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THE THEATRE OF DIONYSUS

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On the south slope of the Athenian Acropolis, you can visit the ancient Athenian theatre of Dionysus today. It is here that some of the first dramas as we know them were ever produced. The first excavators to explore the site were the Greek Archaeological Society in 1838. The site contains not only the theatre but the remains of two temples of the god Dionysus, one which was probably built in the 6th century BCE, when Athenian state theatre began to be performed, and the other rather later, after most of our surviving plays premiered. The introduction of theatre began under the tyrant of Athens, Peisistratus, who ruled for most of the mid-6th century BCE. He was responsible for a major expansion of Athenian festivals, including those for Dionysus, an ancient Greek god whose worship goes back to Mycenaean times and is intimately connected with wine cultivation, colonisation, poetry and theatre.

But the theatre in which plays were performed in Dionysus' honour was not originally built of stone. It probably had permanent wooden benches from around 498 BCE, that is, not long after the Athens expelled the tyrant family and inaugurated their first democracy in 507 BCE. The stone theatre we can see today was not to be built until the fourth century, well after the premieres of the great dramas which we can see performed on our 21st-century stages.

The theatre consisted of a central dancing floor, circular in the case of Athens but rectangular in some other early theatres. The spectator sat on benches which partially enclosed the *orchestra*, and were raked into the hillside to maximise everyone's view. The actors had a tent, later a stage-building, which they entered to change role and mask: it was called a *skene*, from which we derive our word *scene*. The main actors usually performed from an elevated wooden platform; there were various interesting mechanisms and props for special effects: ghosts could be made to arise from a tomb, and gods fly in on a crane from Olympus. Another machine was used to roll out dead bodies and other gruesome sights from backstage when violent deeds, which in tragedy conventionally took place out of sight, were reported.

The creative achievement of the Greek dramatists in inventing tragic and comic theatre takes the breath away. Think of the moment when Creon enters the stage at the end of Sophocles' *Antigone*, carrying the corpse of his fully-grown son, two millennia before Lear first carried in Cordelia and howled. Or the moment in Aristophanes' *Frogs* when the god Dionysus rows across the waters of the Underworld, accompanied by a chorus of Frogs all crying *brekekekex koax koax*.

Then there is the poetry. Even the centuries that have passed between us and the Greek tragedians do not hide the intellectual force and beauty of the disgraced Ajax's meditation on the effects of the passage of time (Soph. *Ajax* 646-9):

Time, so long, so immeasurably long,
Reveals everything that has been obscure, and
Conceals what has been apparent. Nothing is
Impossible. Even the sternest oath
Can be broken, and the strongest will.



It is scenes and poetry like this, components in tragedy of a profound intellectual enquiry into suffering encoded in exquisite art, or the way comic laughter can help solve socio-political problems, that have ensured that Greek drama is today once again a living cultural presence. It taught in schools, performed in both professional and amateur theatres, broadcast on radio, and appears in various guises in novels. People who have never read any Greek drama in a modern-language translation, let alone studied it in ancient Greek, often know something about the heroes of Sophocles' *Oedipus* or Euripides' *Medea*—the king who killed his father and slept with his mother, or the woman who killed her children. The climate of our times has made the confrontational ancient Greek dramas seem powerfully relevant and immediate.

Yet they can be deceptive. For many people today, a Greek play will be the first text from antiquity that they encounter. It is often the first to which they feel they can relate, precisely because it can seem so fresh. Audiences still gasp when Medea complains about the unfair status of women not only in society and in the economy but in the bedroom. When Oedipus, the brilliant elected leader of Thebes in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, throws his weight about and loses his temper with people who are trying to help him, he seems to foreshadow all the politicians whose power has gone to their heads to be seen daily on our news programmes.

The pagan, patriarchal, slave-holding Mediterranean society for whom the tragedies were composed can however seem remote. A vital principle to grasp is that the 'audience' of Greek tragedy was, socially speaking, inseparable from its creative personnel. The men – and they *were* all men – involved in making Greek drama between 472 and 401 BCE, the seven decades from which (with three exceptions) most of the forty-five classical Greek dramas date, were almost all members of the Athenian public. Many of the spectators would have performed in a chorus at some stage of their lives, probably when they were young men; others would be proudly watching a brother, son, nephew, grandson, or neighbour performing. Greek tragedy seems less daunting if we remember that it was community theatre, and a significant proportion of the men involved in the productions were what we would call amateurs.

Yet they were also men from varied backgrounds. Athens' total territory, the ancient name of which was Attica, encompassed many miles of coastline, along with some islands, three vast plains divided by mountain ranges, extensive forests, and the long river Cephissus, which flows from the Parnes mountain range in the north to the Saronic Gulf in the west. While some citizens lived inside the walls of the city itself (their numbers swelled in wartime), and could have walked to the theatre from their homes in half an hour, others lived at distances of twenty or more miles, and would have required a day or two to travel up to town. Attica was in fact made up of a hundred and thirty-nine separate communities—villages or districts—called 'demes'. The demes were divided into three groups – coastal, inland and city – and no doubt that type of regional identity was an important factor in domestic relations too.

Village identity remained strong during the fifth century, long after the unification of Attica. Those who were fellow demesmen of the famous playwrights Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles and Aristophanes will have known them well. They were all citizens of Athens and residents of Attica. Aeschylus, who was born in 525 BCE, nearly two decades before the revolution that led to the instalment of the democracy in 507, came from Eleusis, a settlement in the far west of Attica renowned for its ancient cult of Demeter and the mysteries conducted in her honour there. Euripides' family owned property on the island of Salamis, where he is said to have been born at least three decades after Aeschylus; tradition had it that he had composed some of his tragedies in a cave on the island. Certainly there is plenty of imagery connected with the sea and seafaring in his plays. But his deme was actually Phlya, well inland beyond the Mountain of Hymettus east of the city, and this upbringing may be connected with the many trees and the character type of morally upright peasant farmer which feature in his plays. Euripides' near-coeval Sophocles, on the other hand, was born in Colonus Hippios, a suburban deme only about a mile to the north-west of the centre (it is still named Kolonos). Aristophanes, meanwhile, came from the busy city-centre deme of Cydathenaeum, which included the hustle and bustle of the marketplace and was exactly the right place to pick up the latest gossip about celebrities and politicians.

Particular families were collectively involved in theatrical activity, producing both playwrights and actors. Such families were either in the tragedy business or the comedy business. There is an ancient tradition that Sophocles had started out as an actor himself, and played roles in his own tragedies, but the feebleness of his voice had led him to retire from the stage and devote himself to playwriting. The three great tragedians all came from well



established, elite families that must have been financially independent to allow them to work on theatrical productions more or less full-time. There is no talk of large cash prizes at this time. The point seems to have been to win acclaim, which in Athens meant accruing influence, powerful alliances and friendships, and unlimited dinner invitations.

It was to an inland deme called Icaria, often associated with the theatre-god Dionysus, that the traditional inventor of tragedy, Thespis, belonged. The story went that he was a singer of dithyrambs (hymns to Dionysus), or a mummer who travelled around the villages with a special wagon, staging masked entertainments as he went. He was believed to have won the first ever competition in tragedy, held at Athens in 534 BCE. Yet the issue is clouded because, even centuries before theatre had come into existence, many of its aspects had been anticipated in Greek life. The performance of epic, a practice which stretched back hundreds of years into the Mycenaean past and beyond, had included extended passages of direct speech where the bard recited the actual words of Achilles, or Hecuba, or Odysseus. There had been mimetic elements in rituals which involved mythological stories – noises imitating thunder and chariot wheels, for example, had been simulated in enactments of the appearance of gods from the Underworld. Choruses of the ‘archaic’ period had always played with alternative identities and used mimetic gestures. What made tragic theatre distinctively *theatrical* when it was invented in the 6th century was the spooky phenomenon of an actor assuming a role by masking his identity and speaking in the voice of a long-dead or fictional character such as Pentheus or Lysistrata. Theatre and the actor’s mask were conceptually inseparable, and actors are represented with, or contemplating, their masks. Theatre happened on the cusp between the world that the Athenians could see around them—the reality of the south slope of the Acropolis—and the imaginary world of the play, heroic Thebes or the comic Underworld. Crossing this boundary happened at the moment the actor brought to life his fictive identity.

The earliest theatre must have made an overwhelming impression. It combined operatic solo singing, speech and impressive singing-dancing choral set-pieces. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the actor’s assumption of another identity is so much a part of our cultural environment that it can be difficult to recreate the enormity of its original impact, just as the soaking of our own third-millennium culture in celluloid, videotape and digital images means that we will never experience the excitement felt by the earliest cinema audiences. The Greek actor or chorus-man often shed his masculine identity and substituted a female one. And in many plays, the women are given the central, heroic role.

Take Sophocles’ *Antigone*, written by a man who had been a senior Athenian magistrate himself. It opens at a moment of political crisis caused by internecine warfare: Oedipus and Jocasta, now deceased, had four children. The two sons quarrelled over the kingship of Thebes, and Polynices was driven into exile: Eteocles was left ruling Thebes with the support of his maternal uncle Creon. Polynices allied with the king of the important Peloponnesian city of Argos, raised a force and attacked his own city under the famous seven warriors who led the alliance. The assault failed, but in the battle Polynices and Eteocles killed one another.

The tragedy begins at dawn after the Theban victory; Creon, as the nearest surviving male relative of the two sons of Oedipus, has (hastily) assumed power. The play enacts the catastrophic events which take place on his first day in office. It thus ironically demonstrates the truth of his own inaugural speech, in which he declares that no man’s character can be truly known until he has been tested by the experience of government and legislation. For the very first law that Creon passes—that the body of Polynices is to be refused burial—is in direct contravention of the ‘unwritten law’ protecting the rights of the dead. Mortals who in tragedy transgress these immortal edicts invariably come to see the error of their ways. It may be pragmatically expedient for Creon in *Antigone* to take measures to deter possible traitors to the city, but the play reveals that human reasoning faculties are insufficient means for understanding an inexplicable universe. Antigone buries Polynices, is arrested, and sentenced to death by being walled up in a cave. Her fiancé—Creon’s son Haemon—pleads with his father to change his mind. But the sentence is not revoked until after a visit by the prophet Tiresias, who assures him that Polynices should be buried and Antigone spared. Creon changes his mind, but just too late. Antigone hangs herself, Haemon stabs himself, and so does his mother Eurydice. Creon loses everyone that matters to him and ends the play howling in despair.

It has sometimes been argued that Creon’s law was defensible given the divisive nature of the civil war which had disturbed Thebes, and the urgency of the need for a decisive hand on the rudder of government. Funerals, as politicians everywhere know, are dangerous occasions. But I’m not in agreement.



Thinkers contemporary with Sophocles were involved in the development of a new political theory to match the needs of the new Athenian democracy, and thought hard about the mechanisms that allow humans to live together, achieve a consensus (*homonoia*), and cooperate. Protagoras, for example, argued that the ability to live together in a community required the virtues of self-control and sense of justice (Plato, *Protagoras* 322e) in which Creon is so palpably lacking. His edict was passed autocratically, without listening to others or achieving *homonoia*, and his domineering attitude towards the views of others renders the outcome of his reign, and of the play, inevitable. What *does* make Antigone so astonishing, especially when it is remembered that it was written by an eminent politician in an ancient patriarchy, is that Creon is tested by the initiative of a young female relative. This completely incenses him. Her goal is not political influence: she is only obeying the divine law which laid on the senior surviving member of all families the solemn duty of performing funeral rites for their kin. Antigone is mysterious, arrogant, deliberately inflammatory, and inflexible as Creon is erratic. But she is nonetheless shown by the play to have been absolutely right.

Creon's mercantile and technological metaphors are opposed to the beauty of untamed nature associated with his young opponent. Antigone is likened to a fresh northern wind, and Haemon speaks of wild storms, sea waves, and trees in flooding rivers. The young people in this play, given a chance, could have allowed fresh air to blow through the streets, hearts and minds of their long-suffering city and its people. What prevents them is not just their new overlord's intolerance of disagreement, but the oppressive legacy of their own family history. Creon will not listen to Antigone partly because she is young and female, but partly because she is his niece, engaged to his son, and he has long regarded her as troublesome. But she is also the daughter of his brother-in-law (and nephew) Oedipus, a hard act to follow as ruler. It is Creon's misfortune that she happens to be not only his son's fiancée but his niece. The play thus challenges the distinction between Creon's performance as a public figure and as a family man. Creon fails to keep his two worlds separate, and the drama shows that they are as intertwined as the corpses of Antigone and Haemon, locked in a bizarre travesty of a nuptial embrace. It is the play's plea for both politicians and parents to listen to dissenting voices which lends this heartbreaking tragedy such perennial power. Antigone is the most explicitly political of Sophocles' tragedies. It confronts the problems involved in ruling a community with verve and vigour. The ancient Greeks already recognised the political force of the drama. In more modern times the political element has inspired many topical versions and imitations: Antigone has made significant protests against South African apartheid and Polish martial law.

Who were these Athenians whose city created the surviving Greek dramas? Current scholarship estimates that the total population of Attica during this period was about quarter of a million, but that the large proportion of resident foreigners ('metics') and slaves meant that only perhaps thirty thousand inhabitants were adult male citizens. The major theatrical contests, which were extremely popular, may have accommodated just over fifty per cent of this citizen body; it is unlikely that the theatre of Dionysus could have seated significantly more. The evidence does not allow us to be certain, but it is unlikely that women were present at the City Dionysia premieres of tragedy, except perhaps for one or two mature priestesses. The first audiences of the plays therefore seem to have been dominantly free, Athenian or allied to Athens, and male. Yet when considering the impact that these plays had on their audiences, it is crucial to remember that the more popular were revived in place other than Athens, and after the fifth century all across the Greek world, from Italy to Bactria.

The festivals of the wine-god Dionysus, during the course of which drama competitions were held at Athens, fell respectively in the months equivalent to January and April. The January one was itself called 'the Lenaea', and was attended only by residents of Athens. We know far more about the much bigger festival, the 'City Dionysia' or 'Great Dionysia'. This was held after the start of each year's sailing season, thus allowing spectators to attend from all over the Greek world, making it truly 'Panhellenic' as well as giving the Athenians a chance to display their artistic gifts to their allies and associates everywhere.

Authors submitted proposals for plays to the senior city magistrate in charge of administering secular and political affairs rather than religious ones, which underlines how drama, although performed at a religious festival, fused social, political and spiritual concerns. The selected tragedians were allocated their principal actors, their chorus, and also their *choregos*. This was a wealthy man who sponsored the production by funding the maintenance, costuming and training of the chorus of citizens that would be made available to each of the tragedians. The drama competitions at the City Dionysia were inaugurated at an event called the *Proagon* (which means 'before the



competition'). After about 440 BCE this was held in a roofed building called the 'Song Hall' (Odeon) next to the theatre. All the dramatists who were about to compete ascended a rostrum, along with their actors and chorusmen (wearing garlands but neither masks nor costumes), and 'announced' their compositions. It was probably on the day following the Proagōn that the religious rituals themselves began, with the procession called the 'Introduction' (*Eisagōgē*), which annually reproduced the introduction of Dionysus to his theatre in the city sanctuary. According to myth, this commemorated his original journey from Eleutherae on the border with Boeotia into Attica. The icon of Dionysus, which consisted of a wooden pole with a mask at one end, was adorned with a costume and ivy. It was carried from his city sanctuary to an olive-grove outside the city called the Academy, which was on the road that headed out towards Eleutherae. A day or two later, after hymns and sacrifices, Dionysus was brought by torchlight in a great procession back to the theatre in his sanctuary from which he had been taken. The festival opened officially the next morning with the *Pompē*, which simply means 'procession'.

All the city was now in a state of high excitement: the Assembly could not be held, nor legal proceedings initiated, and it seems that even prisoners were released temporarily on bail. The procession would stop at each of several shrines on its way to the sanctuary of Dionysus in order to sing and dance for different gods. At the same time, it defined, by symbolical enactment, the relationships between the different social groups that made up Athenian society. It was led by a virginal young woman from an aristocratic family, who carried the ceremonial golden basket that would contain the choicest pieces of meat from the sacrifice. The men who had funded the productions wore expensive costumes, sometimes made of gold. Provision had to be made for the public feast, and the many thousands of people attending the festival would have needed a great deal to eat: the bull specially chosen to be the principal sacrificial animal, as 'worthy of the god', was accompanied by younger citizens in military training (*ephebes*). There were, in addition, hundreds of lesser sacrifices; the sanctuary of Dionysus must have resembled a massive sunlit abattoir attached to a barbecue. It resounded with the bellowing and bleating of frightened animals, was awash with their blood, and smelled powerfully of carcasses and roasting meat.

To accompany the meal, enormous loaves of bread on spits and wine in leather skins was carried in procession by citizens, while the metics carried the bowls for mixing the wine with water, which was borne in pitchers by their daughters. More groups of men brought up the rear, carrying the ritual phalluses of Dionysus and singing hymns. The City Dionysia therefore still bore traces of the raucous processions that were such an important part of festivals of Dionysus in the country neighbourhoods. They included the carrying of a phallus pole to the accompaniment of obscene songs, and worshippers dressed in 'ithyphallic' costumes (i.e., with inbuilt or attached erect artificial phalluses).

The theatre itself was prepared for the culmination of the festival, the performance of the plays, by ceremonial activities. These began with a purification rite that may have involved yet another sacrifice, of very young piglets. The ten *strategoī* ('generals'), the most senior elected officers of state, then poured out libations of wine to the gods. A public herald made a series of announcements, naming recent benefactors of the city. When the theatre was full, there was a display of rows of golden money bars ('talents'), the revenue Athens had accrued that year from the states allied with her, who in practice were her imperial subjects and thus required to pay tribute. The imperial flavour was heightened by the public presentation of a suit of armour to all those sons of Athenian war dead who had achieved military age, before they were invited to take prominent seats near the front of the theatre.

A herald, with the aid of a trumpet, announced each of the dramatic productions. At the end of the competition, the results were decided by the judges, who were ordinary citizens selected at the last minute from a cross-section of all the tribes, rather than elected, in order to try to avoid corruption. The judges were under pressure, however, to vote in accordance with public opinion, which would be clear from the applause generated by the performances. The victorious tragedian was crowned with ivy, and led in a procession, like a victorious athlete returning from the Olympic Games, to a wealthy friend's house for a private party. The general atmosphere of such a party, with drinking competitions, a sexual undercurrent, pipe-girls, and carousing outside in the streets into the small hours, is well conveyed by the post-performance party dramatised in Plato's *Symposium*.

The physical demands made on actors were considerable. Their vocal training was arduous; they had to sing solo as well as deliver rapid-fire dialogue and extended orations. They had to switch mask and role under pressure, quickly, and often. They needed to take care not to turn their back on the audience for very long, which is a



challenge in the ancient Greek theatrical space with spectators sitting in a semi-circle. Some roles required a strong presence even through extended passages when they remained silent, such as Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Others required conveying a character's qualities through gait. Actors also needed to be physically fit. Some roles require outstanding physical qualities, for example that of Io in *Prometheus*, who needs to leap across the stage as if incessantly goaded by a gadfly, or Philoctetes, who must convey what it feels like to live in unremitting pain. Some spend time prostrate or on their knees, such as Hecuba in *Trojan Women*. Others had to climb onto palace roofs, appear through trapdoors, and fly in the theatrical crane.

We must not be so struck by the professional actors of tragedy that we neglect the core element of the chorus (see below), and indeed the numerous 'backstage' operatives and technicians whose names and labours have vanished almost without trace. We know the words for the trainer (as opposed to the funder) of the chorus, the *chorodidaskalos*. We know the word used for the man in charge of the crane in which gods could appear; he was the *mēchanopoiios* or 'machine-operator'. The productions were probably much more sophisticated in terms of their special effects and visual design than we have the evidence to demonstrate. One of the few types of theatre personnel that the ancient dramatists emphatically did *not* require to help their plays come to life in performance was the lighting designer or technician. The suffering in Greek tragedy and the laughter in comedy took place by the light of the sun.

Each tragedian performed a group of four plays, a tetralogy, consisting of three tragedies and a satyr play, one after another through a long morning. The chorus men's last change of costume during tragic performances at the Dionysia required them to put on the masks and accoutrements made of leather, wool and fur that befitted semi-naked satyrs. Only hours and minutes earlier they had been dressed in one of the three rather different outfits, required by the preceding plays in the tetralogy, suitable for the women, men, or supernatural females who constituted the choruses of all extant tragedies. Hundreds of classical satyr plays were produced, yet only Euripides' *Cyclops* survives in its entirety, together with a substantial part of Sophocles' *Trackers* (*Ichneutae*). One of the few certainties about this genre is that its gender orientation was more profoundly male than that of tragedy and comedy. Like them it was produced by male poets and performed by male actors, in front of a largely male audience. Yet unlike the choruses of tragedy and comedy, which could represent either females or males, the chorus of satyr drama by convention consisted of male satyrs with conspicuous phalluses.

The satyrs, like their divine master Dionysus, confounded most of the polarities by which the Greeks organised their conceptual grasp of the world. They were almost human, yet both slightly bestial and marginally divine. They were childlike and yet their bald heads suggested that they were simultaneously old. They lived in the untamed wild and yet in myth were present at the dawn of technology and the arts of civilisation. They were innocent yet knowing, often stupid yet capable of cunning. They were pugnacious yet timorous and oddly charming. The single boundary they emphatically did *not* confuse is that between male and female. Their extreme male libidinousness was visually represented in their frequent state of erection, represented by the actors' costumes. The subject-matter of satyr drama is heroic myth; favoured plot motifs are servitude and escape, hunting, athletics, drinking, eating, and sex. Athletics in particular offered possibilities for raucous fun with the ligature which athletes used for controlling their penises during competitions; in Aeschylus' *Theoroi*, Dionysus comments that the satyrs have prepared for competing in the athletics events at the Isthmian games by bobbing their ithyphaloi, with the result that they look like mouse tails. While tragedy and comedy choose the civic settings of public spaces or citizens' homes, satyr drama reflects the imagined life of the pre-urban (even Neolithic) male by locating itself outside mountain caves or on remote seashores.⁸ *Trackers*, for example, is set on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia, where the nymph Cyllene is nursing the newborn Hermes, who is about to invent the lyre.

Satyr drama shared with tragedy most of its conventions, yet its jocularly, and its obsession with bodily functions, betray a closer affinity with comedy. In Euripides' *Cyclops* cooking, eating, farting and belching are central jokes). Satyr drama was also much rowdier than tragedy: satyrs danced and pranced continuously, and used more 'shouting noises' (*epiphthegmata*).¹⁰ The satyrs in Sophocles' *Trackers* yell to the audience, 'u u, ps ps, a a'.

Comedy was separate. It was first formally recognised by being integrated into the drama competitions of the classical Athenian state a little later than tragedy, in 486 BCE. A musical chorus of men dressed in obscene costumes accompanied a knockabout actor or two who cracked jokes, and shouted versified abuse at an audience of tipsy citizens. Comedy did not glamorise long-dead mythical heroes in a manner of which a tyrant could



approve: it insulted rulers and well-known citizens. Its performers dressed in bizarre padded costumes with pot bellies and artificial penises (*itthyphalloi*). They wore cartoon-like comic masks ridiculing famous people's—and gods'—facial features. They mocked anybody who 'put their head about the parapet' in public life. They talked freely about sleaze, corruption, and personal toilet habits. They subjected powerful individuals and groups to trial by vitriolic laughter which makes most modern equivalents—*Private Eye*, *Spitting Image*, *Not the Nine O'clock News*—look half-hearted in comparison. The intensity of abuse characters suffered in comic theatre ensured that only robust, popular and clever men survived to be re-elected again.

An ancient inscription found on a large block of stone from the Aegean island of Paros says that the first ever 'comic chorus' was established at the festival by the people of Ikarion (a north-eastern Athenian district), that its inventor was called Sousarion and that the prize was a basket of figs and forty litres of wine. But an entry in a Byzantine encyclopaedia known as the *Suda* reports that the first person to 'put on' a comedy (or to 'star in' one—the Greek is ambiguous) was called Chionides. Perhaps the different names preserve memories of two of the earliest competing comedians, or of the victorious producer and his star actor.

Sadly, no pioneering text by either of them survives and we only have scraps of information about the dozens of plays performed between the first official comic competition in 486 and 425 BC. In fact, only eleven Athenian democratic comedies survive, traditionally called 'Old Comedies' in order to distinguish them from the more domestic and genteel 'New Comedies' which arose after the Macedonian conquest. The extant 'Old Comedies' are all by one dramatist, Aristophanes. Their premieres run from 425 BCE to 388 BC.

From its inception as a recognised element of the festival, comedy was intimately tied to the democracy—the form of sovereign power (*kratos*) held by the free populace—the *demos* of Athens. The other Greek city-states which laid claim to indigenous local comedy—Megara (which bordered on Athens in central Greece) and Syracuse in Sicily, were also democratic at the time. The relationship of comedy with political power—the question of who gets to laugh publicly at whom—remains as close today. A good litmus test of any society is its ability to tolerate unfettered freedom of comic expression. The history of political comedy and of the influence of Aristophanes has always been turbulent.

The most savage comedy by Aristophanes is his *Knights*, performed at the bibulous Lenaea festival of Dionysus, in the month equivalent to January 424 BCE. This text gave the world not only the term *demagogue*—a person who leads (*agogein*) the people (*demos*)—but its archetypal example, the Athenian statesman Cleon. He was the most popular leader to emerge after the death of the aristocratic Pericles, who had been repeatedly re-elected to top office for three decades. Cleon was no aristocrat but a member of a *nouveau riche* family (his father owned a leather business), a champion of the poor, and a fierce, mesmerising orator. Athens was at war with Sparta for hegemony in the Greek world. So Cleon advocated the stern punishment of Greek city-states which seceded from the Athenian empire. He understood that the right of the ordinary, lower-class Athenian citizens to political sovereignty was directly dependent on revenue from subject states. The year before *Knights* he had won a famous military victory over the Spartans and was riding the crest of a wave.

Cleon came from the same district as Aristophanes, Cydathenaeum. It was in the civic heart of Athens and included the market-place. But being close neighbours did not prevent the politician and the poet from loathing one another. The raw class struggle depicted in the less lyrical *Knights* makes it the most scathing political comedy of all time.

Knights is set at the house of the personified People, Demos, built on the Pnyx Hill, where the democratic assemblies were convened. The dominant contemporary politicians, including Cleon, are slaves of Demos: Cleon is called the 'Paphlagonian', which means both a man from what is now northern Turkey, Paphlagonia (so likely to be a slave), and a man whose oratory violently 'boils' or 'blusters'. The chorus consists of upper-class knights, prosperous Athenians who served as cavalrymen rather than in the infantry or navy from which Cleon drew his support. The Paphlagonian's enemies decide to oust him from power. To deride what the Athenian elite saw as the parvenu Cleon's atrocious manners, they select a citizen of the lowest class, a sausage-vendor, and train him in oratory to attack Cleon in parliament.



The Cleon-Paphlagonian is attacked for ugliness, gluttony, corruption, bribery, intimidation, and cynically manipulating Demos with spurious oracles. He is humiliated by comic slapstick and beaten with sausages. Aristophanes gives the best laughs to the Sausage-Seller. Demos realizes that he has been cheated by the Paphlagonian, and chooses the Sausage-Seller as his new steward. The Paphlagonian is driven out to the city's gates, where he is to take over the Sausage-Seller's job, quarrel with prostitutes and sell meat for dogs and donkeys.

Demos forges a New Deal with the Sausage-Seller, now named 'the Pick of the Market-Place', Agorakritos. Agorakritos promises to protect the interests of the people over those of the higher classes. He will ensure that sailors get paid punctually and that knights can't dodge the draft. In this radical ending, a man of the lowest class has been found competent to be top statesman. He is actually a fictional version of Cleon—a popular politician who supports the lower classes. But he does not share Cleon's alleged sleaze and corruption. Aristophanes has responded to the contemporary political climate by producing an ideal picture of a functioning relationship between the Demos and a leader from its lowest social class. This has rarely been achieved in modern democracies, and certainly not in Etonian-dominated Britain.

Knights made Aristophanes' career. It was the first play with which he won first prize as sole dramatist. The Athenians loved it: since Cleon was certainly in the audience, the atmosphere must have been electric. But *Knights* did nothing to damage Cleon's reputation, either. He was soon afterwards elected to a generalship; two years later he fought with the Athenians at the battle of Amphipolis and was killed. Comedy had fulfilled its democratic role. It had put a statesman on trial by vituperation and his reputation had survived the test. This indicates a healthy relationship, from which today we still have plenty to learn, between 'the arts' and the body politic. Admittedly, comedy's influence on public opinion sometimes had more negative results. Although the philosopher Socrates and Aristophanes are depicted as friends in Plato's *Symposium*, the mud which the playwright threw at the philosopher in his *Clouds* the year after *Knights* seems to have stuck. Socrates later said in his defence speech, Plato's *Apology*, that his reputation had been damaged by Aristophanes' comic caricatures of himself as a crazy natural scientist. But the example of Socrates must not diminish our appreciation of the principle of comic scrutiny enshrined in Athenian democratic comedy.

Some of Aristophanes' plays, like those of the tragedians, were mercifully preserved in the manuscript tradition of Byzantium, and the first printed edition was published in Italy in 1498. Soon translated into easy Latin and modern languages, his bracing, obscene and imaginative comedies had a massive impact on the future directions taken both by comedy and by discussions of censorship and freedom of speech. It was not until the 19th century, however, that playwrights really rediscovered the radical potential of Aristophanes. A French vaudeville version of *Lysistrata*, in which the women of Athens go on sex strike to persuade their husbands to end the war with Sparta, was censored. Penned by François-Benoît Hoffman during the final negotiations for the ephemeral peace treaty of Amiens, it was performed in the Théâtre Feydeau in January 1802 (Nivôse of the 10th year of the Revolution). The printed edition reveals that the play had shocked Napoleon because of its irreverent manner of treating the war, apparently too serious a subject for laughter, even on the eve of a truce.

In Britain, Aristophanes was harnessed to the cause of women's suffrage. The exceptionally obscene *Lysistrata* had kept it off curricula and away from the public eye. But by 1910, the many actresses in the movement for women's suffrage were looking to ancient dramas to help them make their point. When Gertrude Kingston became the lessee of the Little Theatre in the Adelphi, she opened her first season with *Lysistrata*, in which she played the title role. The translator was the ardent supporter of both women's rights and gay rights, A.E. Housman's much less well-known brother, Laurence Housman. He had helped found the Men's League for Women's Suffrage in England in 1907 and saw the production as offering an unusual political opportunity. The Woman's Press published Housman's translation in 1911, after which North American suffrage groups also performed it. It was also after cutting her teeth on an adaptation of *Lysistrata* that Joan Littlewood, the most important British female director of the twentieth century, developed her distinctive brand of politicised musical revue best exemplified in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*

Aristophanic comedies have ever since continued to be performed, and sometimes suppressed. Nowhere has Aristophanes been so contested as cultural property as in later twentieth-century South Africa. Originally introduced as part of the syllabus read by the colonial master classes, both British and Dutch, in their schools and universities, productions of Aristophanes began in the 1970s to address apartheid. In an Afrikaans adaptation by



André P. Brink of *Birds*, staged by the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal's Youth Theatre in 1971, the birds created a new flag for the new kingdom out of yellow, green and black feathers, the colours of the African National Congress, at that time a banned organization.

There are many countries in the world where no political theatre or satire is tolerated. The right to question, through comedy, every idea and every person in a position of power is surely a lynchpin of democracy. Leaders who do not approve of Aristophanic comedy are usually suspect: a high-profile case of censorship occurred in 2002, when the government of Silvio Berlusconi interfered in a production of *Frogs* directed by Luca Ronconi. Ronconi's decadent, vulgar Romanised god Dionysus, the protagonist of this play, was all too intelligible to third-millennial Italian audiences.

In 486 BC, when that epoch-making first competition in comic theatre was held, a comic attitude to life was of course not new. The ancient Greeks were cracking jokes from the first minute in history when we can first hear their voices: the Cretans who lived in Bronze Age Knossos must have had their tongues in their Mycenaean cheeks when they called their ploughing cows 'Nimble', 'Swift' and 'Talkative', names we can read in the early script, Linear B. There are plenty of ribald insults designed to provoke laughter in the 8th-century BC Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, often when someone has raised the question of who is entitled to political power. Celebrants of festivals connected with fertility and viticulture had for centuries hurled abuse at local individuals while they processed in mummers' costumes, sometimes on wagons, through the villages. The stem *kom-* in *komoidia*, comedy, means 'revel' or 'carousal', while also sounding like the Greek word for an unwallled rural village: *komoidia* thus means a 'revel-ode', with rustic overtones. But *ad hominem* abuse incorporated into a musical drama, along with an often wildly imaginative plotline, was something completely new. The Athenians had discovered a timeless secret: not only is comedy a political issue, but satire is a democratic duty.

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