

# Aristophanes

**Acharnians**  
**Lysistrata**  
**Clouds**

Translated with  
Introductions  
and Notes

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# Contents

GENERAL INTRODUCTION	1
ACHARNIANS	13
LYSISTRATA	85
CLOUDS	149

## General Introduction

### Aristophanes and Old Comedy

Aristophanes of Athens, the earliest comic playwright from whom whole works survive, was judged in antiquity to be the foremost poet of Old Attic Comedy, a theatrical genre of which he was one of the last practitioners and of which his eleven surviving plays are our only complete examples. His plays are valued principally for the exuberance of their wit and fantasy, for the purity and elegance of their language, and for the light they throw on the domestic and political life of Athens in an important era of its history. Legend has it that when the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius wanted to inform himself about 'the republic of the Athenians,' Plato sent him the plays of Aristophanes.

Little is known about Aristophanes' life apart from his theatrical career. He was born *ca.* 447/6, the son of one Philippus of the urban deme Cydathenaeum and the tribe Pandionis, and he died probably between 386 and 380. By his twenties his hair had thinned or receded enough that his rivals could call him bald. He seems to have had land-holdings on, or some other connection with, the island of Aegina, a connection that detractors and enemies exploited early in his career in an attempt to call his Athenian citizenship into question. He was twice prosecuted by a fellow demesman, the popular politician Cleon, for the political impropriety of two of his plays (*Babylonians* and *Knights*), but he was not convicted. Early in the fourth century he represented his tribe in the prestigious government position of Councillor. Four comic poets of the fourth century, Araros, Philetaerus, Philippus and Nicostratus, are reputed in ancient sources to be his sons.

In the dialogue *Symposium* Plato portrays Aristophanes as being at home among the social and intellectual elite of Athens. Although the historical truth of Plato's portrayal is uncertain, Aristophanes' plays do generally espouse the social, moral and political sentiments of contemporary upper-class conservatives: nostalgia for the good old days of the early democracy, which defeated the Persians and built the empire; dismay at the decadence, corruption and political divisiveness of his own day; hostility toward the new breed of popular leaders who emerged after the death of the aristocratic Perikles in 429; impatience with the leadership and slow progress of the Peloponnesian War (431-404); unhappiness about current artistic and intel-

lectual trends. There is no question that Aristophanes' comic expression of such views reflected, and to a degree shaped, community opinion, and that comedy could occasionally have a distinct political impact. But the fact that Aristophanes emerged politically and artistically unscathed from the war, from two oligarchic revolutions (411 and 404), and from two democratic restorations (411 and 403) suggests that on the whole his role in Athenian politics was more satirical, moral(istic) and poetical than practical; and the perennial popularity of his plays would seem to indicate that the sentiments they express were broadly shared among the theatrical public.

The period of Old Comedy at Athens began in 486 BC, when comedy first became part of the festival of the Greater Dionysia; by convention it ended in 388 BC, when Aristophanes produced his last play. During this period some 600 comedies were produced. We know the titles of some fifty comic poets and the titles of some 300 plays. We have eleven complete plays by Aristophanes, the first one dating from 425, and several thousand fragments of other plays by Aristophanes and other poets, most of them only a line or so long and very few deriving from plays written before 440.

The principal occasions for the production of comedies were the Greater Dionysia, held in late March or early April, and (from 440) the Lenaea, held in late January or early February. These were national festivals honoring the wine-god Dionysus, whose cult from very early times had included mimetic features. The theatrical productions that were the highlight of the festivals were competitions in which poets, dancers, actors, producers and musicians competed for prizes that were awarded by judges at the close of the festival. The Greater Dionysia was held in the Theater of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis, which accommodated some 17,000 spectators, including both Athenian and foreign visitors. The Lenaea, which only Athenians attended, was held elsewhere in the city (we do not know where). By the fourth century the Lenaea was held in the Theater of Dionysus also, but it is unclear when the relocation occurred.

At these festivals comedy shared the theater with tragedy and satyr-drama, genres that had been produced at the Greater Dionysia since the sixth century. The first "city" contest in tragedy is dated to 534, when the victorious actor-poet was Thespis, from whose name actors are still called thespians. But it is not certain that Thespis' contest was held at the Greater Dionysia, and in any case this festival seems to have experienced major changes after the overthrow of the tyranny and the establishment of democracy, that is, after the reforms of Cleisthenes in 508. Tragedy dramatized stories from heroic myth, emphasizing dire personal and social events that had befallen hero(in)es and their families in the distant past, and mostly in places other than Athens. By convention, the poetry and music of tragedy were highly stylized and archaic. Satyr-drama, which was composed by the same poets who wrote tragedy, had similar conventions, except that the heroic stories were treated in a humorous fashion and the chorus was composed of satyrs: mischievous followers of Dionysus who were part human and part animal.

## Aristophanes' Acharnians

### CHARACTERS

#### SPEAKING CHARACTERS

Dicaeopolis of Cholleidae, a rustic  
 Herald  
 Godson, son of Lycinus, an immortal  
 Ambassador returned from the King of Persia  
 Pseudo-Artabas, the Persian King's "Eye"  
 Theorus, a politician  
 Daughter of Dicaeopolis  
 Slave of Euripides  
 Euripides, the tragic poet  
 Lamachus, a general  
 Megarian  
 Girls (two), daughters of the Megarian  
 Informer  
 Theban  
 Nicarchus, another informer  
 Slave of Lamachus  
 Dercetes of Phyle, a farmer  
 Best Man  
 Messenger I (from the generals)  
 Messenger II (from the priest of Dionysus)  
 Messenger III (from the battlefield)

#### MUTE CHARACTERS

Officers of the Athenian Assembly	Wife of Dicaeopolis
Citizens attending the Assembly	Children of Dicaeopolis
Policemen policing the Assembly	Soldiers under Lamachus
Eunuchs, two	Ismenias, slave of the Theban
Thracian Mercenaries	Pipers from Thebes
Xanthias, slave of Dicaeopolis	Maid of Honor
Slaves of Dicaeopolis	Dancing-Girls, two
Ambassadors returned from the King of Persia	

#### CHORUS

Old Men of Acharnae, twenty-four

## PROLOGUE

(*Dicaeopolis, Herald, Godson, Ambassador, Pseudo-Artabas, Theorus; Officers, Citizens, Policemen, Ambassadors, Eunuchs, Thracian Mercenaries*)

## Dicaeopolis

How often have I chewed my heart with rage!  
 My pleasures? Very few; in fact just four.  
 My pains? The grains in a million heaps of sand.  
 Let's try to recall a case of real euphoria.  
 I know! It's something my heart rejoiced to see: 5  
 that million-dollar fine coughed up by Cleon°  
 That really gave me joy! I love the Knights  
 for that indictment: a banner day for Greece!  
 But then I had another pain, quite tragic:  
 I was waiting for a play by Aeschylus,° 10  
 then heard, "Theognis, bring your chorus on."°  
 Imagine how that shook up my poor heart!  
 Another joy was after Moschus played:  
 Dexitheus did some Theban country-tunes.°  
 But recently I died and went to hell, 15  
 when Chaeris played the Anthem on his pipes.°  
 But never since I first began to wash  
 with soap have I cried such tears as I cry now,  
 whenever the Assembly holds a meeting  
 and all the seats are empty, just like now, 20  
 while everybody's gossiping in the market  
 and trying to avoid the summoner.  
 The Magistrates aren't even here; they're late,  
 and when they come you can't imagine how

- 
- 6 What had pleased Aristophanes, a personal enemy of Cleon (see Introduction), also pleases his hero. But the precise nature of the incident referred to in these lines is obscure. Ancient commentaries explain that some island allies had bribed the demagogue Cleon to argue for a reduction of their property taxes or tribute and that the Knights, motivated by an old grudge, had made him "cough up" the money. If so, the case cannot have gone to trial: conviction for bribery would have resulted in a more severe penalty and at least some interruption of Cleon's political career. Cleon probably made restitution to avoid trial by the procedure known as *probole*. Some scholars think that the incident is not historical at all but took place in a comedy, perhaps Aristophanes's *Babylonians* (see lines 377 ff.), but that is very unlikely, since the Knights do not seem to have played a role in any comedy before *Knights*: see 299 ff., *Knights* 507 ff.
- 10 The great tragic poet, who had died thirty years before, was a favorite of older men like Dicaeopolis, nostalgic for the empire-building years after the Persian wars. The patriotic and inspirational qualities of Aeschylus' plays are dramatized in Aristophanes's *Frogs*.
- 11 The comic poets nicknamed this "frigid" tragic poet "Snow".
- 14 Two noted *kithara* (lyre) players; Dicaeopolis's preference was determined by Dexitheus' choice of song.
- 16 The comic poets considered Chaeris a bad piper and lyre-player.