



ARISTOPHANES

AN  
AUTHOR  
FOR  
THE  
STAGE

Carlo  
Ferdinando  
Russo

ROUTLEDGE  


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*Carlo Ferdinando Russo*



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To my Hekamede, curly-locked, transoceanic  
(*Iliad* XI and XIV)



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## PREFACE

Aristophanes continues to gather suitors, and in recent years I too have kept biting, or rather nibbling, at the strings of his comedies. Some time ago, moreover, at the theatre at Syracuse, I strove to acquaint myself with the historical dawn of comedy, when in the times of Miltiades and Aristides comedy was legitimized and first admitted to the official contests.

When I started work on *Aristophanes, an Author for the Stage*, I was living in Forio d'Ischia-Pithekoussai, where along with Giorgio Buchner and David Ridgway I savoured the Celebration Cup of Nestor and Aphrodites for Olympiad XIV of 724, and with Ingeborg Bachmann and Wystan Auden discussed *Acharnians* and the poetics of Aristophanes. From Pithekoussai I moved to another Mediterranean environment, accepting an appointment in Bari after my years with Giorgio Pasquali at the Scuola Normale di Pisa and in Florence, and then as an afternoon lecturer in Cologne.

The aim of my work on Aristophanes was to point out the theatrical properties inherent in the Word. During the preparatory phases, the University library—so much appreciated by Eduard Fraenkel, professor at Bari throughout the 1960s—offered me Granville-Barker's *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, with its innovative introduction addressed to the 'new scholarship'. In 1929, John Dover Wilson had acclaimed this theatrical philologist as follows:

It is one of the most important literary discoveries of our age that Shakespeare wrote, not to be read, but to be acted; that his plays are not books, but, as it were, libretti for stage performance. It is amazing that so obvious a fact should so late have come to recognition.

Every comedy is indeed a 'libretto', or rather a work of thought designed for theatrical execution. Take *Clouds* and *Frogs*, for instance, both bruised and revised by the author in response to pressing demands. Whereas these comedies simply confound the desk-bound reader, they reward anyone who takes their theatrical properties into account, ranging from the three professional and the amateur actors to the very 'strings of the comedy' themselves, which the author was obliged brusquely to pull: on the one hand when *Clouds* was defeated and subsequently revised, and again when

## PREFACE

Sophocles descended into Hades at a point when the text of *Frogs* was already prepared for the stage.

The functional manuscript of the stage-author is even more apparent in the case of *Wasps*. The comedy has been transmitted in a state of disorder, so to speak, the result of an accident occurring *chez* Aristophanes! Certain elements of the manuscript are evidently out of place, and within its overall habitat there even emerges a fossil, a structural form consisting of 18×2 tetrameters with a phosphorescent alarm-signal at its centre. In recent years, because of the efforts of Dutch scholars, certain new materials have illuminated the deep scansion and the acting style of the prologue of *Peace*, a comedy which prior to the parabasis puts on display a compositive outline of unmitigated purity made up of 36×2 trimeters divided midway by an extra metre ὦ ὦ. The classicist, none the less, remains enchanted by the Byzantine archetype and prepares editions devoid of metrical and dramaturgical directions yet full of sigla, lists and variants of arguable utility: ‘What an ass that master of Byzantine school is’, exclaimed the professor of dramaturgy August Wilhelm von Schlegel; ‘but I have found a better master, a source as new as it is old: the text of the poet.’ Today, Thomas Gelzer, Jean Irigoin, Giuseppe Mastromarco and Hans-Joachim Newiger are close to the autograph of the Athenian dramatist himself.

In the dramaturgical bibliography you will find a work by an evergreen archaeologist, Curt Fensterbusch, the founder of the modern Aristophanic stage. In one of my many letters to Fensterbusch, I once enquired: ‘Why did you not refer more explicitly in your 1912 dissertation to the two theatres of Aristophanes—the theatre of Dionysos and the Lenaian precinct—as you did in 1932 under the heading *Theatron* in Pauly-Wissowa?’ He replied immediately: ‘My professor, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, refused to tolerate the slightest mention of the two theatres. Hence, I was forced to tone down that particular aspect, indeed to hide it almost completely.’ That aspect has not been abandoned here, and I have also recorded its essential traits. Besides, in modern times the Lenaion generally receives greater attention, thanks to *Acharnians* 504: οὐπι Ληναίω τ’ἀγών, ‘the contest is in the Lenaion’. Anyone who is unwilling to listen to *Acharnians* should at least listen to Albin Lesky, who in 1968 drew attention to the pregnant and localizing value of this expression, an expression which is almost as concrete as the religious stone found in Athens on which are inscribed the names of Aristophanes’ companions, including his faithful poet-didaskalos Philonides.

*Aristophanes, an Author for the Stage* has found a congenial translator in the linguist Kevin Wren, whom I had the good fortune to encounter at the Faculty of Science along with his collaborator, Elena Palazzo of Magna Graecia. With my transoceanic spouse Adele Plotkin, art teacher and graduate of Yale University School of Design, I discussed the composition and decomposition of *Frogs* and the staging of the comedies. I have also received unflinching support from Raffaele Ruggiero with Flavio Rizzo, and sensitive suggestions from Eric W. Handley and Sebastiano Timpanaro.

## PREFACE

I am grateful to Kenneth J. Dover, Aristophanist *par excellence*, who immediately, and with great enthusiasm, expressed the idea that the book should be translated, and my thanks also go to the Aeschylean Oliver Taplin, who recently seconded the idea.

In this English edition you will find some afterthoughts, and certain proposals: the theatrical seasons, comedy legitimized in the time of Miltiades and Aristides, the historiographical *Knights* and finally Aristophanes' naval career and his role as coryphaeus in *Acharnians*.

According to Thucydides, Pericles once said to the Athenians: 'By celebrating games and festivals throughout the year, we have procured the greatest distraction for our minds, providing relief from fatigue' (II.38.1). *Clouds* releases an analogous message for the entire year, a message which privileges the joys of spring, in the theatre of Dionysos. Yet the greatest entertainment and most pungent jokes are left to 'Aristophanes in the heavens, to the Universal Author, the Colossus of wit': words annotated at the end of *Geständnisse*, after Plato, by the self-mocking Heinrich Heine. Heine was christened 'the earthly Aristophanes' by his compatriots.

What I wish to say is that when faced with Aristophanes all critics tend to feel like Dikaiopolis at *Acharnians* 367, before the kitchen chopping-block: **ὁ δ' ἄνῆρ ὁ λέξων οὔτοσι τυννουτοσί**, 'he who is about to speak is as tiny as this'.

C.F.Russo  
Florence, 'La Belfagoriana'



# THE THEATRICAL SEASONS AND THE DAWN OF COMEDY

The two annual theatre seasons surface more than once from within the texture of Aristophanic comedy. Regarding the seasons and the two separate audiences, the playbills which the author releases from this or that comedy are of great significance.

The extant comedies number 11, out of an overall total of 40. Here they are, with the theatrical seasons when known: *Acharnians*, Lenaia 425, *Knights*, Lenaia 424, *Clouds*, Dionysia 423, *Wasps*, Lenaia 422, *Peace*, Dionysia 421, *Birds*, Dionysia 414, *Lysistrata*, 411, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 411, *Frogs*, Lenaia 405, *Assemblywomen*, 392, *Plutus*, 388. The Lenaian contests took place between the end of January and the beginning of February, the Dionysian between the end of March and the beginning of April. From the end of the sixth century, tragedy had already installed itself at the Dionysian contests, whereas the comic contests did not begin until 486. At the Lenaia, however, the comic dramatists had the upper hand, with official contests beginning around 440 (the tragic contests around 432). The Dionysia, in which the dithyrambic contests also took place, were organized by the archon basileus, the Lenaia by the eponymous archon.

In *Acharnians* and *Clouds*, the playbills are launched at particularly sparkling moments of the action. In *Clouds*, the Clouds are exhorted to appear, and the excellence is proclaimed of the variegated spring season:

Rainclad virgins, let us stir to gaze upon the glowing land of Pallas, a region of heroes loved by Cecrops, home of the cult, and of its ineffable rites, in whose sacred ceremonies the temple doors swing wide to admit the initiated, bearing gifts to the celestial gods. In every season, there are processions, sacrifices and banquets in Athens; and when springtime arrives, it is time for the feast of Bromios, the excitement of resounding choruses, the deep-quivering Muse of the flauts.

(298–313)

By contrast, the playbill of *Acharnians*, which was performed in winter, is prosaic and punctilious: it proclaims and confirms the Athenian, hence non-Hellenic, identity of the audience, without failing to mention the site of the

contest open to such a restricted public, ‘the purest wheaten flour’; the theatre of Dionysos, on the other hand, could house around fifteen thousand people. Here, the first actor is speaking, and the moment is a political one:

Don’t wish me ill, O gentleman spectators, that I, poor beggar, should come to speak before the Athenians about the city, in a tragi...comedy, for even tragicomedy can distinguish righteousness, and the words I speak will be hard, yet righteous. This time Kleon won’t be able to slander me, accusing me of speaking ill of the city in the presence of foreigners, because we are here alone. The contest is in the Lenaion and the foreigners are absent: the tributes haven’t come, and not even the city’s allies. Now, we are alone, the purest wheaten flour.

(495–511)

There are three different expressions referring to the absentees: ‘the foreigners’, ‘the tributes’ and ‘the allies’ (‘the tributes’ were put on display in the orchestra prior to the performance, when the theatre of Dionysos was full). Just as many expressions are used to describe the occasion itself: ‘we are here alone’, ‘the contest is in the Lenaion’, ‘Now, we are alone, the purest wheaten flour.’ The mention of the precinct in which the contest took place would have increased the author’s freedom of speech and rendered the comedy all the more political in the eyes of the Athenians. In *Knights*, Aristophanes demands the **ληναίτης** roar, ‘the roar proper to the Lenaion’. In *Acharnians*, the protagonist, promoter just previously of **κατ’ἀγρούς Διονύσια** (202), is as topographical as a Baedeker.

And ‘Les Belles Lettres’ render homage to our Baedeker: ‘c’est le concours du Lénaion’. The others, however, envision a formular decline: ‘the Lenaian contest, the contest of the Lenaia’. As remarked in the preface, Albin Lesky, reviewing the second edition of Pickard-Cambridge, has issued a warning regarding the topographical eloquence of **οὐπι Ληναίω τ’ἀγών**. In the same passage, line 510 reads, **οὐπι Ταϊνάρω θεός** ‘Poseidon, the god worshipped in the sanctuary of Tenaros’, and it is known that in this sanctuary the Spartans did actually worship the god. At the end of the century, in the comic poet Sannyrion, **Μέλητον, τὸν ἀπὸ Ληναίου νεκρόν** is topographical and theatrical to the maximum degree: see chapter 4 on *Knights*.

The strings linking the protagonist to the contest precinct also link the orphan-character in *Birds* to the theatre of Dionysos, since civil ceremonies were held in the theatre prior to the contests, and held there alone. Solemn and vital as it was, the theatre of Dionysos is never actually named: ‘a great swarm of goddesses move forward singing’ (297). This eccentric stage-direction is given by the master of ceremonies, Socrates, a moment prior to the song of the twenty-four ‘Virgin Clouds’, advancing from the sky towards the powerful city of Pallas, or rather towards the corridor of the theatre of Dionysos. The solemn Dionysian contests in fact opened with virgins and noble young women moving in procession towards the Dionysian orchestra.

Our Baedeker is always on the alert, and in the Dionysian *Peace* is highly punctilious regarding the Lenaian *Wasps* from the previous year: a number of lines from the parabasis of *Peace* are identical, or extremely similar, to lines from the parabasis of *Wasps*: cf. *Peace* 752 and 754–60 with *Wasps* 1029–37. One variant is significant: ‘but all along I stood up to the monster, fighting for you *and for the islands*’. ‘And for the islands’, adds the poet in the Dionysian *Peace*, since the audience this time includes the allies from the islands, not the Athenians alone.

There exists another refined contact between dramas, this time between Euripides and Aristophanes, between *Andromeda*, with Perseus in flight, and *Thesmophoriazusae*: ‘I am Echo...she who took part in the contest last year, I too, in this very same place, for Euripides’, thus *Thesmophoriazusae* 1059–61, on the lips of Echo, previously one of the characters of Euripides’ *Andromeda*. The theatre in which *Andromeda* was performed must have been the theatre of Dionysos, since it alone was equipped with a flying-machine (the Lenaion, a makeshift theatre, would not have availed itself of this particular device). Besides, Euripides never took part in the contests of the Lenaia, where his enemies, the comic dramatists, were masters of the house.

Comic dramatists are masters by nature: the Greek comic dramatists, for instance, would have been free to consign their works just a couple of months prior to performance. However, they remain the slaves of events: Aristophanes found himself under urgent obligation to revise *Frogs* because of Sophocles’ death, and *Peace* on account of the deaths of the two warlords; *Wasps* had to be revised on account of the trial of the pacifist strategos Laches, whereas at the last moment nine lines were added to *Assemblywomen*, after a draw unfavourable to the author.

‘The greatest distraction for our minds, providing relief from fatigue’, the words of Pericles (Thucydides II.38.1): and its machine of the theatrical season went into motion six to nine months prior to the winter Lenaia and the springtime Dionysia, when between June and July, at the beginning of the Attic year, the choregoi were appointed—a financial weight, fair enough, but a sure source of popularity. Nikias, for example, ‘sought popular trust as a choregos and obtained many first places, never once meeting defeat’ (Plutarch, *Nikias* 3.1.3). A fully fledged season at the Dionysia—tragedy comedy dithyramb—required a mass of 1165 choral voices; the dithyrambic choruses alone employed 500 men and 500 boys.

It was the duty of both archons to choose between the aspirant poets. Plato writes:

Mad would be the city that allowed you to do the things which have just been mentioned, before the archons have judged whether it is opportune or not to allow you to perform your compositions. Hence, children of the sweet Muses, show your choral songs to the archons

along with ours, and if the things you have said seem equal to or better than those we have said, then shall we award you the chorus.

(*Laus* 817d)

A dialogue on admission to the theatre is to be heard in *Frogs* 89–97, during a debate between Herakles and the god of the theatre: ‘Are there not other striplings here who compose tragedies as well, over ten thousand of them, more verbose than Euripides by a mile?’ ‘Aborted little clusters they are, chatterboxes, “academy of swallows”, craft-spoilers; they disappear far quicker than you’d think if they manage to obtain a chorus, the one time they’ve peed on Tragedy. A spermatic poet you wouldn’t find any longer even if you went looking for him, just one who can make an original locution sound out.’

In *Peace*, out of joy for peace, the sarcasm aimed at mediocre tragedians is particularly strong: ‘Karkinos, unexpectedly, gained admission’; ‘In spring the swallow chirps happily and Aeschylus’ two little grandchildren, Morsimos and Melanthios, fail to gain admission. O Muse, launch a nice gob of spit at them.’ And again: ‘Muse, you who have driven war away, dance with me, for I am your friend; and if Karkinos asks you to dance with his sons, pay him no heed, don’t enter into their company, instead treat them like domestic quail, dwarfed dancers with porcupine necks, pellets of goat dung, inventors of artificial dance figures’ (*Peace* 781–817).

The Baedeker is even more punctilious than Professor Eduard Fraenkel: consider, for example, the political brio of Lenaian comedies such as *Acharnians*, *Knights* and *Wasps* (Lamachus, Kleon, the lawcourts), first brought to light by the graduating Friedrich Leo in 1863, in comparison to the Dionysian Panhellenic comedies such as *Peace*; *Lysistrata*, whose contest remains unknown, must also have been Panhellenic. Political brio apart, it is also the dramaturgy of comedies for the makeshift Lenaian theatre which apparently distinguishes them from those performed in the theatre of Dionysos. The Dionysian protagonist remains within the environment of the theatre from the beginning of the comedy to its end. When he is not on-stage, he stays within the structures of the stage and never makes use of the public side corridors, in so far as they lead out of the theatre. The other Dionysian characters, after exiting by the corridor, disappear for good. The characters of Dionysian comedies, with the exception of the divine Tumult in *Peace*, are all governed by the theatrical unity proper to the environment in which the comedies were performed.

By contrast, the Lenaian protagonist is active both in and outside the theatre: he exits by the corridor, re-enters by the corridor, and provides an account of what has happened in the mean time in some extra-theatrical location. The other characters behave in the same way. The exits normally take place during the parabasis. The characters in the Lenaian comedies expand the dramatic action beyond the theatre itself. Only in *Frogs*, which is set for the most part in the nether world, is there no such action.

Extra-theatrical actions are also to be found in *Assemblywomen* and *Plutus*: in *Assemblywomen*, even the chorus has its moment of escape. In these, the two final comedies, the setting is made up of the normal little bourgeois houses, as in comedies of certified Lenaian origin, although, with the one exception of *Clouds*, the setting of the Dionysian comedies is more characteristically of an eccentric variety: the sky, a cave, a copse, the city of the birds. In *Lysistrata* the setting is the Acropolis, in *Thesmophoriazusaë* the Thesmophorian temple: the contests of these two comedies may indeed remain unknown, but they conform none the less to the theatrical unity of the milieu in which they were performed.

In 1917, the German archaeologist August Frickenhaus, discussing the stage-properties of the Greek dramas, stated as a preamble to his rapid analyses of Aristophanes that the attempt to find some scenic distinction between Lenaian and Dionysian comedies is a pointless enterprise, and cited in his favour the scenic unity of plays which Shakespeare composed for radically differing theatres. The reference to Shakespeare is an interesting one, considering that one of the most secure findings of modern Shakespearian scholarship is precisely the scenic, and linked stylistic and ideological, distinction existing between dramas conceived first for one theatre, then for another, then for yet another again, first for one public, then for another.

Comedies designed for the two different contests naturally have a common foundation: articulation into, and composition in, blocks. From *prologue* to *exodos*, these blocks are represented by the *parodos*, *agon*, *parabasis*, *episodes*, *agon II* and *parabasis II*.

They are blocks which a 25-year-old philologist, the geometric Dr Thadeusz Zielinski, illustrated in colour in his brilliant work dedicated to Otto Ribbeck, *Die Gliederung der altattischen Komödie* (Leipzig, 1885): taking the tragic poets as his starting-point, he made designs of seven Aristophanic comedies, from *Acharnians* to *Frogs*. They are blocks probably written progressively by the author on the basis of functional acting units (indeed, revising *Frogs*, the author changed the position of one of these blocks): dialogue on the one hand and parts for the chorus alone on the other (see chapter 15, The disorderly *Wasps*). They are blocks some of which were rather antique for Aristophanes' time: the parabasis, glorious and magnificent, was on its way out of the orchestra and into the museum, as the prologue flowered next to the scenic façade, into which the actor would retire to allow the chorus to deliver the parabasis. The chorus is normally indifferent to the scenic façade, whereas the actor penetrates as far as the spectators seated in the front row.

While the actor would have been employed for an action framed by a **σκηνή**, the choreutai were nomads, countryfolk. At most one might have met them in the open air, in procession. During the parabasis, moreover, the actors are in a state of lethargy, whereas during the prologue the choreutai are straining for the green light.