

Classic Poetry Series

Aristophanes

- poems -

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Aristophanes (448 BC - 380 BC)

Aristophanes, son of Philippus, of the deme Cydathenaus, was a comic playwright of ancient Athens. Eleven of his 40 plays survive virtually complete. These, together with fragments of some of his other plays, provide the only real examples of a genre of comic drama known as Old Comedy, and they are in fact used to define the genre. Also known as the Father of Comedy and the Prince of Ancient Comedy, Aristophanes has been said to recreate the life of ancient Athens more convincingly than any other author. His powers of ridicule were feared and acknowledged by influential contemporaries — Plato singled out Aristophanes' play *The Clouds* as slander contributing to the trial and execution of Socrates although other satirical playwrights had also caricatured the philosopher. His second play, *The Babylonians* (now lost), was denounced by the demagogue Cleon as a slander against the Athenian polis. It is possible that the case was argued in court but details of the trial are not recorded and Aristophanes caricatured Cleon mercilessly in his subsequent plays, especially *The Knights*, the first of many plays that he directed himself. "In my opinion," he says through the Chorus in that play, "the author-director of comedies has the hardest job of all."

Biography

Less is known about Aristophanes than about his plays. In fact, his plays are the main source of information about him. It was conventional in Old Comedy for the Chorus to speak on behalf of the author during an address called the 'parabasis' and thus some biographical facts can be got 'straight from the horse's mouth', so to speak. However, these facts relate almost entirely to his career as a dramatist and the plays contain few clear and unambiguous clues about his personal beliefs or his private life. He was a comic poet in an age when it was conventional for a poet to assume the role of 'teacher' (didaskalos), and though this specifically referred to his training of the Chorus in rehearsal, it also covered his relationship with the audience as a commentator on significant issues. Aristophanes claimed to be writing for a clever and discerning audience, yet he also declared that 'other times' would judge the audience according to its reception of his plays. He sometimes boasts of his originality as a dramatist yet his plays consistently espouse opposition to radical new influences in Athenian society. He caricatured leading figures in the arts (notably [Euripides](http://poemhunter.com/euripides/)), whose influence on his own work however he once begrudgingly acknowledged), in politics (especially the populist Cleon), and in philosophy/religion (where Socrates was the most obvious target). Such caricatures seem to imply that Aristophanes was an old-fashioned conservative, yet that view of him leads to contradictions.

The writing of plays was a craft that could be handed down from father to son, and it has been argued that Aristophanes produced plays mainly to entertain the audience and to win prestigious competitions. The plays were written for production at the great dramatic festivals of Athens, the Lenaia and City Dionysia, where they were judged and awarded places relative to the works of other comic dramatists. An elaborate series of lotteries, designed to prevent prejudice and corruption, reduced the voting judges at the City Dionysia to just five in number. These judges probably reflected the mood of the audiences yet there is much uncertainty about the composition of those audiences. They were certainly huge, with seating for at least 10 000 at the Theatre of Dionysus, but it is not certain that they were a representative sample of the Athenian citizenry. The day's program at the City Dionysia for example was crowded, with three tragedies and a 'satyr' play ahead of the comedy, and it is possible that many of the poorer citizens (typically the main supporters of demagogues like Cleon) occupied the festival holiday with other pursuits. The conservative views expressed in the plays might therefore reflect the attitudes of a dominant group in an unrepresentative audience. The production process might also have influenced the views expressed in the plays. Throughout most of Aristophanes' career, the Chorus was essential to a play's success and it was recruited and funded by a choregus, a wealthy citizen appointed to the task by one of the archons. A choregus could regard his personal expenditure on the Chorus as a civic duty and a public honour, but Aristophanes showed in *The Knights* that wealthy citizens could regard civic responsibilities as punishment imposed on them by demagogues and populists like Cleon. Thus the political conservatism of the plays might reflect the views of the wealthiest section of society, on whose generosity comic dramatists depended for the success of their plays.

When Aristophanes' first play *The Banqueters* was produced, Athens was an ambitious, imperial power and the Peloponnesian War was only in its fourth year. His plays often express pride in the achievement of the older generation (the victors at Marathon) yet they are not jingoistic and they are staunchly opposed to the war with Sparta. The plays are particularly scathing in criticism of war profiteers, among whom populists such as Cleon figure prominently. By the time his last play was produced (around 386 BC) Athens had been defeated in war, its empire had been dismantled and it had undergone a transformation from the political to the intellectual centre of Greece. Aristophanes was part of this transformation and he shared in the intellectual fashions of the period — the structure of his plays evolves from Old Comedy until, in his last surviving play, *Wealth II*, it more closely resembles New Comedy. However it is uncertain whether he led or merely responded to changes in audience expectations.

Aristophanes won second prize at the City Dionysia in 427 BC with his first play *The Banqueters* (now lost). He won first prize there with his next play, *The Babylonians* (also now lost). It was usual for foreign dignitaries to attend the City Dionysia, and *The Babylonians* caused some embarrassment for the Athenian authorities since it depicted the cities of the Athenian League as slaves grinding at a mill. Some influential citizens, notably Cleon, reviled the play as slander against the polis and possibly took legal action against the author. The details of the trial are unrecorded but, speaking through the hero of his third play *The Acharnians* (staged at the Lenaia, where there were few or no foreign dignitaries), the poet carefully distinguishes between the polis and the real targets of his acerbic wit:

People among us, and I don't mean the polis,

Remember this — I don't mean the polis -

But wicked little men of a counterfeit kind....

Aristophanes repeatedly savages Cleon in his later plays. But these satirical diatribes appear to have had no effect on Cleon's political career — a few weeks after the performance of *The Knights*, a play full of anti-Cleon jokes, Cleon was elected to the prestigious board of ten generals. Cleon also seems

to have had no real power to limit or control Aristophanes: the caricatures of him continued up to and even beyond his death.

In the absence of clear biographical facts about Aristophanes, scholars make educated guesses based on interpretation of the language in the plays. Inscriptions and summaries or comments by Hellenistic and Byzantine scholars can also provide useful clues. We know however from a combination of these sources, and especially from comments in *The Knights* and *The Clouds*, that Aristophanes' first three plays were not directed by him — they were instead directed by Callistratus and Philoneides, an arrangement that seemed to suit Aristophanes since he appears to have used these same directors in many later plays as well (Philoneides for example later directed *The Frogs* and he was also credited, perhaps wrongly, with directing *The Wasps*.) Aristophanes's use of directors complicates our reliance on the plays as sources of biographical information since apparent self-references might have been made on behalf of his directors instead. Thus for example a statement by the chorus in *The Acharnians* seems to indicate that the 'poet' had a close, personal association with the island of Aegina, yet the terms 'poet' (poietes) and 'director' (didaskalos) are often interchangeable since dramatic poets usually directed their own plays and therefore the reference in the play could be either to Aristophanes or Callistratus. Similarly, the hero in *The Acharnians* complains about Cleon "dragging me into court" over "last year's play" but here again it is not clear if this was said on behalf of Aristophanes or Callistratus, either of whom might have been prosecuted by Cleon.

Comments made by the Chorus on behalf of Aristophanes in *The Clouds* have been interpreted as evidence that he can have been hardly more than 18 years old when his first play *The Banqueters* was produced. The second parabasis in *Wasps* appears to indicate that he reached some kind of temporary accommodation with Cleon following either the controversy over *The Babylonians* or a subsequent controversy over *The Knights*. [It has been inferred from statements in *The Clouds* and *Peace* that Aristophanes was prematurely bald.

We know that Aristophanes was probably victorious at least once at the City Dionysia (with *Babylonians* in 427) and at least three times at the Lenaia, with *Acharnians* in 425, *Knights* in 424, and *Frogs* in 405. *Frogs* in fact won the unique distinction of a repeat performance at a subsequent festival. We know that a son of Aristophanes, Araros, was also a comic poet and he could have been heavily involved in the production of his father's play *Wealth II* in 388. Araros is also thought to have been responsible for the posthumous performances of the now lost plays *Aeolosicon II* and *Cocalus*, and it is possible that the last of these won the prize at the City Dionysia in 387. It appears that a second son, Philippus, was twice victorious at the Lenaia and he could have directed some of Eubulus' comedies. A third son was called either Nicostratus or Philetaerus, and a man by the latter name appears in the catalogue of Lenaia victors with two victories, the first probably in the late 370s.

Plato's *The Symposium* appears to be a useful source of biographical information about Aristophanes, but its reliability is open to doubt. It purports to be a record of conversations at a dinner party at which both Aristophanes and Socrates are guests, held some seven years after the performance of *The Clouds*, the play in which Socrates was cruelly caricatured. One of the guests, Alcibiades, even quotes from the play when teasing Socrates over his appearance and yet there is no indication of any ill-feeling between Socrates and Aristophanes. Plato's Aristophanes is in fact a genial character and this has been interpreted as evidence of Plato's own friendship with him (their friendship appears to be corroborated by an epitaph for Aristophanes, reputedly written by Plato, in which the playwright's soul is compared to an eternal shrine for the Graces). Plato was only a boy when the events in *The Symposium* are supposed to have occurred and it is possible that his Aristophanes is in fact based on a reading of the plays. For example, conversation among the guests turns to the subject of Love and Aristophanes explains his notion of it in terms of an amusing allegory, a device he often uses in his plays. He is represented as

suffering an attack of hiccoughs and this might be a humorous reference to the crude physical jokes in his plays. He tells the other guests that he is quite happy to be thought amusing but he is wary of appearing ridiculous. This fear of being ridiculed is consistent with his declaration in *The Knights* that he embarked on a career of comic playwright warily after witnessing the public contempt and ridicule that other dramatists had incurred.

Aristophanes survived The Peloponnesian War, two oligarchic revolutions and two democratic restorations; this has been interpreted as evidence that he was not actively involved in politics despite his highly political plays. He was probably appointed to the Council of Five Hundred for a year at the beginning of the fourth century but such appointments were very common in democratic Athens. Socrates, in the trial leading up to his own death, put the issue of a personal conscience in those troubled times quite succinctly:

"...he who will really fight for the right, if he would live even for a little while, must have a private station and not a public one.

Aristophanes the Poet

The language in Aristophanes' plays, and in Old Comedy generally, was valued by ancient commentators as a model of the Attic dialect. The orator Quintilian believed that the charm and grandeur of the Attic dialect made Old Comedy an example for orators to study and follow, and he considered it inferior in these respects only to the works of [Homer](http://poemhunter.com/homer/). A revival of interest in the Attic dialect may have been responsible for the recovery and circulation of Aristophanes' plays during the 4th and 5th centuries AD, resulting in their survival today. In Aristophanes' plays, the Attic dialect is couched in verse and his plays can be appreciated for their poetic qualities.

For Aristophanes' contemporaries the works of Homer and Hesiod were as instructive as the Bible became for many Greeks in the Christian era. Thus poetry had a moral and social significance that made it an inevitable topic of comic satire. Aristophanes was very conscious of literary fashions and traditions and his plays feature numerous references to other poets. These include not only rival comic dramatists such as Eupolis and Hermippus and predecessors such as Magnes, Crates and Cratinus, but also tragedians, notably [Aeschylus](http://poemhunter.com/aeschylus/), [Sophocles](http://poemhunter.com/sophocles/) and Euripides, all three of whom are mentioned in e.g. *The Frogs*. Aristophanes was the equal of these great tragedians in his subtle use of lyrics. He appears to have modelled his approach to language on that of Euripides in particular, so much so that the comic dramatist Cratinus labelled him a 'Euripidaristophanist' addicted to hair-splitting niceties.

A full appreciation of Aristophanes' plays requires an understanding of the poetic forms he employed with virtuoso skill, and of their different rhythms and associations. There were three broad poetic forms: iambic dialogue, tetrameter verses and lyrics:

Iambic dialogue: Aristophanes achieves an effect resembling natural speech through the use of the iambic hexameter (corresponding to the effects achieved by English poets such as [Shakespeare](http://poemhunter.com/william-shakespeare/) using iambic pentameters). His realistic use of the metre makes it ideal for both dialogue and soliloquy, as for instance in the prologue, before the arrival of the Chorus, when the audience is introduced to the main issues in the plot. *The Acharnians* opens with these three lines by the hero, Dikaiopolis (rendered here in English as iambic pentameters):

How many are the things that vex my heart!

Pleasures are few, so very few — just four -

But stressful things are manysandthousandsandheaps!

Here Aristophanes employs a frequent device, arranging the syntax so that the final word in a line comes as a comic climax. The hero's pleasures are so few he can number them (τῆτα?α, four) but his causes for complaint are so many they beggar numerical description and he must invent his own word for them literally 'sandhundredheaps', here paraphrased 'manysandthousandsandheaps'). The use of invented compound words is another comic device frequently found in the plays.

Tetrameter catalectic verses: These are long lines of anapests, trochees or iambs (where each line is ideally measured in four dipodes or pairs of feet), used in various situations within each play such as:

formal debates or agons between characters (typically in anapestic rhythm);

excited dialogue or heated argument (typically trochaic rhythm, the same as in early tragedy);

long speeches declaimed by the Chorus in parabases (in either anapestic or trochaic rhythms);

informal debates barely above the level of ordinary dialogue (typically iambic).

Anapestic rhythms are naturally jaunty (as in many limericks) and trochaic metre is suited to rapid delivery (the word 'trochee' is in fact derived from *trechein*, 'to run', as demonstrated for example by choruses who enter at speed, often in aggressive mood) However, even though both these rhythms can seem to 'bowl along' Aristophanes often varies them through use of complex syntax and substituted metres, adapting the rhythms to the requirements of serious argument. In an anapestic passage in *The Frogs*, for instance, the character Aeschylus presents a view of poetry that is supposed to be serious but which leads to a comic interruption by the god, Dionysus:

AES.: It was Orpheus singing who taught us religion and how wrong people are when they kill,

And we learned from Musaeus medicinal cures and the science of divination.

If it's farming you want, Hesiod knows it all, when to plant, when to harvest.
How godlike

Homer got to be famous, I'll tell if you ask: he taught us what all good men should know,

Discipline, fortitude, battle-readiness. DIO.: But no-one taught Pantocles — yesterday

He was marching his men up and down on parade when the crest of his helmet fell off!

The rhythm begins at a typical anapestic gallop, slows down to consider the revered poets Hesiod and Homer, then gallops off again to its comic conclusion at the expense of the unfortunate Pantocles. Such subtle variations in rhythm are common in the plays, allowing for serious points to be made while still whetting the audience's appetite for the next joke.

Lyrics: Almost nothing is known about the music that accompanied Greek lyrics, and the metre is often so varied and complex that it is difficult for modern readers or audiences to get a feel for the intended effects, yet Aristophanes still impresses with the charm and simplicity of his lyrics. Some of the most memorable and haunting lyrics are dignified hymns set free of the comic action. In the example below, taken from *The Wasps*, the lyric is merely a comic interlude and the rhythm is steadily trochaic. The syntax in the original Greek is natural and unforced and it was probably accompanied by brisk and cheerful music, gliding to a concluding pun at the expense of Amyntas, who is thought to have lost his fortune gambling.

Though to myself I often seem
A bright chap and not awkward,
None comes close to Arynias,
Son of Sellos of the Bigwig
Clan, a man I once saw
Dine with rich Leogorus.
Now as poor as Antiphon,
He lives on apples and pomegranates
Yet he got himself appointed
Ambassador to Pharselus,
Way up there in Thessaly,
Home of the poor Penestes:
Happy to be where everyone
Is as penniless as he is!

The pun here in English translation (Penestes-penniless) is a weak version of the Greek pun, Penéstaisi-penéstes, "destitute". Many of the puns in the plays are based on words that are similar rather than identical, and it has been observed that there could be more of them than scholars have yet been able to identify. Others are based on double meanings. Sometimes entire scenes are constructed on puns, as in *The Acharnians* with the Megarian farmer and his pigs: the Megarian farmer defies the Athenian embargo against Megarian trade, and tries to trade his daughters disguised as pigs, except "pig" was ancient slang for "vagina". Since the embargo against Megara was the pretext for the Peloponnesian War, Aristophanes naturally concludes that this whole mess happened because of "three cunts".

It can be argued that the most important feature of the language of the plays is imagery, particularly the use of similes, metaphors and pictorial expressions. In *The Knights*, for example, the ears of a character with selective hearing are represented as parasols that open and close. In *The Frogs*, Aeschylus is said to compose verses in the manner of a horse rolling in a sandpit. Some plays feature revelations of human perfectibility that are poetic rather than religious in character, such as the marriage of the hero Pisthetairos to Zeus's paramour in *The Birds* and the 'recreation' of old Athens, crowned with roses, at the end of *The Knights*.

Aristophanes and Old Comedy

The Greek word for 'comedy' (komoidía) derives from the words for 'revel' and 'song' (komos and ode) and according to Aristotle comic drama actually developed from song. The first, official comedy at the City Dionysia was not staged until 487/6 BC, by which time tragedy had already been long established there. The first comedy at the Lenaia was staged later still, only about 20 years before the performance there of *The Acharnians*, the first of Aristophanes' surviving plays. According to Aristotle, comedy was slow to gain official acceptance because nobody took it seriously yet, only sixty years after comedy first appeared at 'The City Dionysia', Aristophanes observed that producing comedies was the most difficult work of all. Competition at the Dionysian festivals needed dramatic conventions for plays to be judged, but it also fuelled innovations. Developments were quite rapid and Aristotle was able to distinguish between 'old' and 'new' comedy by 330 BC. The trend from Old Comedy to New Comedy saw a move away from highly topical concerns with real individuals and local issues towards generalized situations

and stock characters. This was partly due to the internationalization of cultural perspectives during and after the Peloponnesian War. For ancient commentators such as Plutarch, New Comedy was a more sophisticated form of drama than Old Comedy. However Old Comedy was in fact a complex and sophisticated dramatic form incorporating many approaches to humour and entertainment. In Aristophanes' early plays, the genre appears to have developed around a complex set of dramatic conventions and these were only gradually simplified and abandoned.

The City Dionysia and the Lenaia were celebrated in honour of Dionysus, a god who represented Man's darker nature (Euripides' play *The Bacchae* offers the best insight into 5th Century ideas about this god). Old Comedy can be understood as a celebration of the exuberant sense of release inherent in his worship. It was more interested in finding targets for satire than in any kind of advocacy. During the City Dionysia, a statue of the god was brought to the theatre from a temple outside the city and it remained in the theatre throughout the festival, overseeing the plays like a privileged member of the audience.[102] In *The Frogs*, the god appears also as a dramatic character and he enters the theatre ludicrously disguised as Hercules. He observes to the audience that every time he is on hand to hear a joke from a comic dramatist like Phrynichus (one of Aristophanes' rivals) he ages by more than a year. The scene opens the play and it is a reminder to the audience that nobody is above mockery in Old Comedy — not even its patron god and its practitioners! Gods, artists, politicians and ordinary citizens were legitimate targets, comedy was a kind of licensed buffoonery and there was no legal redress for anyone who was slandered in a play. There were some limits to the scope of the satire, but they are not easily defined. Impiety could be punished in 5th century Athens but absurdities implicit in traditional religion were open to ridicule. The polis was not allowed to be slandered but, as stated in the biography section of this article, that could depend on who was in the audience and which festival was involved.

For convenience, Old Comedy, as represented by Aristophanes' early plays, is analysed below in terms of three broad characteristics — topicality, festivity and complexity. Dramatic structure contributes to the complexity of Aristophanes' plays. However it is associated with poetic rhythms and meters that have little relevance to English translations and it is therefore treated in a separate section.

Influence and legacy

The tragic dramatists, Sophocles and Euripides, died near the end of the Peloponnesian War and the art of tragedy thereafter ceased to develop, yet comedy did continue to develop after the defeat of Athens and it is possible that it did so because, in Aristophanes, it had a master craftsman who lived long enough to help usher it into a new age. Indeed, according to one ancient source (Platonius, c.9th Century AD), one of Aristophanes's last plays, *Aioliskon*, had neither a parabasis nor any choral lyrics (making it a type of Middle Comedy), while *Kolakos* anticipated all the elements of New Comedy, including a rape and a recognition scene. Aristophanes seems to have had some appreciation of his formative role in the development of comedy, as indicated by his comment in *Clouds* that his audience would be judged by other times according to its reception of his plays. *Clouds* was awarded third (i.e. last) place after its original performance and the text that has come down to the modern age was a subsequent draft that Aristophanes intended to be read rather than acted. The circulation of his plays in manuscript extended their influence beyond the original audience, over whom in fact they seem to have had little or no practical influence: they did not affect the career of Cleon, they failed to persuade the Athenians to pursue an honourable peace with Sparta and it is not clear that they were instrumental in the trial and execution of Socrates, whose death probably resulted from public animosity towards the philosopher's disgraced associates (such as Alcibiades), exacerbated of course by his own intransigence during the trial. The plays, in manuscript form, have been put to some surprising uses — as indicated earlier, they were used in the study of rhetoric on the recommendation of Quintilian and by students of the Attic dialect in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries AD. It is possible that Plato sent

copies of the plays to Dionysius of Syracuse so that he might learn about Athenian life and government.

Latin translations of the plays by Andreas Divus (Venice 1528) were circulated widely throughout Europe in the Renaissance and these were soon followed by translations and adaptations in modern languages. Racine, for example, drew *Les Plaideurs* (1668) from *The Wasps*. [Goethe](http://poemhunter.com/johann-wolfgang-von-goethe/) (who turned to Aristophanes for a warmer and more vivid form of comedy than he could derive from readings of Terence and Plautus) adapted a short play *Die Vögel* from *The Birds* for performance in Weimar. Aristophanes has appealed to both conservatives and radicals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — Anatoly Lunacharsky, first Commissar of Enlightenment for the USSR in 1917, declared that the ancient dramatist would have a permanent place in proletarian theatre and yet conservative, Prussian intellectuals interpreted Aristophanes as a satirical opponent of social reform. The avant-gardist stage-director Karolos Koun directed a version of *The Birds* under the Acropolis in 1959 that established a trend in modern Greek history of breaking taboos through the voice of Aristophanes.

The plays have a significance that goes beyond their artistic function, as historical documents that open the window on life and politics in classical Athens, in which respect they are perhaps as important as the writings of Thucydides. The artistic influence of the plays is immeasurable. They have contributed to the history of European theatre and that history in turn shapes our understanding of the plays. Thus for example the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan can give us insights into Aristophanes' plays and similarly the plays can give us insights into the operettas. The plays are a source of famous sayings, such as "By words the mind is winged."

Drama

1909: *Wasps*, original Greek, Cambridge University undergraduate production, music by Vaughan Williams;

2004, July–October: *The Frogs* (musical), adapted by Nathan Lane, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, performed at The Vivian Beaumont Theatre Broadway;

1962-2006: various plays by students and staff, Kings College London, in the original Greek: *Frogs* 1962, 1971, 1988; *Thesmophoriazusaie* 1965, 1974, 1985; *Acharnians* 1968, 1992, 2004; *Clouds* 1977, 1990; *Birds* 1982, 2000; *Ecclesiazusaie* 2006; *Peace* 1970; *Wasps* 1981

2002: *Lysistrata*, adapted by Robert Brustein, music by Galt McDermot, performed by American Repertory Theatre, Boston U.S.A.;

2008, May–June: *Frogs*, adapted by David Greenspan, music by Thomas Cabaniss, performed by Classic Stage Company, New York, U.S.A.

Literature

The romantic poet, Percy Shelley, wrote a comic, lyrical drama (*Swellfoot the Tyrant*) in imitation of Aristophanes' play *The Frogs* after he was reminded of the Chorus in that play by a herd of pigs passing to market under the window of his lodgings in San Giuliano, Italy.

Aristophanes (particularly in reference to *The Clouds*) is mentioned frequently by the character Menedemos in the *Hellenic Traders* series of novels by H N Turteltaub.

A liberal version of the comedies have been published in comic book format, initially by "Agrotikes Ekdoseis" during the 1990s and republished over the years by other companies. The plot was written by Tasos Apostolidis and the sketches were of George Akokalidis. The stories feature either Aristophanes narrating them, directing the play, or even as a character inside one of his stories.

Electronic media

The Wasps, radio play adapted by David Pountney, music by Vaughan Williams, recorded 26–28 July 2005, Albert Halls, Bolton, in association with BBC, under Halle label;

Acropolis Now is a comedy radio show for the BBC set in Ancient Greece. It features Aristophanes, Socrates and many other famous Greeks. (Not to be confused with the Australian sitcom of the same name.) Aristophanes is characterised as a celebrity playwright, and most of his plays have the title formula: One of Our [e.g] Slaves has an Enormous Knob (a reference to the exaggerated appendages worn by Greek comic actors)

Aristophanes Against the World was a radio play by Martyn Wade and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Loosely based on several of his plays, it featured Clive Merrison as Aristophanes.

In The Odd Couple, Oscar and Felix are on Password, and when the password is bird, Felix's esoteric clue is "Aristophanes" because of his play The Birds. During the commercial break (having failed to guess the password and lost the round), Oscar orders Felix not to give any more Greek clues and angrily growls, "Aristophanes is ridiculous"! Then when it's Oscar's turn to give the clue on the team's next shot, the password is ridiculous and Oscar angrily growls "Aristophanes", to which Felix gleefully responds, "Ridiculous!"

Music

Satiric Dances for a Comedy by Aristophanes is a three-movement piece for concert band composed by Norman Dello Joio. It was commissioned in commemoration of the Bicentennial of April 19, 1775 (the start of the American Revolutionary War) by the Concord (Massachusetts) Band. The commission was funded by the Town of Concord and assistance was given by the Eastern National Park and Monument Association in cooperation with the National Park Service.

Eserleri:

The Acharnians (425 BC)
The Knights (424 BC)
The Clouds (416 BC)
The Wasps (422 BC)
Peace (421 BC)
The Birds (414 BC)
Lysistrata (411 BC)
Thesmophoriazusa or The Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria (411 BC)
The Frogs (405 BC)
Ecclesiazusa or The Assemblywomen; (392 BC)
Wealth (388 BC)
Undated non-surviving (lost) plays
Aiolosikon (first version)
Anagyros
Frying-Pan Men
Daidalos
Danais
Centaur
Heroes
Lemnian Women
Old Age
Peace (second version)
Phoenician Women
Polyidos
Seasons
Storks
Telemessians
Triphales
Thesmophoriazusa (Women at the Thesmophoria Festival, second version)

Women in Tents
Attributed (doubtful, possibly by Archippus)
Dionysos Shipwrecked
Islands
Niobos
Poetry

A Parody On Euripides's Lyric Verse

Halcyons ye by the flowing sea
Waves that warble twitteringly,
Circling over the tumbling blue,
Dipping your down in its briny dew,
Spi-i-iders in corners dim
Spi-spi-spinning your fairy film,
Shuttles echoing round the room
Silver notes of the whistling loom,
Where the light-footed dolphin skips
Down the wake of the dark-prowed ships,
Over the course of the racing steed
Where the clustering tendrils breed
Grapes to drown dull care in delight,
Oh! mother make me a child again just for to-night!
I don't exactly see how that last line is to scan,
But that's a consideration I leave to our musical man.

Aristophanes

A Rainy Day On The Farm

How sweet it is to see the new-sown cornfield fresh and even,
With blades just springing from the soil that only ask a shower
from heaven.
Then, while kindly rains are falling, indolently to rejoice,
Till some worthy neighbor calling, cheers you with his hearty voice.
Well, with weather such as this, let us hear, Trygaeus tell us
What should you and I be doing? You're the king of us good fellows.
Since it pleases heaven to prosper your endeavors, friend, and mine,
Let us have a merry meeting, with some friendly talk and wine.
In the vineyard there's your lout, hoeing in the slop and mud--
Send the wench and call him out, this weather he can do no good.
Dame, take down two pints of meal, and do some fritters in your way;
Boil some grain and stir it in, and let us have those figs, I say.
Send a servant to my house,--any one that you can spare,--
Let him fetch a beestings pudding, two gherkins, and the pies of hare:
There should be four of them in all, if the cat has left them right;
We heard her racketing and tearing round the larder all last night,
Boy, bring three of them to us,--take the other to my father:
Cut some myrtle for our garlands, sprigs in flower or blossoms rather.
Give a shout upon the way to Charinades our neighbor,
To join our drinking bout to-day, since heaven is pleased to bless our
labor.

Aristophanes

Chorus Of Women

They're always abusing the women,
As a terrible plague to men:
They say we're the root of all evil,
And repeat it again and again;
Of war, and quarrels, and bloodshed,
All mischief, be what it may!
And pray, then, why do you marry us,
If we're all the plagues you say?
And why do you take such care of us,
And keep us so safe at home,
And are never easy a moment
If ever we chance to roam?
When you ought to be thanking heaven
That your Plague is out of the way,
You all keep fussing and fretting--
'Where is my Plague to-day?'
If a Plague peeps out of the window,
Up go the eyes of men;
If she hides, then they all keep staring
Until she looks out again.

Aristophanes

Grand Chorus Of Birds

Come on then, ye dwellers by nature in darkness, and like to the
leaves' generations,
That are little of might, that are molded of mire, unenduring
and shadowlike nations,
Poor plumeless ephemerals, comfortless mortals, as visions of
shadows fast fleeing,
Lift up your mind unto us that are deathless, and dateless the date
of our being;
Us, children of heaven, us, ageless for aye, us, all of whose thoughts
are eternal:
That ye may from henceforth, having heard of us all things aright
as to matters supernal,
Of the being of birds, and beginning of gods, and of streams, and
the dark beyond reaching,
Trustfully knowing aright, in my name bid Prodicus pack with his
preaching!
It was Chaos and Night at the first, and the blackness of darkness,
and Hell's broad border,
Earth was not, nor air, neither heaven; when in depths of the womb
of the dark without order
First thing, first-born of the black-plumed Night, was a wind-egg
hatched in her bosom,
Whence timely with seasons revolving again sweet Love burst out as
a blossom,
Gold wings glittering forth of his back, like whirlwinds gustily
turning.
He, after his wedlock with Chaos, whose wings are of darkness, in
Hell broad-burning,
For his nestlings begat him the race of us first, and upraised us to
light new-lighted.
And before this was not the race of the gods, until all things by Love
were united:
And of kind united in kind with communion of nature the sky and
the sea are
Brought forth, and the earth, and the race of the gods everlasting and
blest. So that we are
Far away the most ancient of all things blest. And that we are of
Love's generation
There are manifest manifold signs. We have wings, and with us have
the Loves habitation;
And manifold fair young folk that forswore love once, ere the bloom
of them ended,
Have the men that pursued and desired them subdued by the help of
us only befriended,
With such baits as a quail, a flamingo, a goose, or a cock's comb
staring and splendid.
All best good things that befall men come from us birds, as is plain
to all reason:
For first we proclaim and make known to them spring, and the
winter and autumn in season;
Bid sow, when the crane starts clanging for Afric in shrill-voiced
emigrant number,

And calls to the pilot to hang up his rudder again for the season and slumber;
And then weave a cloak for Orestes the thief, lest he strip men of theirs if it freezes.
And again thereafter the kite reappearing announces a change in the breezes.
And that here is the season for shearing your sheep of their spring wool. Then does the swallow
Give you notice to sell your great-coat, and provide something light for the heat that's to follow.
Thus are we as Ammon or Delphi unto you. Dodona, nay, Phoebus Apollo.
For, as first ye come all to get auguries of birds, even such is in all things your carriage,
Be the matter a matter of trade, or of earning your bread, or of any one's marriage.
And all things ye lay to the charge of a bird that belong to discerning prediction:
Winged fame is a bird, as you reckon; you sneeze, and the sign's as a bird for conviction;
All tokens are 'birds' with you--sounds, too, and lackeys and donkeys.
Then must it not follow
That we are to you all as the manifest godhead that speaks in prophetic Apollo?

Aristophanes

SONG OF THE CLOUDS (from The Clouds)

CLOUD-MAIDENS that float on forever,
Dew-sprinkled, fleet bodies, and fair,
Let us rise from our Sire's loud river,
Great Ocean, and soar through the air
To the peaks of the pine-covered mountains where the pines hang as tressed of hair.
Let us seek the watch towers undaunted,
Where the well-watered cornfields abound,
And through murmurs of rivers nymph-haunted,
The songs of the sea-waves resound;
And the sun in the sky never wearies of spreading his radiance around.

Let us cast off the haze
Of the mists from our band,
Till with far-seeing gaze
We may look on the land.

Cloud-maidens that bring the rain shower,
To the Pallas-loved land let us wing,
To the land of stout heroes and Power,
Where Kekrops was hero and king,
Where honor and silence is given
To the mysteries that none may declare,
Where are gifts to the high gods in heaven
When the house of the gods is laid bare,
Where are lofty roofed temples, and statues well carven and fair;
Where are feasts to the happy immortals
When the sacred procession draws near,
Where garlands make bright the bright portals
At all seasons and months in the year;
And when spring days are here,
Then we tread to the wine-god a measure,
In Bacchanal dance and in pleasure,
'Mid the contests of sweet singing choirs,
And the crash of loud lyres.

Aristophanes

The Appeal Of The Chorus

If A veteran author had wished to engage
Our assistance to-day, for a speech from the stage,
We scarce should have granted so bold a request:
But this author of ours, as the bravest and best,
Deserves an indulgence denied to the rest,
For the courage and vigor, the scorn and the hate,
With which he encounters the pests of the State;
A thoroughbred seaman, intrepid and warm,
Steering outright, in the face of the storm.

But now for the gentle reproaches he bore
On the part of his friends, for refraining before
To embrace the profession, embarking for life
In theatrical storms and poetical strife.

He begs us to state that for reasons of weight
He has lingered so long and determined so late.
For he deemed the achievements of comedy hard,
The boldest attempt of a desperate bard!
The Muse he perceived was capricious and coy;
Though many were courting her, few could enjoy.
And he saw without reason, from season to season,
Your humor would shift, and turn poets adrift,
Requiting old friends with unkindness and treason,
Discarded in scorn as exhausted and worn.

Seeing Magnes's fate, who was reckoned of late
For the conduct of comedy captain and head;
That so oft on the stage, in the flower of his age,
Had defeated the Chorus his rivals had led;
With his sounds of all sort, that were uttered in sport,
With whims and vagaries unheard of before,
With feathers and wings, and a thousand gay things,
That in frolicsome fancies his Choruses wore--
When his humor was spent, did your temper relent,
To requite the delight that he gave you before?
We beheld him displaced, and expelled and disgraced,
When his hair and his wit were grown aged and hoar.

Then he saw, for a sample, the dismal example
Of noble Cratinus so splendid and ample,
Full of spirit and blood, and enlarged like a flood;
Whose copious current tore down with its torrent,
Oaks, ashes, and yew, with the ground where they grew,
And his rivals to boot, wrenched up by the root;
And his personal foes, who presumed to oppose,
All drowned and abolished, dispersed and demolished,
And drifted headlong, with a deluge of song.

And his airs and his tunes, and his songs and lampoons,
Were recited and sung by the old and the young:
At our feasts and carousals, what poet but he?

And 'The fair Amphibribe' and 'The Sycophant Tree,'
'Masters and masons and builders of verse!'
Those were the tunes that all tongues could rehearse;
But since in decay you have cast him away,
Stript of his stops and his musical strings,
Battered and shattered, a broken old instrument,
Shoved out of sight among rubbishy things.
His garlands are faded, and what he deems worst,
His tongue and his palate are parching with thirst.

And now you may meet him alone in the street,
Wearied and worn, tattered and torn,
All decayed and forlorn, in his person and dress,
Whom his former success should exempt from distress,
With subsistence at large at the general charge,
And a seat with the great at the table of State,
There to feast every day and preside at the play
In splendid apparel, triumphant and gay.

Seeing Crates, the next, always teased and perplexed,
With your tyrannous temper tormented and vexed;
That with taste and good sense, without waste or expense,
From his snug little hoard, provided your board
With a delicate treat, economic and neat.
Thus hitting or missing, with crowns or with hissing,
Year after year he pursued his career,
For better or worse, till he finished his course.

These precedents held him in long hesitation;
He replied to his friends, with a just observation,
'That a seaman in regular order is bred
To the oar, to the helm, and to look out ahead;
With diligent practice has fixed in his mind
The signs of the weather, and changes of wind.
And when every point of the service is known,
Undertakes the command of a ship of his own.'

For reasons like these,
If your judgment agrees
That he did not embark
Like an ignorant spark,
Or a troublesome lout,
To puzzle and bother, and blunder about,
Give him a shout,
At his first setting out!
And all pull away
With a hearty huzza
For success to the play!
Send him away,
Smiling and gay,
Shining and florid,
With his bald forehead!

Aristophanes

The Call Of The Nightingale

Awake! awake!
Sleep no more, my gentle mate!
With your tiny tawny bill,
Wake the tuneful echo shrill,
On vale or hill;
Or in her airy rocky seat,
Let her listen and repeat
The tender ditty that you tell,
The sad lament,
The dire event,
To luckless Itys that befell.
Thence the strain
Shall rise again,
And soar amain,
Up to the lofty palace gate
Where mighty Apollo sits in state
In Jove's abode, with his ivory lyre,
Hymning aloud to the heavenly choir,
While all the gods shall join with thee
In a celestial symphony.

Aristophanes

The Cloud Chorus

SOCRATES SPEAKS

Hither, come hither, ye Clouds renowned, and unveil yourselves here;
Come, though ye dwell on the sacred crests of Olympian snow,
Or whether ye dance with the Nereid Choir in the gardens clear,
Or whether your golden urns are dipped in Nile's overflow,
Or whether you dwell by Maeotis mere
Or the snows of Mimas, arise! appear!
And hearken to us, and accept our gifts ere ye rise and go.

THE CLOUDS SING

Immortal Clouds from the echoing shore
Of the father of streams from the sounding sea,
Dewy and fleet, let us rise and soar;
Dewy and gleaming and fleet are we!
Let us look on the tree-clad mountain-crest,
On the sacred earth where the fruits rejoice,
On the waters that murmur east and west,
On the tumbling sea with his moaning voice.
For unwearied glitters the Eye of the Air,
And the bright rays gleam;
Then cast we our shadows of mist, and fare
In our deathless shapes to glance everywhere
From the height of the heaven, on the land and air,
And the Ocean Stream.
Let us on, ye Maidens that bring the Rain,
Let us gaze on Pallas's citadel,
In the country of Cecrops fair and dear,
The mystic land of the holy cell,
Where the Rites unspoken securely dwell,
And the gifts of the gods that know not stain,
And a people of mortals that know not fear.
For the temples tall and the statues fair,
And the feasts of the gods are holiest there;
The feasts of Immortals, the chaplets of flowers,
And the Bromian mirth at the coming of spring,
And the musical voices that fill the hours,
And the dancing feet of the maids that sing!

Aristophanes

The Harvest

Oh, 'tis sweet, when fields are ringing
With the merry cricket's singing,
Oft to mark with curious eye
If the vine-tree's time be nigh:
Here is now the fruit whose birth
Cost a throe to Mother Earth.
Sweet it is, too, to be telling,
How the luscious figs are swelling;
Then to riot without measure
In the rich, nectareous treasure,
While our grateful voices chime,--
Happy season! blessed time.

Aristophanes

The Origin Of The Peloponnesian War

DICAEOPOLIS

Be not surprised, most excellent spectators,
If I that am a beggar have presumed
To claim an audience upon public matters,
Even in a comedy; for comedy
Is conversant in all the rules of justice,
And can distinguish betwixt right and wrong.

The words I speak are bold, but just and true.
Cleon at least cannot accuse me now,
That I defame the city before strangers,
For this is the Lenaeon festival,
And here we meet, all by ourselves alone;
No deputies are arrived as yet with tribute,
No strangers or allies: but here we sit
A chosen sample, clean as sifted corn,
With our own denizens as a kind of chaff.

First, I detest the Spartans most extremely;
And wish that Neptune, the Taenarian deity,
Would bury them in their houses with his earthquakes.
For I've had losses--losses, let me tell ye,
Like other people; vines cut down and injured.
But among friends (for only friends are here),
Why should we blame the Spartans for all this?
For people of ours, some people of our own,--
Some people from among us here, I mean:
But not the People (pray, remember that);
I never said the People, but a pack
Of paltry people, mere pretended citizens,
Base counterfeits,--went laying informations,
And making a confiscation of the jerkins
Imported here from Megara; pigs, moreover,
Pumpkins, and pecks of salt, and ropes of onions,
Were voted to be merchandise from Megara,
Denounced, and seized, and sold upon the spot.

Well, these might pass, as petty local matters.
But now, behold, some doughty drunken youths
Kidnap, and carry away from Megara,
The courtesan, Simaetha. Those of Megara,
In hot retaliation, seize a brace
Of equal strumpets, hurried forth perforce
From Dame Aspasia's house of recreation.
So this was the beginning of the war,
All over Greece, owing to these three strumpets.
For Pericles, like an Olympian Jove,
With all his thunder and his thunderbolts,
Began to storm and lighten dreadfully,
Alarming all the neighborhood of Greece;
And made decrees, drawn up like drinking songs,

In which it was enacted and concluded
That the Megarians should remain excluded
From every place where commerce was transacted,
With all their ware--like 'old Care' in the ballad:
And this decree, by land and sea, was valid.

Then the Megarians, being all half starved,
Desired the Spartans to desire of us
Just to repeal those laws: the laws I mentioned,
Occasioned by the stealing of those strumpets.
And so they begged and prayed us several times;
And we refused: and so they went to war.

Aristophanes

The Poet's Apology

Our poet has never as yet
Esteemed it proper or fit
To detain you with a long
Encomiastic song
On his own superior wit;
But being abused and accused,
And attacked of late
As a foe of the State,
He makes an appeal in his proper defense,
To your voluble humor and temper and sense,
With the following plea:
Namely, that he
Never attempted or ever meant
To scandalize
In any wise
Your mighty imperial government.
Moreover he says,
That in various ways
He presumes to have merited honor and praise;
Exhorting you still to stick to your rights,
And no more to be fooled with rhetorical flights;
Such as of late each envoy tries
On the behalf of your allies,
That come to plead their cause before ye,
With fulsome phrase, and a foolish story
Of 'violet crowns' and 'Athenian glory,'
With 'sumptuous Athens' at every word:
'Sumptuous Athens' is always heard;
'Sumptuous' ever, a suitable phrase
For a dish of meat or a beast at graze.
He therefore affirms
In confident terms,
That his active courage and earnest zeal
Have usefully served your common weal:
He has openly shown
The style and tone
Of your democracy ruling abroad,
He has placed its practices on record;
The tyrannical arts, the knavish tricks,
That poison all your politics.
Therefore shall we see, this year,
The allies with tribute arriving here,
Eager and anxious all to behold
Their steady protector, the bard so bold;
The bard, they say, that has dared to speak,
To attack the strong, to defend the weak.
His fame in foreign climes is heard,
And a singular instance lately occurred.
It occurred in the case of the Persian king,
Sifting and cross-examining
The Spartan envoys. He demanded
Which of the rival States commanded

The Grecian seas? He asked them next
 (Wishing to see them more perplexed)
 Which of the two contending powers
 Was chiefly abused by this bard of ours?
 For he said, 'Such a bold, so profound an adviser
 By dint of abuse would render them wiser,
 More active and able; and briefly that they
 Must finally prosper and carry the day.'
 Now mark the Lacedaemonian guile!
 Demanding an insignificant isle!
 'Aegina,' they say, 'for a pledge of peace,
 As a means to make all jealousy cease.'
 Meanwhile their privy design and plan
 Is solely to gain this marvelous man--
 Knowing his influence on your fate--
 By obtaining a hold on his estate
 Situate in the isle aforesaid.
 Therefore there needs to be no more said.
 You know their intention, and know that you know it:
 You'll keep to your island, and stick to the poet.
 And he for his part
 Will practice his art
 With a patriot heart,
 With the honest views
 That he now pursues,
 And fair buffoonery and abuse:
 Not rashly bespattering, or basely beflattering,
 Not pimping, or puffing, or acting the ruffian;
 Not sneaking or fawning;
 But openly scorning
 All menace and warning,
 All bribes and suborning:
 He will do his endeavor on your behalf;
 He will teach you to think, he will teach you to laugh.
 So Cleon again and again may try;
 I value him not, nor fear him, I!
 His rage and rhetoric I defy.
 His impudence, his politics,
 His dirty designs, his rascally tricks,
 No stain of abuse on me shall fix.
 Justice and right, in his despite,
 Shall aid and attend me, and do me right:
 With these to friend, I ne'er will bend,
 Nor descend
 To a humble tone
 (Like his own),
 As a sneaking loon,
 A knavish, slavish, poor poltroon.

Aristophanes