

TUTORIAL  
THE COMEDIES OF ARISTOPHANES

G.Lalonde; ARH 311B  
x4264;lalondg; MWF  
9-10; M-F 3-4, or appt.

**Description**

Aristophanes was the greatest playwright of Athenian Old Comedy and the only one whose works have survived in significant part. We will read seven of his eleven extant plays. Understanding and appreciation of Aristophanes comes with getting to know something about the history and structure of Old Comedy, and a lot about the society, politics, religion and warfare which were the subjects of his comic wit. Since a primary or secondary target of much of Aristophanes' satire was the contemporary war between Athens and Sparta, we will read and discuss in tandem with the plays Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*. Along with Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a lampoon of the Athenian intellectual scene of his day, we will read Plato's *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, which will allow us to compare the "historical" Socrates with his comic namesake. These readings will be the subjects of exercises in discussion, writing, and spoken presentation centering on interpretation of theme, plot, scene and character.

Throughout the semester we will explore the meaning, philosophy, and psychology of the comic as we see it in Aristophanes and elsewhere - what makes something funny. Is all humor contextual or are some of its elements intrinsic or universal? What did the famous actor mean with his last words, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard"? We will discuss the philosophy of comedy and perhaps see how much we miss Aristotle's lost treatise on the subject.

Much of the attraction of Old Comedy is how applicable its humorous and serious elements are to our own experience. Toward the end of the semester, the tutorial will divide into teams and, with Aristophanes as its muse, create and present scenarios and scenes for contemporary comedies in the Aristophanic mode. We should end the semester, as Aristophanes did his most of his comedies, with a bash.

**Texts and Short Bibliography**

This is optional, but if you have the time and inclination early in the semester to add to your general background in Greek literature and history, I would recommend one of the following short general treatment of the ancient Greeks: H.D.F. Kitto, *The Greeks*; C. Starr, *The Ancient Greeks*; F. Frost, *Greek Society*; P. Green, *Ancient Greece: A Concise History*.

We will treat at least seven of the eleven extant plays of A. in the order in which they were produced, excluding the *Thesmophoriazusae* (411 B.C.) and *Plutus* (388 B.C.) as less interesting (i.e. to most moderns - *Plutus* was the favorite of the Byzantines) or atypical (*Plutus* is more Middle Comedy than Old). I have not asked you to buy the *Knights* (424 B.C.) and *Peace* (421 B.C.), which are great plays but have, I think, no worthy translation. I will summarize them, and, if, in the unlikely event of running out of things to do, we wish to read them, we can use translations from the library. You may wish to read them on your own.

Required texts (Please use the editions ordered in the bookstore because we will need to refer to the texts by a common pagination.):

*Acharnians*, (425 B.C.), tr. D. Parker  
*Clouds* (423), tr. W. Arrowsmith  
*Wasps* (422), tr. Parker

*Birds* (414), tr. Arrowsmith  
*Lysistrata* (411), tr. Parker  
*Frogs* (405), tr. R. Lattimore  
*Congresswomen* (391), tr. Parker

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (tr. S. Lattimore), one of history's great documents on human nature and social violence, has as its paradigm the conflict of Athens and Sparta in 431-404 B.C. We will read a large part, if not all, of this work as background for the comedies, and we will discuss parts of it that relate to the history of the war in general and to specific episodes satirized or alluded to by Aristophanes.

Plato, *Apology, Crito, and Phaedo* (Penguin classic entitled *The Last Days of Socrates*, tr. H. Tredennick and H. Tarrant). Three dialogues associated with the trial, imprisonment, and death of Socrates, and concerning many lofty topics, not least among them, justice, the rights of the individual versus the common good, and the immortality of the soul.

I have also ordered for each of you T. Fulweiler and A.R. Hayakawa, *The College Writer's Reference*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. This should be a useful handbook for your writing in all classes. In editing your papers I will sometimes use the symbols listed on the last page of this book.

#### Selected Bibliography (not required)

In this tutorial we will deal mostly with the primary sources and there will be no research papers. But in case you should wish to read more widely on your own, I list a few secondary works on Aristophanes and Attic Old Comedy that are available in our library:

- Cornford, F.M., *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914)  
Croiset, M., *Aristophanes and the Political Parties at Athens*, tr. J. Loeb (1973)  
Dearden, C.W., *The Stage of Aristophanes* (1976) - The technical side of production  
Dover, K.J., *Aristophanic Comedy* (1972) - Synopses and commentaries  
Edmunds, L., *Cleon, Knights, and Aristophanes' Politics* (1987)  
Ehrenberg, V., *The People of Aristophanes* (1951) - A study of contemporary history as reflected in the plays  
Henderson, J., *The Maculate Muse* (1975) - An exhaustive study of the "naughty bits" in A.  
\_\_\_\_\_ ed. *Aristophanes: Essays in Interpretation. Yale Classical Studies*, v.26 (1980)  
McLeish, K., *The Theatre of Aristophanes* (1980)  
Moulton, C., *Aristophanic Poetry* (1981)  
Murray, G., *Aristophanes and the War Party* (1919)  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Aristophanes: A Study* (1933)  
Pickard-Cambridge, A.W., *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy* (1962)  
\_\_\_\_\_ *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (1968)  
Reckford, K., *Aristophanes' Old and New Comedy* (1987)  
Strauss, L., *Socrates and Aristophanes* (1966)  
Whitman, C., *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (1964)

Although commentaries on the plays of A. often contain references in Greek, they nevertheless contain much information accessible to the Greekless reader. I will not list them here, but you can call them up on the library catalogue program.

### **Agenda**

**ASSIGNMENTS.** The reading assignments and discussion topics/questions for each week will be distributed in class on the Thursday of the preceding week. Assignment of written exercises will be made sufficiently in advance of the deadlines.

**DISCUSSIONS.** The class will discuss large and small matters (Old Comedy was often a poetry of trivial matters, but often with funny and important implications; Thucydides, the great historian on the war that Aristophanes satirized, is never trivial and never funny) in each of the assigned readings. We will use several modes of discussion and we will take time to examine explicitly the effectiveness of our discussions and talk about ways that they might be improved. In a class period prior to the discussion you will receive as part of the assignment some questions or guidelines to help you to prepare your contribution. I will ask each of you occasionally to read ahead and present a topic or question to be discussed in the following session. In these discussions you are always encouraged to bring up your own particular interests and questions on the topic at hand, its background, or parallels in your own experience.

In the first week of the course, please read through the "Appendix to the Syllabus" about discussion and spoken presentations, and consult it frequently during the semester.

**PAPERS.** In addition to the longer final project (written scenario and scenes of your own creation in the manner of Aristophanes to be read/performed in class - I will describe these later) three or four rather short (no more than five-page) papers plus rewrites at regular intervals for the practice of the skills of writing and the art of interpretation. I will introduce these assignments in class well ahead of the deadlines. I may occasionally address common writing problems in the class, but most of the instruction will be geared to your individual papers and take place in individual conferences in my office. The emphasis will be on the improving the quality of these short papers by rewriting. Plan ahead so that you can refine your writing by means of outlines, serious thought, and more than one draft before you submit it. Everyone will have the opportunity to present at least one finished paper to the rest of the class for discussion of its ideas. I am happy if you get extra instruction from the Writing Lab and may suggest that you do so. I will coordinate my work with theirs, including giving them a copy of the assignment.

Another writing assignment, which will enrich your vocabulary during the semester, and, I hope, a lifelong interest in the treasury of the English language, is called "The Logophile's Journal." You should enter in this glossary each week at least five new words that you have encountered in your reading. You will easily come across five. If not, you are setting the bar too low, or you are the next Shakespeare. For each word in your glossary, please give a full dictionary entry (word, pronunciation, etymology, and at least one definition [the one that fits your quotation]) and quote the context in which you found the word. I will collect these glossaries each week on Thursday and give them back

by Friday. Each week we will spend a few minutes talking about the contents of these journals and wherever that takes us. You should own a good hard-cover collegiate-size dictionary. The ultimate lexicon of the English language is *The Oxford English Dictionary* (twenty volumes or one volume with a large magnifying glass); you now have the *OED* on line; just go to the following pages on the Grinnell College web site: "Library" > "Internet Resources" > "Encyclopedias" > "Oxford English Dictionary." You could actually create your journal by copying, pasting, and printing from this on-line version. You should get to know this work, not just as a source for definitions of unusual words, but for historical matter - chronological citations of significant occurrences of words. A new edition of the *OED* is in the works, and the editors have invited anyone to submit potential entries from published sources. You may have a candidate in your journal! You should also get to know H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 2nd ed. 1965, revised, a fascinating, highly useful, and sometimes hilariously editorializing handbook for solving knotty lexical problems. (There is now a third edition, but lovers of Fowler consider it a little "hot-mod.")

SPOKEN PRESENTATIONS. Formal speaking, like writing, is a valuable skill. Each member of the tutorial will have opportunities to present orally the results of some, reading, thinking, and writing. We will sometimes read scenes from the plays, and the final week or two of the semester will be given over to the dramatic reading of your final projects. The section on spoken presentation in the Appendix to the Syllabus will help you prepare for these exercises.

### **Exams, Grades and Credit**

If attendance, preparation and participation are good, I should be able to give you fair grades without quizzes, mid-term or final exams but reserve the right to examine on any assigned material at any time.

Grades will be based on the quality of one's papers, spoken presentations, participation in discussions, and, if there are any, quizzes and exams. Participation, which is the key to the success of this kind of class, presupposes preparation and attendance, so plan always to fulfill these responsibilities. An avoidable absence will be made up in the form of a two-page paper on the matter treated in the missed class. A prerequisite to credit for the tutorial is the completion of all assignments.

### **Miscellaneous**

Please have an e-mail account because I will regularly send you assignments and other information via computer and will not back it up with a hard copy. So you should read your electronic mail two or three times a day. I will do likewise and you should feel free to get my attention that way.

The tutorial is slotted for four hours per week but we will meet usually from 8:30 to 9:50 am on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and the balance of the time will be given to individual conferences.