴ P. Oxy. 2737 col. ii lines 10–17; cf. R. M. Rosen *ZPE* 76 (1989) 223–8.

Dionysia there were more tragedies (three tragedians each presented three tragedies, with a satyr-play) and they formed the climax of the festival, whereas at the Lenaia there were fewer tragedies (two tragedians each presented two) and they were preliminary to the five comedies. The different sequences of events are given by a law regulating conduct at festivals, passed probably in the first half of the fourth century.¹⁵

When the procession takes place for Dionysos in Peiraieus and the comedies and the tragedies, and the procession at the Lenaion and the tragedies and the comedies, and at the Dionysia in town the procession and the boys and the revel¹⁶ and the comedies and the tragedies, and at the procession and the contest of the Thargelia . . .

(Law of Euegoros, quoted by Demosthenes 21.10)

This law apparently observes chronological order, both of festivals within the year (Dionysia at Peiraieus, Lenaia, Dionysia in town, Thargelia) and of events within each festival, and it shows that the tragedies came last at the town Dionysia (and at the Dionysia at Peiraieus) but the comedies came last at the Lenaia. But one passage of Aristophanes has been thought to provide contrary evidence. The chorus of *Birds* is telling the audience that wings are a great asset.

Nothing can be better, nothing pleasanter than growing wings!
If, for instance, one of you spectators were equipped with wings
And you then felt pangs of hunger at the tragic choruses,
You'd just fly away, go home and have some lunch, and afterwards,
When you'd had your fill of eating, you'd fly back to us again.

(*Birds* 785–9)

Birds is a Dionysia play, and the passage has been interpreted as meaning that a spectator who was bored with the tragedies might leave the theatre and return in time for a comedy, which would mean that a comedy followed some tragedies on the same day of the Dionysia.¹⁷ But that is not necessarily right: 'to us' merely means 'to the theatre', and 'again' may mean that the winged spectator

¹⁵ For the date see MacDowell *Meidias* 230.

¹⁶ 'The boys and the revel' seems to cover the choral performances by boys and by men, but the exact interpretation of the phrase is doubtful. For various possibilities see MacDowell *Meidias* 232–3.

¹⁷ e.g. Pickard-Cambridge *Festivals* 64–5.

will return to the same performances as he left, the tragedies, which he will leave not because he is bored with them but because he is hungry. So no evidence contradicts the implication of the law of Euegoros that the tragedies followed the comedies at the Dionysia; and, if it is right to regard the final event as being the culmination and most important part of the festival, it is worth noticing that this position was occupied by the tragedies at the Dionysia, but by the comedies at the Lenaia.

THE JUDGES

The method of appointing judges for the contests at the town Dionysia is fairly well attested; the method at the Lenaia, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, can be presumed to have been the same. They were picked by lot out of a larger number of citizens previously selected by the Council. Before each contest began, the Arkhon drew one name from each of ten urns, each containing the names of the candidates previously selected from one of the ten tribes. The names were called out, and the ten men came forward from wherever they were sitting in the audience. Before taking the seats at the front reserved for them, they swore an oath to vote for the best performers.¹⁸ So an Aristophanic chorus can jocularly tell the judges, near the end of a play which happened (by the drawing of lots) to be the first one performed in its contest, not to break their oath.¹⁹

I'll give the judges first a little hint.
If you're clever, bear in mind the clever bits, and vote for me!
If you're glad to laugh, remember how you laughed, and vote for me!
Nearly all of you in fact, it's obvious, should vote for me!
Though I got the first position when the lottery was drawn,
Don't you let that count against me, but remember all you've heard.
Don't infringe your oath, but always judge the choruses aright.
Don't be like the girls who are no better than they ought to be,
Who can't think back any further than the latest thing they had!

(*Women at the Assembly* 1154–62)

¹⁸ Isokrates 17.33–4, Demosthenes 21.17, 21.65, Plutarch *Kimón* 8.8; cf. Pickard-Cambridge *Festivals* 95–7, MacDowell *Meidias* 241.

¹⁹ Much the same joke had been made in a comedy by Pherekrates (fr. 102).

At the end of the performances each judge wrote his verdict on a tablet, but it seems that not all ten votes were counted; perhaps five were picked out by lot and decided the contest, or perhaps counting stopped as soon as five votes for the same competitor had been announced.²⁰

It would be of interest to know whether the judges were in effect a random choice of ordinary citizens, or whether the method of selection tended to produce judges of a particular class or type. One text seems to mean that a chorus-producer got the Council to include a friend of his in the preliminary selection;²¹ that may have been possible because he happened to be a member of the Council himself that year, and it was not necessarily a normal occurrence. The passage of *Women at the Assembly* just quoted ('If you're clever . . .') may imply that men of all sorts are among the judges. Perhaps the best guess is that the Council would exclude from the preliminary selection anyone who was obviously incompetent to judge, or who was not expected to attend the festival, but did not otherwise restrict its choice to any particular type of citizen. At any rate there seems to be no evidence that the judges' verdict was likely to differ from the opinion of the audience in general, and Aristophanes himself implies that it did not. After the disappointing failure of his *Clouds* at the Dionysia in 423, he makes his chorus blame the audience for its defeat: 'you betrayed him' *Wasps* (1044), 'I blame you' (*Clouds* 525, in the revised version). He regards the audience as responsible for the verdict. That means either that the judges could be assumed to be representative of the audience as a whole, or that the judges normally cast their votes in accordance with the applause or boos of the audience,²² or (most likely) both. We may conclude that, for Aristophanes, winning the favour of the judges did not require any different strategy from winning the favour of the audience.

²⁰ The fragmentary P.Oxy. 1611.30-7 seems to give several possible numbers. Five is the number in schol. *Birds* 445, Hesykhios πέντε κριταί (and Zenobios 3.64, but that probably refers to Sicily, not Athens). Cf. G. Arrighetti *Dioniso* 45 (1971-4) 302-8, M. Pope *CQ* 36 (1986) 322-6.

²¹ Lysias 4.4.

²² When Plato says that the true judge ought not to be influenced by the noise of the many (*Laws* 659a), that may imply that in practice most judges were so influenced.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE AUDIENCE

The audience for Aristophanes' plays must usually have numbered several thousand, but it is not possible to give any precise figure. Aristophanes calls it 10,000 (*Frogs* 677) and Plato 30,000 (*Symposium* 175e), but those are just round numbers; the latter at least must surely be an exaggeration. Even if we knew the number of seats in the theatre, that would not answer the question, because the theatre may not have been full for every play. Since a play was normally performed only once, we can presume that the number wishing to attend was not normally too large for them all to be able to get into the theatre at the same time. So it is obvious that the plays were not attended by the whole population of Attica. What kinds of person are more likely to have been present? There are several factors which may have restricted the audience.

1. *Place of residence.* Those who lived in or near the town could get to the theatre easily. But the remotest parts of Attica are up to thirty miles from Athens. Many country people must have found it inconvenient to walk to Athens and stay there for the period of the festival.²³ They may have had opportunities to see some of the same plays later at their local Dionysia, but at the performances in the town it is likely that town-dwellers outnumbered country-dwellers. However, this balance may have been altered in the early years of the Peloponnesian War, when many country-dwellers took refuge in the town (see p. 46).

2. *Cost.* In the fourth century there was certainly a charge for admission; Demosthenes (18.28) mentions some seats which cost two obols, but does not say whether all seats were the same price. A commentator on Demosthenes, who must have been writing some centuries later and gives no authority for his statements, offers information about theoric payments, grants from public funds to enable poor citizens to attend the festivals. He says that each citizen received two obols, one for his own maintenance and one to pay to the contractor who provided the seating, and he adds later that Perikles originated theoric payments; Plutarch also states that Per-

²³ Cf. Isokrates 7.52: 'many of the citizens did not come into town even for the festivals, but preferred enjoyment of their own possessions to the public entertainments.'

ikles introduced them.²⁴ Even if we accept this late information, the details remain uncertain: perhaps the better seats cost two obols and the worse one obol; or perhaps all seats cost one obol in the fifth century but the price was increased to two obols in the fourth; and it is not clear whether the amounts mentioned are for a whole festival or for each day. But anyway it does seem clear that attendance at the plays involved some expense, which poor citizens may have preferred to avoid. Presumably a man could save money by claiming the grant and then staying away from the theatre.

3. *Status and age.* Theoric grants were given only to citizens. Metics (non-citizens resident in Athens) must have paid for themselves, and so probably attended in smaller numbers than citizens. Slaves would have been unable to attend unless their masters paid for them. Likewise boys would have to be paid for by their fathers, if theoric payments were made only to citizens on the deme-registers.²⁵ References in Aristophanes show that some boys did attend his plays.²⁶ In the fourth century Theophrastos mentions a man taking his sons to the theatre with their *paidagogos*, who was presumably a slave.²⁷ But it is likely that adult citizens predominated in the audience.

4. *Sex.* Whether women attended the plays is a disputed question.²⁸ Probably a distinction ought to be drawn between tragedies and comedies. In Aristophanes one female character refers specifically to seeing plays of Euripides, and other evidence also implies that women attended the performances of tragedies.²⁹ For comedies, however, the evidence is less clear. Two Aristophanic passages which have sometimes been thought to prove the presence of women do not in fact do so: in *Peace* 966 the reason why women do not get any of the barley-corns thrown out into the audience is not necessarily that they are sitting far back in the theatre, but may be simply that they are at home; and *Lysistrata* 1050 does not mean that women

²⁴ Schol. Demosthenes 1.1 (p.15 lines 27–31 and p.16 lines 8–13 in Dilts's edition), Plutarch *Perikles* 9.3.

²⁵ Theoric payments for the Panathenaia were made to those registered as members of a deme (Demosthenes 44.37), and probably the same procedure was used for other festivals.

²⁶ *Clouds* 539, *Peace* 50, 766.

²⁷ Theophrastos *Characters* 9.5; cf. Plato *Gorgias* 502d.

²⁸ Cf. Pickard-Cambridge *Festivals* 264–5.

²⁹ *Women at the Thesmophoria* 386; cf. *Frogs* 1050–1, Plato *Laws* 658d, 817a–c.

are to ask for loans here and now in the theatre, but that they may apply later to members of the chorus at their homes, where the money is (1053).³⁰ On the other hand, the absence of women seems to be implied by *Birds* 793–6, which is about a man who wants to seduce a married woman: when he sees her husband sitting in the Councillors' seats in the theatre, he takes for granted that the wife is at home, not elsewhere in the theatre.³¹ Likewise in *Women at the Thesmophoria* 395–7 husbands returning from the theatre expect to find their wives at home, and suspiciously search the house to see if there is a lover hidden away. But this kind of joke cannot be treated as conclusive evidence on either side of the question. More important, there are numerous places in Aristophanes where a character turns to the spectators and addresses them as 'men'.³² Why are they never addressed as 'men and women' or 'ladies and gentlemen'? In *Peace* 50–3 the audience is analysed into its components, all male. In *Women at the Thesmophoria* 789–807 the chorus of women, when addressing the audience as 'you', clearly means men only.³³ There are only two possible explanations for this. The simpler, which I prefer, is that women were not present: even if they were present at the tragedies, it may have been thought appropriate for them to stay away from the comedies, which were probably performed on different days. The other is that they were present but were ignored: they were expected to stay in the background while the actors and chorus performed to entertain the men.³⁴ This latter explanation cannot be excluded, although there is no real evidence to support it. But even if it is true, it remains the case that Aristophanes addresses his plays to the male spectators.

5. *Travel from overseas.* One passage affirms that there is an important difference between the audience at the town Dionysia and the audience at the Lenaia. *Akharnians* was performed at the Lenaia in 425, and in it Aristophanes makes Dikaiopolis refer to events resulting from his play at the Dionysia the year before.

³⁰ Henderson *Lysistrata* ad loc. is right here, against Sommerstein *Lysistrata* ad loc. and Henderson *TAPA* 121 (1991) 139 n. 33.

³¹ Cf. H. Box *CR* 14 (1964) 241, N. G. Wilson *GRBS* 23 (1982) 158–9.

³² ἄνδρες: *Akharnians* 497, *Peace* 13, 244, 276, *Birds* 30, 685, *Lysistrata* 1044, *Wealth* 802.

³³ On the humour of *Women at the Thesmophoria*, addressed to men, see pp. 265–6.

³⁴ This explanation is ably maintained by Dover *Ar. Comedy* 16–17, J. Henderson *TAPA* 121 (1991) 133–47.

For this time Kleon won't accuse me of
 Abusing Athens when foreigners are here.
 We're by ourselves; it's the Lenaion contest;
 No foreigners are here yet, for the tribute
 And allies from the cities have not come.
 But we are by ourselves, clean-winnowed now—
 The metics I regard as citizens' bran.

(*Akharnians* 502–8)

In the spring, at the Dionysia, envoys from the cities in the Athenian Empire arrived in Athens to hand over the annual tribute, and naturally took the opportunity to see the plays at the festival. The Lenaia, on the other hand, were held in the winter, when travel was more difficult and few foreigners would be in Athens (except metics, residing in Athens permanently). Thus Kleon could complain that a comedy at the Dionysia denigrated Athens in the presence of foreigners, but the same complaint could not (Aristophanes claims) be made about a comedy at the Lenaia. However, the foreign visitors will not have formed a large proportion of the audience even at the Dionysia, and are unlikely to have affected its general character substantially.

THE AUDIENCE'S EXPECTATIONS

Aristophanes, then, was writing a script for a single performance in Athens on a particular date. He wanted to win the competition, and to get the judges' votes he needed to please and impress the audience. The audience was a big crowd of people, much larger than a modern theatre audience; but it was not by any means the entire population of Attica, nor even a fair cross-section of it. It consisted predominantly of adult male citizens, among whom poor people and country-dwellers, though not excluded, may well have been under-represented.

What were the demands or expectations of this audience? Of course the people who came to the plays expected to find them entertaining, in a broad sense; otherwise they would not have gone to the trouble and expense of attending. But different individuals find different things entertaining. Some like ribald humour, others are strait-laced. Some have political, others intellectual interests.

Some are musical, others are tone-deaf. No doubt there were some Athenians who disliked most of what the comedies offered them, and therefore stayed at home. But Aristophanes must still have had to please a wide variety of people, if he was to win the contest.³⁵

Some recent writers have made much of the idea that Athenian festivals were like the carnivals common in medieval Europe and still held in some countries: general holidays on which ordinary people relax and enjoy themselves by watching or taking part in various traditional activities.³⁶ The comparison may have been overstated: ancient plays were certainly more varied and complex than carnivals. Nevertheless it is useful to be reminded that tradition was an important element in them. When an Athenian went once more to the theatre to see the comedies, he went because he had enjoyed last year's comedies and hoped to have the same kind of entertainment again. The following features can safely be assumed to be parts of the comic tradition, which the audience would be expecting and which Aristophanes probably felt more or less obliged to provide, at least in his earliest plays; in his later plays they become less prominent, and some of them disappear altogether.

1. *Religion*. In performances at religious festivals there are naturally some religious elements. From time to time Aristophanes introduces a hymn, a genuine invocation of a god, but usually with some comic twist to it. For example, his chorus of Horsemen naturally sings in praise of Poseidon, god of horses and of the sea, but the short line at the end of each period (marked here with a dash)³⁷ introduces a slightly cynical slant on horse-racing or on the exigencies of imperial administration and naval warfare.

Lord of the horse, Poseidon, thou
 Lovest the brazen sound of hooves
 Mingled with horses' whinnying;
 Lovest the dark-prowed trireme-ships

³⁵ P. Walcot *G&R* 18 (1971) 35–50 stresses the 'popular' character of the audience.

³⁶ Carrière *Carnaval* 29–32, S. Halliwell *Yearbook of English Studies* 14 (1984) 7, Reckford *Old-and-New* 3–52, S. Goldhill *The Poet's Voice* (Cambridge 1991) 176–88, D. F. Sutton *The Catharsis of Comedy* (Lanham 1994) 105–18. Note the earlier and more cautious approach of Murray *Aristophanes* 1–2.

³⁷ My translation reproduces the original metre approximately, but cannot be exact. In the original the short lines (555, 558, 564) are in each case a catalectic form of the lines which precede, bringing the rhythm to a pause.

—Swiftly conveying money;
 Lovest the young men's races too,
 Winning renown in chariots
 —Or having ill success there:
 Come to our chorus, thou of the golden trident,
 Ruler of dolphins, prayed to at Sounion,
 God of Geraistos, Kronos' son,
 Dearest to Phormion³⁸ among
 Gods, and to all Athenians
 —In present circumstances!

(*Horsemen* 551–64)

More conspicuously, Aristophanes sometimes brings gods on-stage³⁹ as characters, and moreover as characters to be laughed at: Herakles is greedy and stupid (in *Birds* and *Frogs*), Dionysos is pretentious and cowardly (in *Frogs*), and so on. This has worried some modern critics, who have wondered whether Aristophanes was irreligious or blasphemous. But that is a misunderstanding. To the Greeks, gods were part of the world, just as much as women, birds, slaves, Akharnians, frogs, politicians, and all the other creatures who appear in Aristophanes' plays. They were powerful, but not omnipotent, and not necessarily good, and so it was quite reasonable, in appropriate cases, to make fun of them, as of anyone else, in a comedy. The Athenian audience would expect some religion at a religious festival, but in the comic part of the festival they would expect religion to be treated comically.

2. *Form and structure.* It has long been observed that certain features of form and structure are common to many of Aristophanes' plays. Typically there are: the prologue, in which the characters, in dialogue or monologue, make clear to the audience the initial situation from which the action of the play will develop; the entrance-song of the chorus (parodos); a scene in which the main character seeks help by knocking at someone else's door; a dispute leading to a debate (agon), in which two characters speak in a relatively formal metre (tetrameters); a passage known as the parabasis, delivered by the chorus alone, sometimes on subjects

³⁸ The most successful Athenian naval commander in the early years of the Peloponnesian War.

³⁹ Throughout this book I use 'on-stage' (or 'off-stage') to refer to what is visible (or invisible) to the audience. This does not necessarily mean that the performers were on a raised platform.

which have little or nothing to do with the story of the play;⁴⁰ further scenes showing the results of whatever conclusion was reached in the debate, often including unsuccessful attempts by new characters to interfere with those results, and alternating with songs which may include a second parabasis (taking the same form as the second half of the main parabasis); and a concluding scene (exodos) of revelry or festivity, ending with another short song. Traces of most of these features can be found also in the fragments of other comic dramatists of the fifth century, and it is clear that they were customary in comedy at that time and not peculiar to Aristophanes.

Attempts have been made to reconstruct out of these features a kind of primitive ritual or proto-comedy out of which Aristophanic comedy as we know it may be supposed to have grown.⁴¹ Such speculations cannot be confirmed from the evidence we have, and we do not really know which of these features were old. And even if it is true that tradition had at one time required dramatists to include them in every comedy, that was no longer the case in Aristophanes' time; for he does not in fact include them in all his plays. The only play in which he uses virtually all is *Wasps*.⁴² Of the other plays, *Peace* has no agon, *Clouds* has no concluding festivity, *Frogs* has no parabasis but only a 'second parabasis', and so on; in the last two plays, *Women at the Assembly* and *Wealth*, nearly all of them have disappeared. We may conclude that the tradition, whatever it was, was not so strong that Aristophanes was compelled to retain these features. Nevertheless the audience may well have looked forward to seeing and hearing them, or some of them, with the pleasure of recognition; and so Aristophanes, especially in his earlier years, brings them in whenever he finds it convenient and useful to do so.

3. *Music and dancing.* Every play had a chorus; to apply for permission to put on a play was to 'ask for a chorus' (*Horsemen* 513),

⁴⁰ The parabasis regularly consists of: a short introductory song (kommation) and a long speech in (usually) anapaestic tetrameters, ending in a continuous run of anapaests (pnigos); and then two short songs and two speeches, corresponding in length and metre, in the order song, speech, song, speech (ode, epirrhema, antode, antepirrhema).

⁴¹ See especially F. M. Cornford *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (London 1914).

⁴² Actually *Wasps* has no scene in which a character knocks at someone else's door, but the passage in which Philokleon knocks at his own door when trying to get out (152) may be regarded as a variant of this feature.

and it is clear that in Aristophanes' time a play without a chorus was inconceivable. Sometimes the chorus represented animals, such as frogs or birds. It sang and danced, usually accompanied by the aulos (a kind of pipe or oboe). Individual characters sometimes sang and danced too. We now have only the words of the songs, although the metre sometimes enables us to make guesses about the music. We know even less about the dances, but occasionally a text makes reference to a particular type of dance or movement. They might be comic (especially when danced by a chorus representing animals), or they might be impressive in other ways. For example, *Wasps* ends with a scene which evidently included different kinds of dance. First old Philokleon provides a comic parody of the old-fashioned style of dancing used by Thespis and Phrynikhos, tragedians of earlier generations.⁴³

XANTHIAS. It's so long since the old man drank and heard
The pipe, and he's enjoying it so much,
That now he won't stop dancing. All night long
He's been performing Thespis's old dances.
He says he'll dance in competition with
Modern tragedians, and prove them fogeys!

PHILOKLEON. Who sitteth and guardeth the doors of the court?
XANTHIAS. There! What did I say? Here comes trouble, you'll see!
PHILOKLEON. Let the bars of these portals be loosed! For anon
The figure beginneth—
XANTHIAS. Or rather it's madness beginning, perhaps!
PHILOKLEON.—Of a dancer who bendeth his torso with strength.
What a snort from my snout! What a crack from my back!
XANTHIAS. You should drink hellebore!⁴⁴
PHILOKLEON. Now Phrynikhos cowers to spring like a cock—
XANTHIAS. They'll throw stones at you soon!
PHILOKLEON.—And he then kicks his leg out as high as the sky.
My buttocks are parted—
XANTHIAS. Look out for yourself!

⁴³ For details of this passage see MacDowell *Wasps* ad loc. For different interpretations see E. Roos *Die tragische Orchestik im Zerrbild der altattischen Komödie* (Lund 1951), E. K. Borthwick *CQ* 18 (1968) 44–51, J. Vaio *GRBS* 12 (1971) 344–51, W. T. MacCary *TAPA* 109 (1979) 137–47, M. V. Molitor *Hermes* 112 (1984) 252–4.

⁴⁴ Hellebore was supposed to be a cure for insanity.

PHILOKLEON.—For my joints now move supply in each of my limbs.
Good, wasn't it?
XANTHIAS. Zeus, no! Sheer lunacy!

(*Wasps* 1476–96)

Philokleon then challenges all comers. Three sons of Karkinos come forward; these were real men (not fictional characters), who evidently were expert dancers and seem to have appeared in person in the play. The chorus sings a song, which includes references to high kicks, pirouettes, and other movements, and finally joins in too (1518–37). We cannot reconstruct the dance, but clearly it was intended to provide a spectacular end to the play.

So, although the music and dancing are the aspects of the plays which are least evident to us as we read the texts, we must bear in mind that they were far more evident to the Athenian spectators. Some indeed, like spectators of modern opera, may have considered the music the most important part of the performance.

4. *Obscenity.* Aristotle asserts that comedy originated 'from the leaders of the phallic events which to this day still remain customary in many of the cities'.⁴⁵ Presumably 'the phallic events' were rituals related to human fertility, intended to encourage the gods to make the race fertile or to celebrate the fact that they had done so. We do not know what evidence Aristotle had for his assertion, but it is supported by the phallic costume and sexual jokes of Old Comedy.

The basic costume of the actors was a close-fitting leotard, padded to look comically fat, and attached to this (for male characters) was a leather phallus. Clothes worn over it would conceal the phallus from view, but in comedy characters sometimes appear undressed or not fully dressed, and then the phallus would be visible. How often this happened is a question which has been much disputed.⁴⁶ There are also numerous references in the dialogue to sexual organs (female as well as male) and excretion. Some, especially in *Lysistrata*, obviously arise from the plot of the play; but others are gratuitous, in the sense that they are not called for by the context but come as a comic surprise.

⁴⁵ Aristotle *Poetics* 1449a 11–13. Murray *Aristophanes* 3–11 emphasizes the phallic ritual behind Old Comedy.

⁴⁶ Stone *Costume* 72–126 provides a full discussion and references to earlier work.

SOCRATES. Now let me look and see first what he's doing.

Hey you, are you asleep?

STREPSIADES. By Apollo I'm not!

SOCRATES. Have you got hold of anything?

STREPSIADES. No, I haven't.

SOCRATES. Nothing at all?

STREPSIADES. No, nothing but my cock!
(*Clouds* 731-4)

BDELYKLEON. And indeed I'll maintain him. I'll see that he has

What an old man requires. He'll have gruel to drink,

And a soft cloak to wear, and a sheepskin as well,

And a whore, who will give him a good rubbing up

On his cock and his arse!

(*Wasps* 736-40)

These are jokes, not primitive ritual. Probably an early connection between comedy and phallic ritual made it possible and customary for comedy to use phallic costumes and language, but Aristophanes exploits that custom for his own purposes. By mentioning explicitly what was not normally mentioned in public he could raise laughs, and probably many men in the audience had a special liking for this kind of humour and looked forward to it every year. It also went naturally with personal ridicule.⁴⁷

5. *Personal ridicule.* Old Comedy had a tradition of making rude comments on individuals who had become prominent, whether as political leaders or in some other way. This tradition may well have been connected originally with religious rituals intended to avert the gods' envy, or with satire in iambic poetry, or with both;⁴⁸ but in Aristophanes it is not confined to religious contexts or to iambic passages. No doubt ordinary Athenians enjoyed the chance to feel superior, once or twice a year, to powerful men whom they had to treat with deference most of the time.⁴⁹ But the persons ridiculed were not necessarily powerful. When the spectators laughed at Pantakles, an otherwise unknown man who did not know how to fix the crest on the helmet which he was to wear in a procession

⁴⁷ The abusive function of obscenity is emphasized by Henderson *The Maculate Muse* 1-29. Cf. also A. T. Edwards *TAPA* 121 (1991) 157-79.

⁴⁸ Cf. R. M. Rosen *Old Comedy and the Iambographic Tradition* (Atlanta 1988), E. Degani in *Ar. Hardt* 1-49.

⁴⁹ Cf. Dover *Ar. Comedy* 31-41.

(*Frogs* 1036-8), they were not asserting themselves against restraint; they were just amused at the recollection of a ludicrous incident which had occurred on a recent public occasion. Thus the tone may vary from bitter satire in one case to friendly fun in another. Each case must be assessed separately, and sweeping statements about the purpose of personal ridicule must be avoided.⁵⁰

In some plays an actor is brought on to impersonate a real man, who may even become a major character in the play, such as Lamakhos in *Akharnians* and Socrates in *Clouds*. Such characters will be discussed later in this book in the appropriate chapters. More often a real person is just mentioned verbally, for the sake of a brief joke which may be quite incidental to the action. A particularly striking example is the standing joke about Kleonymos, a fat politician who was said to have discarded his shield; in a battle it was a serious offence to drop one's shield to run away. Aristophanes trots out this joke in play after play for over ten years.⁵¹

DEMOCRACY. Next, any man put on a list of hoplites

Shan't be transferred through influence or pull,

But stay where he was registered at first.

SAUSAGE-SELLER. That's hurt the shield-band of Kleonymos!⁵²

(*Horsemen* 1369-72)

SOCRATES. Have you ever looked up in the sky and caught sight of a cloud that looked like a centaur,

Or that looked like a leopard, a wolf, or a bull?

STREPSIADES. Yes, I have, by Zeus. What about it?

SOCRATES. They turn themselves into whatever they wish . . .

STREPSIADES. So yesterday, seeing Kleonymos passing, the thrower-away of his shield,

⁵⁰ For discussion of this topic see S. Halliwell *Yearbook of English Studies* 14 (1984) 6-20, J. Henderson in *Noth.Dion.* 293-307; but both tend to define the purposes of ridicule too narrowly.

⁵¹ Besides the passages quoted, see *Wasps* 15-27, 822-3, *Peace* 673-8, 1295-1304, *Birds* 290. The joke is discussed by I. C. Storey *Rh. Mus.* 132 (1989) 247-61.

⁵² Sommerstein *Knights ad loc.* considers that this passage refers to a different incident from the others. But 'it is uneconomical to assume that Cleonymos' shield became funny twice' (Heath *Political Comedy* 28 n. 51). I take the joke here to be that, if Kleonymos cannot evade service by being transferred to a different list, his shield is sure to suffer for it by being thrown away again.

Because they had seen that great coward of a man, they turned into
deer for that reason!

(*Clouds* 346–54)

PHILOKLEON. And then there's Euathlos, and that great big
Flatter-onymos, shield-discarder . . .

(*Wasps* 592)

CHORUS. Many, new, and wonderful the
Places we have flown to are,
And the strange things we have seen.
An amazing tree is growing
Farther off than Kardia,⁵³
And it's named Kleonymos.
Though it serves no useful purpose,
It's a great big cowardly thing.
Every year it sprouts in springtime,
Flourishing and prosecuting,
But when winter comes again you'll
Find that it's deshielduous!

(*Birds* 1470–81)

Did Kleonymos really throw away his shield in a battle? It seems improbable, because that was an offence for which a man could be prosecuted, and the penalty was disfranchisement.⁵⁴ Kleonymos was a politician, and some political opponent would have been sure to get him convicted and disfranchised if it had been possible to convince a jury that he was guilty; yet he seems not to have been disfranchised, for he continued to take part in public affairs. So it is unlikely that he was really guilty of cowardice. Yet there must have been some well-known incident which gave rise to the joke; otherwise it would not have been funny to say that Kleonymos, rather than any other man, had thrown away his shield. For instance, perhaps he accidentally dropped his shield with a loud clatter in front of a big crowd of spectators at a procession (similar to the occasion when Pantakles had trouble with his helmet). Or perhaps he did discard his shield in a battle, but escaped conviction by

⁵³ Kardia was a town in Khersonesos, but here there is a pun on *καρδία* meaning 'heart' or 'courage'.

⁵⁴ Cf. MacDowell *Law* 160.

claiming that he did so for a good purpose, such as helping to carry a wounded comrade to safety. We can be sure that *some* fact lies behind the ridicule, but we cannot know what the fact was; and the same is true of a great many other passages of personal ridicule in Aristophanes.⁵⁵

Did the tradition of personal ridicule leave Aristophanes free to say absolutely anything he liked about anybody, or were there any limits? The only evidence for legal restrictions comes from the scholia, and is open to the suspicion that it may be based on nothing but false inferences from jokes in comedies.⁵⁶ One scholiast (on *Akharnians* 67) says that 'the decree about not satirizing' was passed in the year 440/39 and repealed in 437/6; even if that is true, the nature of the ban is obscure, and anyway it belongs to a period before Aristophanes began writing. Another scholiast (on *Birds* 1297) thinks that a man named Syrakosios got a decree passed 'that no one was to be satirized by name'; but it is obvious from Aristophanes' plays that they were never subject to a total ban on jokes about named individuals, and modern attempts to interpret the ban as some more specific kind of restriction have not been very successful.⁵⁷ The Athenians had a law about slander; but what it forbade was not defamation in general, but certain specified allegations, if they were false. Among these, it was forbidden to say that a man had thrown away his shield. Now, Aristophanes does say that Kleonymos had thrown away his shield (most directly in *Clouds* 353) and, as we have seen, this assertion was probably false, or at least exaggerated. It seems, then, that Aristophanes did not need to obey the law about slander, at least in his earlier plays. Either comedy was formally exempt, or it was just an accepted custom that no prosecutions were brought for what was said in a comedy. I have wondered

⁵⁵ Some scholars have thought that allegation of foreign origin was one type of ridicule which was often made with no foundation at all, but for argument against that view see MacDowell in *Tr. Com. Pol.* 359–71.

⁵⁶ Cf. S. Halliwell *CQ* 34 (1984) 83–8.

⁵⁷ Carrière *Carnaval* 45–6 suggests that the decree banned comedies named after a real person; but he has then to assume that it was soon repealed, because several such comedies are known to have been produced a few years later, including Platon's *Kleophon* and Strattis' *Kinesias*. A. H. Sommerstein *CQ* 36 (1986) 101–8, following a suggestion by Droysen, interprets the decree as a ban on reference to the men found guilty of impiety in 415 (for mutilation of the Hermai or profanation of the Mysteries); but this does not carry conviction, because immunity from satire would have been a privilege, not a penalty.

whether what Syrakosios did in his decree was to insist that comic dramatists should conform to that law;⁵⁸ but that is not what the scholiast on *Birds* says, and it is probably better to admit that we do not know what, if anything, was prevented by the decree of Syrakosios. Whatever it was, it does not seem to have hampered Aristophanes very much.⁵⁹

The conclusion of this chapter is that Aristophanes was writing scripts for performance on particular occasions before a large audience which consisted predominantly of male citizens living in or near the town of Athens. They had come to the theatre to enjoy themselves on a festive occasion, but not merely to hear a string of jokes. They expected a performance in a traditional form, including religious and musical elements, and also ribald humour and ridicule of members of their own community. The rest of this book is about some of the ways in which Aristophanes used and developed this traditional form of entertainment.

⁵⁸ MacDowell *Law* 128–9. When I wrote that book, I was regrettably unaware that almost the same interpretation had been proposed by M. Radin *AJP* 48 (1927) 215–30. There seems to be no clear infringement of the law of slander in *Birds* or in any later play; *Birds* 1470–81 is innuendo, not plain statement.

⁵⁹ For further discussion of this topic see S. Halliwell *JHS* 111 (1991) 48–70, J. E. Atkinson *CQ* 42 (1992) 61–4.

Aristophanes and Athens

An Introduction to the Plays



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