

## **COMEDY IN GREEK THEATRE**

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### **Abstract**

Ancient Greek comedy was one of the final three principal dramatic forms in the theatre of classical Greece (the others being tragedy and the satyr play). Athenian comedy is conventionally divided into three periods, Old Comedy, Middle Comedy, and New Comedy. Old Comedy survives today largely in the form of the eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes, while Middle Comedy is largely lost, ie preserved only in relatively short fragments by authors such as Athenaeus of Naucratis New Comedy is known primarily from the substantial papyrus fragments of Menander.

Ancient Greek comedy was a popular and influential form of theatre performed across ancient Greece from the 6th century BCE. The most famous playwrights of the genre were Aristophanes and Menander and their works, and those of their contemporaries, poked fun at politicians, philosophers, and fellow artists. In addition to maintaining their comic touch, the plays also give an indirect but invaluable insight into Greek Society in general and provide details on the workings of political institutions, legal systems, religious practices, education, and warfare in the Hellenic world, Uniquely, the plays also reveal to us something of the identity of the audience and show just what tickled the Greeks' sense of humour. Finally, Greek comedy and its immediate predecessor Greek tragedy would together form the foundation upon which all modern theatre is based.

### **Key Words**

Comedy in Greek, Origins of Comedy Plays, Old Comedy, Periods of Ancient Greek Comedy

## **COMEDY IN GREEK**

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The philosopher Aristotle wrote in his Poetics (c. 335 BC) that comedy is representation of laughable people and involves some kind of blunder or ugliness which does not cause pain or disaster. C. A. Trypanis wrote that comedy is the last of the great species of poetry Greece gave to the world.

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## **The Origins of Comedy Plays**

The precise origins of Greek comedy plays are lost in the mists of pre history, but the activity of men dressing as and mimicking others must surely go back a long way before written records. The first indications of such activity in the Greek world come from pottery where decoration in the 6th century BCE frequently represented actors dressed as horses, satyrs, and dancers in exaggerated costumes. Another early source of comedy is the poems of Archilochus (7th century BCE) and Hipponax (6th century BCE) which contain crude and explicit sexual humour. A third origin, and cited as such by Aristotle, lies in the phallic songs which were sung during Dionysiac festivals.

## **A Comedy Play**

Although innovations occurred, a comedy play followed a conventional structure. The first part was the parados where the Chorus of as many as 24 performers entered and performed a number of song and dance routines. Dressed to impress, their outlandish costumes could represent anything from giant bees with huge stingers to knights riding another man in imitation of a horse or even a variety of kitchen utensils. In many cases the play was actually named after the Chorus, e.g., Aristophanes' *The Wasps*.

The second phase of the show was the agon which was often a witty verbal contest or debate between the principal actors with fantastical plot elements and the fast changing of scenes which may have included some improvisation (if references to specific audience members are taken as being to individuals actually present in the theatre). The third part of the play was the parabasis, when the Chorus spoke directly to the audience and even directly spoke for the poet. The show-stopping finale of a comedy play was the exodus when the Chorus gave another rousing song and dance routine.

All performers were male professional actors, singers, and dancers and they were helped in their endeavour to represent a vast variety of human and non-human characters by wonderful costumes and highly decorated face masks. The main actors one protagonist (who took the lion's-share of the limelight) and two other actors, performed all of the speaking parts. On occasion, a fourth actor was permitted but only if non-instrumental to the plot. These restrictions were to ensure equality in competition and keep down the costs to the state which funded the professional actors. The Chorus, costumes, musicians, and rehearsal time were funded by an appointed private citizen, a *khoregos*, which was a role carrying great prestige.

Due to the restricted number of actors then, each performer had to take on multiple roles which involved fast changes of costume and the use of recognisable character masks such as those for slaves or gods like Hercules and Hermes. In addition, some masks may well have been decorated to represent in caricature certain contemporary figures that the poet wished to poke fun at. Masks did, however, deprive the actor of using facial expressions and consequently the use of voice and gesture became extremely important. Costumes were another important visual part of the performance, and the most common were padded with tights and a short tunic which revealed a false and exaggerated phallus (connected with Dionysian ritual) a detail clearly seen on many comic scenes represented on Greek pottery.

Plays were performed in an open-air theatre (*theatron*) such as that of Dionysos in Athens and seemingly open to all of the male populace (the presence of women is contested). The presence of theatres in towns across the Greek world and finds of terracotta theatre masks also suggest that comedies (and of course tragedies) were widely performed. The semi-circle of seats created a central area known as the *orchestra* and it was here that the Chorus performed. The main actors performed on a raised stage with a background provided by the *skēne* - a two-storey structure which also provided various entrance points for the actors and provided a means to change costume unobserved by the audience. There was some movement between these areas as

the Chorus might occasionally climb the stage, and actors could also enter the orchestra via the public entrances or parodoi at each side of the theatre.

## **Comedy in Competition**

During the 5th century BCE, at major religious festivals such as the City Dionysia and the Lenaea, comedies were performed in competition over three days. First five and later three comedies were entered for competition, a comic play being performed at the end of the day after the tragedy and satyr plays. Plays were judged by a panel of ten judges chosen by lot and they voted by placing pebbles in an urn Five urns were then chosen at random to decide the final winner.

## **Old Comedy**

Old Comedy refers to plays written in the 5th century BCE. The earliest surviving complete play is Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, first performed in 425 BCE, and citations from surviving fragments of earlier plays can be dated no earlier than c 450 BCE. The plot of comedies usually stretches reality in terms of time and place, jumping incredible geographic distances and rapidly changing scenes Fantastical elements such as giant creatures and improbable disguises are mixed with references to the audience which delivers a roller-coaster ride of satire, parody, puns, exaggeration, colourful language, and crude jokes. Indeed, as the plays were popular entertainment, they reveal some of the popular language used by the Greeks, language not usually found in more serious written material Any public figure was fair game it seems, and even mythology and religion could be made fun of. However, despite this high degree of free speech, certain aspects of religion such as the Mysteries and the higher gods such as Zeus and Athena seem to have been off-limits for the comic poet.

## **Periods of Ancient Greek Comedy**

The Alexandrine grammarians seem to have been the first to divide Greek Comedy into what became the canonical three periods: Old Comedy (archaia), Middle Comedy (mese) and New Comedy (nea). These divisions appear to be very arbitrary, and ancient comedy almost certainly developed constantly over the years.

### **Old Comedy (Archaia)**

The earliest Athenian comedy, from the 480s to 440s B.C.E., is almost entirely lost.

In order to impress the refined and cultured community of Athens in the age of Pericles, the dramatists of the Old Comedy borrowed all its most attractive features from tragedy: choral dances, masked actors, poetic meters, scenery and stage mechanisms, and the dramatic form of Attic Greek. Thus comedy became a recognized branch of the drama, presenting brilliant dialogue and poetic beauty in the choral parts comparable to tragedy plays of the same period.

### **Aristophanes**

The most important dramatist of the Old Comedy was Aristophanes. His works define the legacy of Old Comedy, with their pungent political satire and abundance of sexual and scatological innuendo. Aristophanes lampooned the most important personalities and institutions of his day, as can be seen in his buffoonish portrayal of Socrates in *The Clouds*, and in his anti-military farce *Lysistrata*. In *The Birds* he held up Athenian democracy to ridicule. Only 11 of his plays have survived.

## **Lysistrata**

Led by the title character, Lysistrata, the story's female characters barricade the public funds building and withhold sex from their husbands to end the Peloponnesian War and secure peace. In doing so, Lysistrata engages the support of women from Sparta, Boeotia, and Corinth. All of the other women are first against Lysistrata's suggestion to withhold sex. Finally, they agree to swearing an oath of allegiance by drinking wine from a phallic shaped flask, as the traditional implement (an upturned shield) would have been a symbol of actions opposed to the aims of the women. This action is ironic and therefore comical, because Greek men believed women had no self-restraint, a lack displayed in their alleged fondness for wine as well as for sex.

## **The Frogs**

The Frogs had a more serious tone than some of Aristophanes other comedies However, The Frogs is unique in its structure, because it combine two forms of comic motifs, a journey motif and a contest motif or agon motif, with each motif being given equal weight in the play.

## **Influence**

The Old Comedy subsequently influenced later European writers such as Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, and Voltaire In particular, they copied the technique of disguising a political attack as buffoonery.

The legacy of Old Comedy can be seen in contemporary times in political satires such as Dr Strangelove and in the televised buffoonery of Monty Python and *Saturday Night Live*.

## **Middle Comedy (Mese)**

The line between Old and Middle Comedy is not very clearly marked, Aristophanes and others of the latest writers of the Old Comedy becoming the earliest writers of the Middle Comedy. The Middle Comedy was an offshoot of the Old Comedy, but differed from it in three essential particulars: Middle Comedy had no chorus, public characters were not impersonated or personified on the stage, and the objects of ridicule were general rather than personal, literary rather than political. Where Old Comedy was caricature and lampoon, Middle Comedy was criticism and review.

The period of the Middle Comedy extended from the close of the Peloponnesian War to the enthrallment of Athens by Philip of Macedon, that is, from the closing years of the fifth century BCE. to nearly the middle of the fourth century B.C.E. It was extremely prolific in plays, but not especially so in genius. The favorite themes were the literary and social peculiarities of the day, which, together with the prominent systems of philosophy, were treated with light and not ill-natured ridicule. The Middle Comedy freely parodied the greatest tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the noblest passages of Homer, and the most beautiful lyrics of Pindar and Simonides. Subjects taken directly from ancient mythology were treated in the same way. In dealing with society, classes rather than individuals were attacked, as courtesans, parasites, revelers, and especially the self-conceited cook, who, with his parade of culinary science, was always a favorite target for the shafts of middle comedy.

## **New Comedy**

The new comedy lasted throughout the reign of the Macedonian rulers, ending about 260 B.C.E.

Very little of the text of the New Comedy has survived. A few Greek fragments have come down to us. During the twentieth century the complete text of *Dyskolos*, a play by



Menander, the leading writer of New Comedy, was rediscovered. It is the only example of New Comedy to have survived in its entirety. A few long fragments by Menander have survived as well from such plays as *The Arbitration*, *The Girl from Samos*, *The Shorn Girl*, and *The Hero*) Much of our information about the New Comedy is derived from the Latin adaptations by Plautus and Terence.

For the first time love became a principal element in the drama. The New Comedy relied on stock characters such as the senex iratus, or "angry old man," the domineering parent who is all too often led into the vices and follies for which he has reproofed his son, and the bragging soldier or mercenary soldier returned from war with a noisy tongue, a full purse and an empty head. With these exceptions, the characters were very much the same as in the middle comedy. The new comedy represented Athenian society and the social morality of the period, but it made no attempt to improve it, presenting only in attractive colors. The New Comedy influenced much of Western European literature, in particular the comic drama of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, Congreve and Wycherley. Much of contemporary romantic and situational comedy descends from the New Comedy sensibility, in particular generational comedies such as *All in the Family* and *Meet the Parents*.

### **New Comedy**

Sometime in the late 4th century BCE, a new style of Greek comedy arrived, although the transition from Old Comedy may have been more gradual than the surviving plays suggest and some scholars propose an intermediary stage called Middle Comedy. Certainly, Aristophanes' final two plays differ in style in comparison to his other plays and provide a transition towards a newer style of presentation. This New Comedy focused more on the plot of the play and often employed recurring stock characters such as cooks, soldiers, pimps, and the cunning slave. The Chorus becomes less important to the plot, (providing only musical interludes between acts) and plays seem to settle on an established five act structure. Another difference is that there seem to

be fewer personal attacks (or is that only the impression given by having too few sources to compare with?) which may be due to legislation made specifically to curb this practice. The subject of New Comedy also differed and was more concerned with fictional everyday people and their relations with family, other classes, and foreigners.

## **The Writers of Comedy**

The giant of Greek comedy is Aristophanes Little is known for certain about him, but from the dates of his plays, we may surmise that he lived from 460 to 380 BCE and was from Athens Eleven of his plays survive complete and these are the only surviving examples of the Old Comedy genre. Seen by some (notably Aristotle) as rather crude, the plays, nevertheless, reveal Aristophanes' sharp wit, and they often comment on the inconsistencies and ridiculous aspects of society and public figures. The politician Kleon, the philosopher Socrates, and the tragedy playwright Euripides were the three figures most often found in Aristophanes' comic sites.

## **Satyr Plays**

But comedy-or the type of play called that-is not the earliest form of comic drama on record. Satyr plays, another genre of humorous theatre, were part and parcel of the Greek tragedians' work as far back as the evidence allows us to see. At some point before or during the early Classical Age, the custom developed that a playwright competing at the Dionysia presented a trilogy of tragedies rounded off with a light-hearted satyr play. And even though only one such play (Euripides' Cyclops, see Reading 3) has survived from antiquity complete, there is much information extant about satyr plays. For instance, all evidence points to their following a predictable scenario, the rowdy satyrs intrude upon a standard myth, stir up comic havoc, nearly disrupt its set course, but in the end the traditional resolution of the myth is preserved and the satyrs head off for another jolly adventure. With that, the reason why these plays became popular seems obvious the big question is how and when.

More than just the earliest dramatic comedy attested, satyr plays are also among the earliest plays known. Though no pro classical satyr play has survived to our day, there is sound evidence they existed before 480 BCE. as did the tradition of satyrs themselves. Greek mythological figures of great antiquity. Hesiod, for example, an epic poet who lived around 700 BCE calls these half man half-beast divinities "brothers of wood nymphs" and "good for nothing and mischievous." On Greek vases, they have a long history, too, both before and after the Classical Age. To wit, the post-classical Greek sculptor Praxiteles sculpted a famous statue in antiquity, "*The Satyr Pouring Wine*".

Furthermore from fairly early on there appears to have been a rather intricate mythology surrounding satyrs-much like that involving fairies in Shakespeare's day-further testimony to their popularity. For instance, the satyrs had a leader named Silenus, sometimes called their father," who can at times be wise philosophical or ironical. Nevertheless, like his satyr kin, he more often craves drink and dance and, in general, likes to cavort and misbehave, especially sexually. His modern cultural progeny can be found on the beaches of Florida during Spring Break.

Satyrs were less long-lived on stage, however. While rising quickly and early, the satyr play as a viable form of drama went extinct with comparable alacrity. History chronicles very few serious artists writing new satyr plays during or after the fourth century BCE, which is not to say that later ages did not appreciate the genre-the Roman mosaic of Aeschylus directing a satyr play attests to an enduring memory of its dramatic delights-only that after the Classical Age the satyr play was no longer a vehicle for original creative expression. While some evidence exists that Romans as late as the second century CE composed satyr plays, these were probably only antiquarian exercises, not innovative nor even intended as viable theatrical pieces.

Nor was the satyr play a species of drama which made an impact comparable to that of tragedy. Though it surely contributed in some meaningful way to the history of theatrical

comedy, the satyr play early on gave way to Old Comedy as the principal vehicle of humorous drama. This is no surprise, either, since satyr plays had two obvious strikes against them. First, their humor rested largely on a limited gimmick—the satyrs intrude upon and disrupt a conventional myth—which, while giving the play a clear structure, left less than ample room for the type of genius which comic theatre at its best can stir. Second, because of this, the attraction of these plays depended on the hence's understanding and appreciation of the myth being ridiculed, often in a dramatic form, and with the decline of tragedy after the Classical Age, which depended on it naturally declined, too. In essence, satyr plays constituted a good, early attempt at comic theatre, which burned its way across the stage brightly but rapidly and over time was replaced with a more successful type—or rather types—of dramatic comedy.

However, the history of satyr plays is informative of more than just the evolution of an extinct theatrical genre. It may help map the course of early drama, in general, since it can serve as an important test of theories concerning Western theatre's nascence. Aristotle, for instance, the archetypal "lumper, saw in satyric drama an early stage of tragedy, and early Greek vase-paintings of satyrs seem to support this proposition. Certainly, satyrs maintained a strong presence in the popular imagination of the classical Greeks. Still, it is not clear whether these vases depict satyrs in drama, or just satyrs in general. All in all, the remote origin of the satyr play stands, like that of tragedy, on the horizon of history, and though we hold tantalizing clues as to its birth and role in early theatre, there is little definite that can be said.

The earliest known playwright of satyr plays is Pratinas—also a tragic poet—discussed above, whom some scholars have suggested was, in fact, the inventor of the satyr play, at least in the form it was popularized later in the fifth century. The surviving titles of his plays indeed suggest that thirty or more were satyric. It seems natural then that, if he invented the genre, his corpus would include a disproportionate number of satyr plays.

Aeschylus also was well-known as a composer of satyr plays, perhaps another debt he owed to his great predecessor Pratinas. Several titles of Aeschylus' satyr plays hint at their dramatic content. For instance, Aeschylus Prometheus the Fire-Bringer was a satyr play treating the same general subject as Aeschylus' extant tragedy Prometheus Bound, an excellent example of the way classical playwrights felt free to approach the same myth both tragically and comically. To judge from its fragmentary remains, Prometheus the Fire Bringer involved the satyrs disrupting in typical fashion the famous tale of Prometheus delivering fire to humankind.

Traditionally, the philanthropic Titan arrives as a savior on earth to give his great gift to humans but in the satyr play he lands instead amidst a band of satyrs who steal the fire, and then proceed to do what satyrs do best that is, eat it and kiss it-perhaps worse! At some point in the play, Prometheus warms one of them, "Watch it, old man! You'll singe your beard!" Unfortunately, we know very little else about this play, though there may be a representation of it on a Greek vase dating to the early Classical Age. If so, it attests further to the popularity of Aeschylus' drama in the day, as well as satyr plays in general.

## **Old Comedy before Aristophanes**

Among the first documented events in the early history of Old Comedy is that at some time around 440 BCE drama in general, and comedy in particular, was given an additional venue, the Lenaea, a festival with close associations to the Dionysia. At both ceremonies, comedies and tragedies were presented, though the tragic competition at the Lenaea seems never to have achieved the acclaim that the Dionysia did. To wit, only two tragedians competed at the Lenaea, as opposed to the three, or four or five-the number seems to have changed over time-whose works were performed at the Dionysia. Also, because the Lenaea was held in the dead of winter (December/January), there were no foreign dignitaries in the audience.

But despite its second-rate status, the Lenaea was clearly of great importance to the burgeoning art of dramatic comedy. For instance, it significantly increased the number of

opportunities for comic playwrights to produce new work and, as such, is a measure of growing popular interest in comedy. Furthermore, because comedies at both festivals were always presented as single works Instead of trilogies, the comic playwrights had in general far fewer opportunities than tragedians to showcase their work. The addition of a new dramatic festival featuring comedy doubled the art form's public visibility. With that it is easy to see why the Lenaca was always more famous for its comedies than its tragedies.

Thus, there was clearly no "fourth wall" in Old Comedy, though some in the audience may have wished there had been, which accords well with the nature of the plots of these plays, invariably less coherent than boisterous That is, when the playwright is focused primarily on winning laughs and a first place award and only secondarily on matters like plot construction, the resulting construct is likely to become episodic, affording frequent changes of location because the drama must follow the path of humorous delight before all else Even the main character's central purpose in Aristophanes' drama can be lost amidst the riotous revelry of an Old Comedy dénouement. In sum, it is difficult to categorize a typical Old Comedy-especially so when only Aristophanes' plays are extant-but unlike "goat-song," "party song" is not a bad place to begin.

#### **A. Athenian Poets of Old Comedy Before the Rise of Aristophanes**

Chionides, the earliest Athenian comic poet known today, is little more than a name attached to a few play titles: *Beggars*, *Heroes*, and *Persians*. His name appears on the victory lists around the year 486 BCE. That is really all that can be said about the first known comic playwright

About Magnesium, a near contemporary of his, we know a bit more, since he seems to have been quite popular, winning at least eleven times at the Dionysia and exerting a more lasting influence on comedy than Chionides. To wit, in one of Aristophanes' early plays (*Knights*) he recalls how the fickle Athenian public had at one time rejected Magnes when he became older and less sharp witted. This recollection may not be entirely nostalgic, since

Magnes' plays have titles reminiscent of Aristophanes' plays, such as Frogs, Dionysus, Birds, and Lydians, so Aristophanes may be hinting to the judges that they can atone for their ancestors' injustice to Magnes by awarding his modern heir a first prize.

The comic playwrights who followed Chionides and Magnesium intersect with the period when Aristophanes was active. Thus, with only two names preserved, a few titles and anecdotes and the occasional random fragment free of dramatic context, it seems safe to say the data for early evolution of comedy are scanty indeed. By all fair standards, then, this dramatic genre enters the stage of history only in the next generation.

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