

From Old to New: The Evolution of Comedy in the Ancient Greek World

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CHAPTER 1

TIMELINE OF EVENTS (all dates BCE)

478: The Delian League is formed, Athens begins to amass its empire

469: Socrates born

445: Aristophanes born

431: Peloponnesian war begins between Athens and Sparta

430: The Plague of Athens begins, a result of moving the countrymen of Athens inside the city walls to protect them from Spartan siege

429: Plato born, Pericles dies of the plague

426: The Plague of Athens dies down, historians estimate about 25% of Athens' population died due to the plague

425: Acharnians was performed at the Lenaia and takes first place, earliest surviving work of Aristophanes

421: Peace of Nicias, temporary peace treaty between Athens and Sparta

416: The Siege of Melos, genocide of Melian people by Athens' army

414: Birds by Aristophanes is performed at the City Dionysia, winning second place

414: Decree of Syrakosios restricts comedians' ability to satirize individual Athenians in plays.

413: Sicilian Expedition fails spectacularly, devastating losses for Athenian forces

411: Athenian coup led by a group of oligarchs, Lysistrata is performed at the Lenaia, Women at the Thesmophoria Festival is performed at the City Dionysia

410: Democratic restoration in Athens

405: Frogs performed at the Lenaia

404: Peloponnesian war ends, Athens is defeated, Sparta imposes the rule of the oligarchical rule of the "Thirty Tyrants"

403: Uprising led by Thrasybulus overthrows the rule of "The Thirty"

399: Death of Socrates

392: Women at Assembly by Aristophanes is performed

388: Wealth by Aristophanes was performed

384: Aristotle born

372: Theophrastus born

347: Plato dies

342: Menander is born in Athens

338: Philip II defeats Athens and Thebes in the Battle of Chaeronea.

322: Aristotle dies

322: Antipater (Macedonian embassy) establishes a property requirement for franchise, democracy in Athens ends, Macedonian domination of Athens begins

317: Demetrius of Phalerum is appointed *epimeletes* of Athens by Cassander.

316: Menander produces Grouch at the Lenaia

~305-300: Menander produces Girl from Samos

307: Demetrius of Phalerum is exiled to Thebes by Demetrius Poliorcetes and Athenian democrats.

290: Menander dies

INTRODUCTION

There are three distinct genres of Greek comedy that modern scholars continue to study. Of these three genres, categorized first by the Alexandrine grammarians, only two waves have been preserved enough to generalize about what constituted that style. The first genre has been dubbed “Old Comedy,” and its conventions were popular in the 5th century BCE. Exact dates for the eras of comedy are hard to define, as the genres likely evolved gradually over time. However, in this thesis, I choose to define the eras of Old Comedy around the most prolific playwright that survives from the general era: Aristophanes. It is important to note that Aristophanes was not necessarily the first or the last poet to represent the genre of Old Comedy. But given that he was defined by ancient scholars as one of the three greatest Old Comedy playwrights, and he is our only surviving example of the genre, defining the genre by the dates of his lifetime is not farfetched. Therefore, when using the term Old Comedy in this thesis, the general dates will be plays written from 450-388 BCE.

The second genre that this thesis will focus on is New Comedy. Again, the exact dates of New Comedy are hazy, as it likely developed and morphed from the conventions of Old Comedy over time. Our only surviving playwright of this genre (aside from sporadic and fairly indiscernible fragments from his contemporaries) is Menander. Menander's surviving works are limited to just two plays, which are mostly intact, and three other plays that have significant *lacunae*. Menander, like Aristophanes, was likely not the first or the last playwright to write within the genre of New Comedy. However, since he is also our only surviving example of the genre, this thesis will reference New Comedy's timeframe within his life which was from 342-290 BCE.

How comedy was consumed in antiquity is in many ways foreign to our modern-day perception of comedy. Therefore, in my thesis, I will elaborate on the ways in which Greek comedy (Old and New) was performed, consumed, and actualized on stage. These sections will also individually examine the differences in convention between Old and New Comedy, and how those differences related to the overall themes and humor of the comedies. After the differences and similarities between the two genres have been outlined, I will attempt to explain through historical events, evolving philosophy, and economic factors exactly why and how these changes might have come about.

My argument rests on the consideration of all of these external factors in some way influencing the subjects that both Aristophanes and Menander chose to include in their comedies. And often, these factors were not working alone. It is the combination of societal, political, philosophical, and economic changes exhibiting pressure on the *polis* that resulted in the Greek mind's change of humor and therefore an explicit split in genres of comedy. Whether the influence was conscious or unconscious, the significant changes we see between Old and New Comedy mirror the significant changes that Athens was experiencing through these times in history.

This thesis will focus first on establishing the differences and then attempting to explain their relevance and correlation to the more systemic and overarching changes Athens underwent in around one hundred years.

DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE OF GREEK COMEDY

While the origins of ancient Greek Comedy are still obscure, historians are mostly confident that official performances of Greek comedy in Athens began at two annual religious festivals, the City Dionysia and the Lenaia. Comedy performances debuted at the City Dionysia in 487 or 486 BCE and are thought to have debuted at the Lenaia around 442 BCE. The Lenaia

took place in the month of *Gamelion* in the Greek calendar year (January/February), while the City Dionysia was held in *Elaphebolion* (March/April).¹ Although we have historical evidence of ancient comedy being performed at places other than Athens, through the existence of theaters and mentions of other performances, my thesis will focus entirely on Athenian comedy because the only extant plays from both Greek Old Comedy and Greek New Comedy were written by Athenian playwrights that were staging their work in Athens.

Although the City Dionysia and the Lenaia were both festivals at which dramatic competitions were staged, their origins, schedule, and audience differed slightly. The origins of the City Dionysia centered around the worship of the god Dionysus, who was associated with drinking, revelry, performance, and freedom. The festival started with a great procession through the streets, with much of Athens' population participating, followed by a communal feast, ritual sacrifices of animals, and an offering of libations in dedication to the god. These religious festivities set the tone for the following days filled with dramatic performances. By processing, feasting, and participating in ritual, the City Dionysia represented civic unity and joint identity of Athenians. The act of eating meat together in the feast, regardless of participants' social standing, was a symbolic expression of Athenian civic identity.² This desire to display Athenian unity was exaggerated by the alignment of the festival with the time of year that the allies of imperial Athens were required to pay their *phoros*, which were dues for inclusion in Athens' Delian League. In addition to this, the City Dionysia took place at a warmer time of year, allowing non-residents and non-citizens to travel from different *poleis* in order to witness the dramatic festival. This resulted in a considerable number of foreigners participating in and

¹ White, M. E., and Arthur Pickard-Cambridge. "The Dramatic Festivals of Athens." *Phoenix*, vol. 9, no. 4, Jan. 1955, p. 189. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1086349>.

² Goldhill, Simon. "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987): 58–76. Web.

viewing the dramatic festival, in addition to Athenian residents' attendance.³ For this reason, some people in contemporary Athens believed that plays shown during the City Dionysia should not overtly criticize Athens' political dealings, as criticism risked being seen as a weakness in front of foreigners. This idea is conveyed in a scene in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*. The protagonist Dicaeopolis mocks a contemporary political figure and personal rival of Aristophanes, Cleon. Cleon claimed that Aristophanes' plays (*Babylonians*' or *Banqueters*') depict Athens' political dealings as slanderous and exaggerated and therefore, treacherous to perform at the City Dionysia in front of the city's allies and visitors.⁴

Unlike the City Dionysia, the Lenaia, as far as scholars can ascertain, manifested itself as a strictly theatrical and social event with non-religious undertones. While there is potential evidence in paintings on vases commonly known as the "Lenaia Vases" that the Lenaia might have demonstrated a similar ritual procession as the City Dionysia, the depictions on the vases are still being questioned by modern scholars (Figure 1).⁵

The Lenaia took place during the coldest part of the year for Athenians. Because of this, its audience was much more insular and included almost exclusively Athenian citizens, as foreigners would not have been able to travel due to the extreme temperatures and volatile maritime conditions that occurred during the winter. Although there could have been non-Athenian residents in attendance, they would have been *metics*: permanent foreign residents in Athens. This meant that the subject of the plays at the Lenaia could be slightly more critical of the contemporary events that surrounded Athens and its government, without the fear of

³ MacDowell (1995): 15-16.

⁴ Roche (trans.), *Acharnians*, (2005): 27-28.

⁵ Pierce, (1998) and F. Frontisi-Ducroux, (1991).

appearing weak in front of non-Athenians attending the festival, like they did at the City Dionysia. However, the plays at the Lenaia were not always more politically engaged.



Figure 1. Attic Black-Figure Column Krater, c. 520 BCE (Getty Museum). Dionysus, the god of wine who is wearing an ivy wreath and holding his drinking horn, stands calmly in the midst of a group of dancing maenads and satyrs (the figures with tails).

There is still considerable scholarly debate concerning the demographic composition of the audience of Greek Old Comedy, aside from the differences due to seasonal timing of the festivals. After the Periclean reform in 451 BCE, Athenian citizenship was granted only to men born in Athens to two Athenian born parents.⁶ Regardless of social standing, men that fell under this category were encouraged and expected to attend both festivals. Although there was an entrance fee to attend the dramatic performance, the Athenian state sponsored poorer citizens to

⁶ Carawan, (2008): 1.

attend by allowing them to apply for their entrance fee to be covered.⁷ This demonstrates how vital theater was for Athenian identity, for the act of watching the comedies was a direct reflection of Athenian democratic identity and watching the plays as a whole *polis* was a microcosm of the equality the Athenian direct democracy promised. This idea is especially significant when considering how their democracy was significantly destabilized or totally inactive due to civil unrest, tyrants, and Macedonian occupation during the era of Greek New Comedy.

In terms of their scheduling programs, both festivals began with performances of tragedy due to the ancient Greek assessment of tragedy as an intrinsically nobler dramatic form than comedy. During the City Dionysia, the following three days after the Great Procession were devoted to tragic performance. Three tragic playwrights would be chosen to perform three plays each, and each of the three days was devoted to one of their trilogies. After the three days of tragedy, the festival would conclude with a single day devoted to comedy. Five comic playwrights would stage their individual plays all on the same day, though the number was reduced to three during the Second Peloponnesian War in the face of Athens' economic struggles. The Lenaia was a shorter festival, spanning only four days. The first two days of performance were once again dedicated to tragic trilogies, while the final day was devoted to comedy, just as in the City Dionysia. It is important to note that in both instances tragedy and comedy were performed side-by-side and often in close relation to each other. It was common for comedies to make light of tragedies from the previous year's performances or to farcically quote tragic playwrights, and the exchange of ideas between comedy and tragedy in the ancient world contributed to many jokes employed in Greek Old Comedy.

⁷ Dilts' edition, *Schol. Demosthenes*, (1983): 15-16. MacDowell, (1995): 13-14.

Finally, an essential element of Greek comedy is the factor of competition. The playwrights were selected to perform their plays by either the *archon* (City Dionysia) or the *basileus* (Lenaia), assuming there were more than five poets attempt to stage their plays at either festival respectively.⁸ Just being selected to perform was considered a huge honor, but the competition did not stop there. Before both festivals, a panel of judges were selected by the Athenian Council and then narrowed down to the actual panel through the Athenian assembly voting. The panel of judges would swear an oath to vote for the best performances and sit in the front row seats for all the plays at that particular festival.⁹ The nature of these dramatic performances encouraged excellence and competition between the poets putting on plays. An essential feature of Greek comedy is the fact that it was meant to be performed only once, specifically in the year it was written, and intended to win the dramatic competition. These unique factors in the presentation of Greek comedy contribute to the ways in which I will analyze comedy's interaction with larger societal trends and historical events later in this thesis.

INTRODUCTION TO ARISTOPHANES

Although official comedic performances at the City Dionysia were recorded for the first time in 487 or 486 BCE, our earliest entirely preserved example of Greek Old Comedy is *Acharnians*, written by Aristophanes, and thought to have been staged at the Lenaia in 425 BCE. This was not Aristophanes' first play, for his *Banqueters* and *Babylonians* had been staged in 427 and 426 BCE, respectively, though unfortunately these plays are lost.¹⁰

Ancient scholars divided Greek comedy into three genres: Old, Middle, and New Comedy. Aristophanes is our only surviving playwright who epitomizes what scholars have

⁸ MacDowell, (1995): 9.

⁹ MacDowell, (1995): 11.

¹⁰ Roche, (2005): ix.

termed “Greek Old Comedy.” Aristophanes likely was born in the Athenian deme Kydathenaion around in the early 440’s BCE and became renowned among contemporaries and subsequent generations as one of the greatest playwrights in Greek Old Comedy. He wrote over forty plays, staged at both the Lenaia and the City Dionysia, but only eleven of these survive partially or almost completely intact. Aristophanes had many contemporary rivals but two in particular, Eupolis and Kratinos, seemed to have enjoyed significant success as playwrights (their plays survive only in fragments, however). Yet in Greek antiquity, after his death, Aristophanes was recognized as the main representative of Greek Old Comedy.¹¹ His posthumous fame rests not just on his competitive successes at dramatic festivals but also on the fact that at some point after his death his plays became a mainstay of the ancient Greek educational curriculum. This resulted in his continued proliferation as a school author long after his plays ceased being staged. In any event, his plays are distinguished by their overtly political content, satire surrounding contemporary public figures, fantastical solutions to current Athenian conflicts, and inclusion of vulgar and slapstick comic tropes. All of these features characterize the essence of Greek Old Comedy, but two of his plays (*Assemblywomen* and *Wealth*) are thought to represent the transition from Greek Old Comedy to Greek Middle Comedy.

INTRODUCTION TO MENANDER

Like Aristophanes, Menander is the author of plays representing a single form of comedy, in his case Greek New Comedy. Menander’s comedies, though mentioned glowingly and repeatedly in later *scholia*, were entirely lost until 1959, when *Dyksolos* was rediscovered almost completely intact, along with fragments of two of his other plays, *Samia* and *Aspis*, in the Bodmer papyrus. There is ancient evidence that Menander wrote over 100 plays, with several of

¹¹ Olson, (2001): 9.

these winning first place at both City Dionysia and Lenaia.¹² In addition to his original work, several Roman comic playwrights adapted his plays. Since there are significantly fewer examples of Greek New Comedy, it can be harder to establish definite trends or generalizations across the genre. However, based on the knowledge that we have, scholars can agree that Greek New Comedy plays are characterized by their focus on domestic situations (as opposed to big-picture political settings), a distinct lack of political references or mocking of contemporary political figures, a use of stock characters, and tropes such as misunderstanding or recognition plots.

It is important to note that Old and New Comedy were not separate or distinct theatrical movements without any genealogical relation to each other. The revolutionary changes we see occurring from Old to New Comedy did not happen all at once. Rather, it is far more likely that some changes emerged earlier than others, while some followed later, and that all the changes were gradual. Unfortunately, it is difficult to analyze this gradual change due to our limited ancient sources. Dozens of Greek comic playwrights would have submitted their works annually to compete in either the Lenaia or the City Dionysia, or both. Of these dozens of plays, only three to five were selected to be performed at each festival. While we have recovered the titles and playwrights of some of these plays, almost all are completely lost, leaving us with the recovered works of just two poets: Aristophanes and Menander.

Despite these unfortunate but inevitable evidentiary *lacunae*, analysis of the evolution of Greek Old to New Comedy is absolutely possible. The ancient Greeks themselves deemed both Aristophanes and Menander to be exemplary representations of Greek Old and New Comedy. Their exemplarity is also seen through how they were both competing in the dramatic

¹² O'Bryhim, (2001): 89.

competitions of the City Dionysia and the Lenaia. The desire to win dramatic competition would have been a large consideration for both poets. To even be selected to stage their plays at the two prestigious dramatic festivals, Aristophanes and Menander would have had to impress the Athenian archons, who selected three to five comedic playwrights out of dozens of submissions. Therefore, to ensure selection and a performance at the festival, both Aristophanes and Menander needed to present plays that were unique and interesting but within the preferences of their contemporary audience. If either poet stepped too far outside of their respective genre, the play might not have been selected by the archons or voted to win by the judges at the festivals. Innovating the content of the plays while remaining within the genre's convention was key for both Aristophanes and Menander since they were producing plays not just for performance but for competition as well.

PLOT STRUCTURE IN GREEK OLD AND NEW COMEDY

Generally speaking, ancient Greek audiences expected three things from a comedy. The first is the most obvious: humor. Even in Menander's more serious comedies, there is a clear divide between tragedy and comedy, meaning that the contemporary audiences of these plays were expecting something to make them laugh; otherwise, it would have been a tragedy. Secondly, the audience expected a conflict. Both Aristophanes and Menander utilized different ways of introducing this conflict, which contributes to the changes in structure from Old to New Comedy; regardless of the style, however, introductory scenes presented the audience with the conflict. Lastly, audiences would have expected a resolution of the conflict introduced at the beginning of the play. Whereas Greek tragedy invariably ends on a negative or depressing note, Greek comedy must end on a high note with successful resolution of the primary conflict. This happy ending may come about in unexpected ways, often the unexpectedness of the solution was what the audience was most invested in, and it was an integral part of all Greek comedy, Old and New alike.

With these expectations identified, we can begin to locate where Old and New Comedy differ in structure, while still satisfying the broader criteria for what comedy is. The first structural difference concerns the presentation of the conflict. Aristophanes employed two different techniques to introduce the conflict to the audience and on that basis most of his plays can be divided into one of the two categories: the prologue speech and the expository dialogue. Menander, in contrast, employed the prophetic prologue, where the audience would be told by a character in the introduction a general structure of the plot. This difference influenced where the dramatic tension of the audience arose and also suggests what influenced each comedian when writing their plays.

Aristophanes utilizes the prologue speech in *Acharnians* as the play opens to Dicaeopolis wailing about his sufferings. He vaguely hints at the cause of his suffering and his speech is riddled with contemporary references (e.g., quotations from Euripides' tragedy, jokes about the Athenian politician Cleon, his mentioning of the knights as a social class in Athens). These familiarizing elements and his quick witty jokes are intended to hook the audience's interest.¹³ Aristophanes does not keep them in the dark for long, as Dicaeopolis soon reveals the cause of his suffering to be the war with Sparta. Aristophanes favored this method of conflict introduction earlier in his career; it is present in *Knights*, *Clouds*, *Wasps*, *Peace*, and *Birds* as well.¹⁴

In terms of the expository dialogue, *Lysistrata* is an excellent representative example. The play opens to the titular character Lysistrata complaining that the women she called to a meeting have not arrived. But as her neighbor Calonice appears on stage, they have a back-and-forth which reveals that Lysistrata has an idea about how to save Greece from the Peloponnesian War, which was still raging at the time.¹⁵ Once again, Aristophanes builds dramatic tension and hooks the audience's interest through vague terms before ultimately revealing the conflict explicitly when the rest of the women arrive.¹⁶ Aristophanes tends to use the expository dialogue towards the end of his career, such as in *Women at the Thesmophoria*, *Frogs*, *Woman at the Assembly*, and *Wealth*, the latter two often being considered examples of Middle Comedy, which will be discussed in more detail later.¹⁷ Although the method of presenting the conflict is slightly different across our examples of Old Comedy, it is important to note that the function remains the same: to build interest through the tension created by the initial vagueness about what exactly is going on, before ultimately revealing what the primary conflict is.

¹³ Roche, (2005): 5-7.

¹⁴ Hunter, (1985): 24.

¹⁵ Roche, (2005): 420-421.

¹⁶ Roche, (2005): 425.

¹⁷ Hunter, (1995): 24.

Menander begins his plays usually by telling the audience exactly what will occur and that there will be a happy ending, which has been termed the “prophetic prologue.” We can assume that there would have been variations on the prophetic prologue because the two examples we have (from Menander’s *Grouch* and *Girl from Samos*) are delivered by different types of characters. In *Grouch* the prophetic prologue is delivered by Pan, a god, telling the audience that it was his influence that caused the events to unfold this way. This prologue is extremely similar to what we find in tragedy; parallels of this god-delivered prophetic dialogue can be seen in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*.

Girl from Samos differs in that the prophetic prologue is delivered not by a god but by a main character, Moschion, who declares that he can tell the story in full because he is now at leisure. The speaker in these prologues shifts slightly but the intention behind this prologue remains consistent. The “leisure” of Moschion and the assurance from a god, Pan, both tell the audience that they will receive their happy ending.¹⁸ Menander affirms that he will fulfill one of the expectations of comedy at the very beginning of his plays.

So where is the allure for the ancient audience? With the audience knowing the general plot points from this style of prologue, Menander draws their interest towards the process in which the result will arrive. It is a matter of *how*, and not *if*, the conflict will get resolved. This idea also mirrors the expectation of an audience at a tragic performance. Most tragedies are based on mythological stories that would have been familiar to the audience. While the tragic playwrights had some liberties to change the result, the audience was interested in the emotions of the characters, the nuances of the theatrical performance, and the ways in which the story

¹⁸ Hunter, (1985): 25.

progresses. Spoilers are not an annoyance in the ancient Greek mindset; to the contrary, they function as an audience teaser.

Old Comedy's next defining characteristic is the "great idea." The Aristophanic "great idea" is the solution, often exaggerated and wholly fantastical, that the protagonist cooks up as a sure-fire way to solve the overarching conflict. This progression from presentation of conflict into an epiphanic idea expertly transitions the audience's attention from the conflict towards the journey the protagonist will follow to reach the expected successful resolution.

Through the pursuit and execution of this "great idea" the protagonist of Aristophanic plays encounters a series of obstacles or smaller conflicts before ultimately achieving the resolution. In *Frogs*, Dionysus comes up with the "great idea" to go into the Underworld to talk with the dead tragic poets after mourning to Xanthias, his slave, that there are no good poets left alive. In *Lysistrata*, the "great idea" is the sex strike to motivate the men to end the war. In *Acharnians*, the great idea is for Dicaeopolis to secure an individual peace treaty with Sparta.

Although this plot structure is overall formulaic, Aristophanes was able to employ quite a lot of range within this general layout. Because the "great idea" could be as fantastical as he wanted, his plays feel unique and distinguishable from one another, even when they concern similar primary conflicts. The best examples of this are *Acharnians* and *Lysistrata*. Both concern the war with Sparta, which was actively occurring when these plays were being performed. However, each play approaches the solution in wildly different ways through a uniqueness in the individual "great ideas." In *Acharnians* the resolution to the war comes in the form of Dicaeopolis brokering a peace treaty between Sparta and himself, whereas in *Lysistrata* the women of Greece launch a sex strike, weaponizing their sexuality as a means to get the men to agree to peace. Where *Lysistrata* targets the desire for peace from a community perspective, *Acharnians* tackles the persistent issue in a much more cynical, individualist way.

The “great idea” is not employed in New Comedy for several reasons. Primarily, the audience’s interest and investment in dramatic tension does not come from how the main character solves the conflict, as they are often already aware of the solution from the prophetic prologue. However, the audience is invested in the individual character’s growth and the ways in which the tropes such as misunderstandings get solved. In *Girl from Samos*, the conflict arises through the misunderstanding of who is responsible for the infant presented at the beginning of the play. The rising action in Menander’s plays requires the conflict to get bigger and bigger before it is eventually resolved all in one piece, often when the truth is revealed, such as when the parentage and legitimacy of the child is revealed and resolved in *Girl from Samos*.

Old Comedy contrasts this structure because it is essential to the “big idea” plot for the characters to methodically or continuously attempt to solve the problem before reaching the eventual solution that concludes the play. The conflict in Old Comedy does not snowball or increase over the course of the play, but rather the characters attempting to solve the conflict with the “big idea” run into a series of obstacles that slow, but do not prevent, the eventual success of the “big idea.”

Another area where Old and New Comedy diverge is the “episodes” or “acts” the plays can be broken up into. The only moment in Aristophanic comedy where the continual plot is interrupted is a section towards the middle of the play called the *parabasis*. In this section, the chorus, alone on the stage, sings a song, with the playwright himself often directly addressing the audience through their voice. The topic of the *parabasis* is usually only loosely related to the action of the play and typically delves into a more thematic philosophical speech instead of progressing the plot further. This is essentially the only time in each play that Aristophanes breaks away from the primary plot line to address the audience. While jokes that break the fourth

wall are sprinkled throughout the play, Aristophanes often alternates between calling attention to the fact that this is a play and immersing the audience in the quest-like plots.¹⁹

The “big idea” plot requires a continuous persistence of the solution with the rising action being the series of obstacles that the characters face in their attempt to resolve the conflict. Therefore, it makes sense that Aristophanes constructed his plays in a single episode fashion. The modern idea of an “act” in a play did not exist in Old Comedy’s structure. Although there were occasional songs sung by the chorus throughout the play, they were different than what we as a modern audience might rush to classify as an intermission. The best comparison we have to the choral songs in Aristophanes is the structure of a musical, with the ensemble representing an active character that participates in forwarding the plot throughout the play. In Old Comedy, the chorus is a designated character and often participates directly in the play’s plot, thereby taking an active role rather than one to break up the overall plot into specific acts.

Aside from the brief *parabasis*, there is no segmentation or break throughout the rising action, climax, and conclusion in Old Comedy. Aristophanes utilizes the continuous narrative to propel the action of his plays forwards, with only the *parabasis* interrupting. Whether the prologue is delivered through a speech or an expository dialogue, it sweeps the audience up with the subsequent “great idea” and propels them forwards at an exceedingly quick and dynamic pace.

New Comedy, by contrast, uses a five-act plot structure instead of the continuous, uninterrupted one that Aristophanes employs. This makes the comedies feel almost episodic, with rising and falling tensions between acts or scenes in a methodically planned order to control audience interest. The evidence that Menander’s New Comedy was split into acts resides in a

¹⁹ Bowie, (1982).

stage queue found in certain manuscripts that seems to indicate a choral song or interlude.²⁰ When coupled with the fact that the chorus does not have lines on stage while the main plot is occurring, these stage queues lead scholars to believe that rather than acting to forward the plot, New Comedy employed the chorus as comedic breaks and as a way to build the dramatic tension.

Menander's form follows his function. That is to say, he utilizes the five-act structure to create a sense of authenticity and reality that is not accessible in the Aristophanic continuous plot model. Where Aristophanes takes his audiences through a fantastical hero's journey, Menander employs dramatic tension and well-timed comedic relief scenes to mimic the ebbs and flows of reality. The five-act structure allows the audience to digest things in a controlled pace, giving them space to reflect on the ways in which Menander asks the audience to question conventions and expectations, before they are sucked back into the tension of the plot. Although it can be argued that this was simply the convention of Greek New Comedy, Menander's precision in tempo changes between scenes and emotional intensity demonstrates an intentionality. He was not just writing his plays within the confines of the universal convention but instead was operating under an accepted convention while trying to expand on it to heighten the audience experience and investment in his narratives. His tempo changes are specifically seen in the variation of meter in *Grouch*. In order to inform the crowd of the underlying mood or tone of individual scenes, Meander emphasizes the tragic form of iambic trimeter and the comic form of iambic trimeter at different points in the play.²¹ The tragic meter would have immediately associated with the contemporary audience, subconsciously informing them of the more somber

²⁰ The Greek word that functioned as the stage queue is xopou. Sommerstein, (1984): 1.

²¹ Hunter, (1985): 43-46.

mood of the scene, whereas the return to comic meter would have primed the audience to expect a more lighthearted scene.

New Comedy diverges from the structure of Old Comedy through the prophetic prologue and the elimination of the chorus as an active character, transitioning to episodic plot lines with five distinct acts. The result of this difference in structure is to serve the new priority of Greek comedy at this time: to resemble, at least on some level, authentic aspects of Greek life.

COSTUMING

The transition from Old Comedy to New Comedy can also be seen in how the actors and settings were physically represented on stage. In general terms, Old Comedy's costuming was exaggerated, fantastical, and an added layer to the comedy in a physical sense. New Comedy skewed towards realism, toning down the exaggerations and clothing characters in costumes that were more similar to the realistic outfits in Greek life at the time.

Masks were worn by all characters in both Old and New Comedy. These masks were an integral convention of comedy, and almost certainly allowed the audience members to distinguish characters from farther away seats in the amphitheater. However the style and expressions of the masks evolved from Old the New Comedy to fit the evolution of themes and humor. In Old Comedy, masks were engorged, with wide mouths, huge lips, and bulging or squinting eyes. Often they were painted different colors, with male characters' masks being a dark brown-red and having beards while female characters had lighter painted masks with no beards.²² It is important to note that male actors played all roles in Greek theater regardless of the character's gender, so costuming was needed to distinguish. While the color of masks and presence of beard were the general expectations to distinguish genders, Aristophanes frequently

²² Stone, (1977): 43-45.

played with the expectation to make digs at certain males, suggesting that they were effeminate by making their mask lighter or without a beard.²³ In addition, when Aristophanes had a real historical figure depicted in his plays, like Euripides in *Frogs*, the character's mask would often be a caricature of their true features.

New comedy masks were considerably more realistic, toning down the caricature like features that are seen in Old Comedy masks. The mouths were not as enlarged, and the eyebrows were less stylized, leading to less off-putting expressions on the characters. In addition to being more realistic, the masks of New Comedy were not as varied as the masks of Old Comedy. Due to the fantastical nature of Aristophanic plots, it can be assumed that unique masks were required for the characters as well as the chorus in each new play he staged. In other words, the masks used in *Birds* would have been drastically different than the masks in *Assembly Women*. But because New Comedy relies on the structure of stock characters, and frequently takes place in the streets of Athens or other urban settings, the masks presumably could have been reused. In fact, the repetition of certain characteristics on masks might have helped the audience to identify which stock character was on stage, especially during the introduction of the play.²⁴ (Figure 2)

²³ Stone, (1977): 48-49.

²⁴ MacCary, (1972).

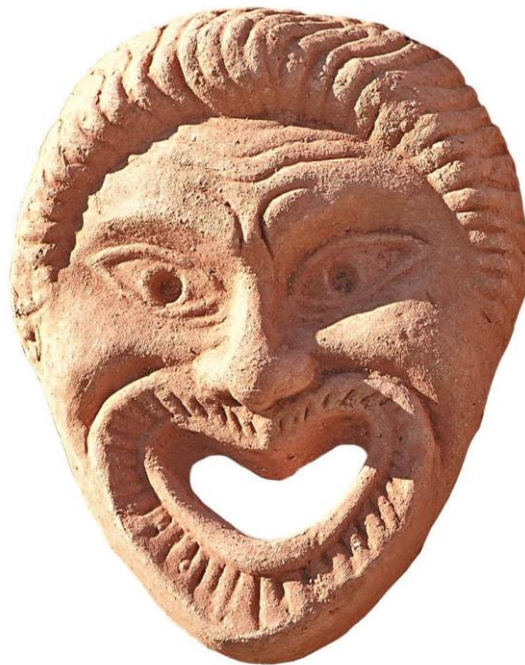


Figure 2. Comparison of an Old Comedy mask and New Comedy mask. Old Comedy mask (top) has more exaggerated features (eyebrows, nose, proportions) and New Comedy mask (bottom) has features that are more realistic.

The phallus was a unique addition to the Old Comedy costuming. Male characters in Old Comedy plays wore phalluses (made of fabric, leather, etc.) attached to the outside of their costume tunics which could be manipulated by the characters to be more or less visible depending on comedic requirement (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Greek red-figure bell-krater, 360-340 BCE (British Museum). In a scene from Greek comedy Dionysus is depicted with a comic actor balancing a basket on his head. The actor is in typical costume - padded stomach, added phallus and bearded mask.

In addition to the artistic representation, which we find from ancient vases, there are also mentions of the phallus within Aristophanic comedies, such as in the *Clouds parabasis*, when the

chorus remarks that Electra is without a “sewn-on, thick, and red-tipped dangling john.”²⁵ The phallus was used as the punch line to some jokes, extending past just innuendo and serving as a visual for crude humor. Sometimes these phalluses were erect or uncircumcised for comedic purposes and varying depending on the characters’ participation and personality in the play.²⁶ In addition, some jokes were simply pointed at the presence and innate humor of the phallus. In *Knights*, a joke is made between Demosthenes and Nicias about pretending to “jerk off” and calling it getting “a wiggle on.”²⁷ While often the phallus was simply a costuming convention of Old Comedy, there are countless examples of when Aristophanes would intentionally fashion a crude joke around calling the audience's attention to it. The audience is assumed to have found these jokes funny even though they were assumed to be used to seeing the phallus as part of the costume.

As to how and why the phallus came to be a fixture of Old Comedy costumes, scholars point out that it was a symbol of Dionysus, in whose honor the Lenaia and City Dionysia were put on, and so, the argument goes, the comic phallus is a tribute to the patron god of these dramatic competitions. Evidence that the phallus came from this religious origin can be seen in *Acharnians*, when Dicaipolis forces his family to walk in procession with a large phallus statue in celebration of his individual peace treaty with Sparta.²⁸ Although this scene certainly is comedic in nature, there is an element of historical accuracy that might be present, and the phallus being used in Old Comedy costumes stemmed from or coincided with a legitimate religious tradition.

²⁵ Roche, (2005): 158.

²⁶ The lack of circumcision is a punchline in *Acharnians* when Dicaipolis runs into Odomantian guards and lifts their kilts to reveal the stereotype that they were uncircumcised. Roche, (2005): 13.

²⁷ Roche, (2005): 68.

²⁸ Roche, (2005): 17-18.

Old Comedy costuming in general presented characters as the antithesis of the Greek ideal figure and form. Traditional beauty standards were reversed through the monstrous masks, fabric padding that made the characters look rotund and clumsy, and the phallus, especially when erect. In a lot of ways, the Old Comedy costumes might have served as a visual union to the more fantastical plots and actions of the characters. Aristophanes' plots pushed the boundaries of what Greeks could accept as reality (e.g., women taking over the Acropolis in *Lysistrata*) but with the actors outfitted in such distorted costumes suggesting to the audience that this was fictional throughout the actions of the play, Aristophanes was able to create boundary pushing narratives without fear that the audience might reject their unfoundedness.

Somewhere between Old Comedy and New Comedy the costumes significantly changed in convention and became more realistic. The phallus is assumed to have disappeared, which we infer from the fact that there are hardly any sexual references at all in New Comedy, and much less fourth wall breaks about the phallus like we have in several of Aristophanes' plays. If sexual innuendo had fallen out of stage humor and themes were transitioning to more domestic, "proper" comedy, it is possible that the use of the phallus was discontinued simply because it became antiquated and unreflective of the content in the comedies.

The changes seen in costuming demonstrate to us that there was a significant shift in the focus of the plays between Old and New Comedy. This shift is physically seen in the representation of the characters that the differing plots center around. Where Old Comedy was focused on absurdity and exaggeration, New Comedy was centered around more closely representing Greek domestic life, with costuming resembling reality more.

THE EVOLUTION OF HUMOR IN GREEK COMEDY

Scholars have noted the revolutionary change in the humor between Old and New Comedy. The changes in humor we see work hand in hand with the differences discussed in

previous sections. For example, costuming demonstrates a change in humor through the removal of the phallus and with it, phallic jokes or punch lines stemming from sexual innuendoes. Menander excludes lewd jokes from his writing and therefore the phallus would have been unnecessary and even distracting to the content of New Comedy's plots. However, the shift in humor does not stop at the disappearance of sexual innuendo.

In Old Comedy, it was frequent and expected for there to be a large amount of contemporary references. Aristophanes particularly enjoyed poking fun at contemporary politicians while simultaneously offering opinions on political events or issues through the mouths of his characters. At times, it is difficult to say if these opinions were actually his own, but sometimes it is extremely clear that Aristophanes infused his characters with personal upset, the primary example being in the *parabasis* of *Acharnians* when the chorus brings up the personal and political rivalry between Aristophanes and Cleon, including details from their legal battle.²⁹

Aristophanes was extremely intentional about the themes of plays, and they often were directly correlated with Athenian identity and current events. All of his plays are directed towards the Athenian people or Athenian identity in some way, and they almost always take a stance on a certain issue that the Athenian audience would have related to. This concerns not only the thematic claims that Aristophanes made through his plays but also the jokes themselves. In fact, there are some lines that we can recognize as jokes but have lost why they are funny. We simply do not have the social or cultural knowledge of a fourth-century Athenian to understand the punch line.³⁰

²⁹ Roche, (2005): 34-36.

³⁰ An example can be seen in Aristophanes' *Birds* when he makes an individual, Teleas, the butt of a joke, but the punch line as well as Teleas' significance has been lost. Roche, (2005): 345.

In contrast, Menander did not narrow his scope of performance by writing plays only to audiences that had firsthand knowledge of living in Athens. Instead, his humor is much more universal, without the political or contemporary references. Menander retains the slapstick humor sometimes employed in Aristophanes and expands on its usage to contribute to his style of varying tempos throughout the five acts.³¹ Humor on a larger scale in Menander often operates under misunderstanding or recognition plots, where characters are consistently miscommunicating, causing the primary conflict, and the resolution is the eventual realization and righting of this mistake. It can be assumed that the historical audience would have found this to be funny, as well as being invested in the tension (i.e., how the misunderstanding would be resolved).

FANTASY VS. REALISM IN GREEK COMEDY

The final and most abstract change occurring from Old to New Comedy is the general setting or thematic scope. While Old Comedy's narratives span larger-than-life issues, solving them with an overly simplified, realistically impossible solution, New Comedy's conflicts are domestic and smaller in scope and concern issues that Greeks might have actually encountered in daily life. While Old Comedy expands its horizons to ponder overarching issues and big-picture political debates, New Comedy narrows the lens to focus on interpersonal conflict and how to resolve it within the confines of semi-accurate Greek tradition.

Lysistrata exemplifies Old Comedy's fantastical setting twofold. It opens to Lysistrata atop the Athenian Acropolis met with the improbably large problem of securing peace amidst the Peloponnesian War. The Acropolis is a grand setting because of its explicit reference and symbolism with the Athenian image of self (Figure 4). It is a physical image and concentration

³¹ An example of this slapstick behavior can be found in *Girl from Samos* when Demeas attempts to punish Parmenon with a whip. Elman, (1998): 97-98.

of Athenian pride, power, and civic identity. In addition, the Theater of Dionysus, where this play was staged, was built on the south side of the Athenian Acropolis, meaning that directly behind the ancient audience would have been this looming symbol of their democracy and identity as a *polis* (Figure 5).



Figure 4. The Acropolis (Athens, Greece)

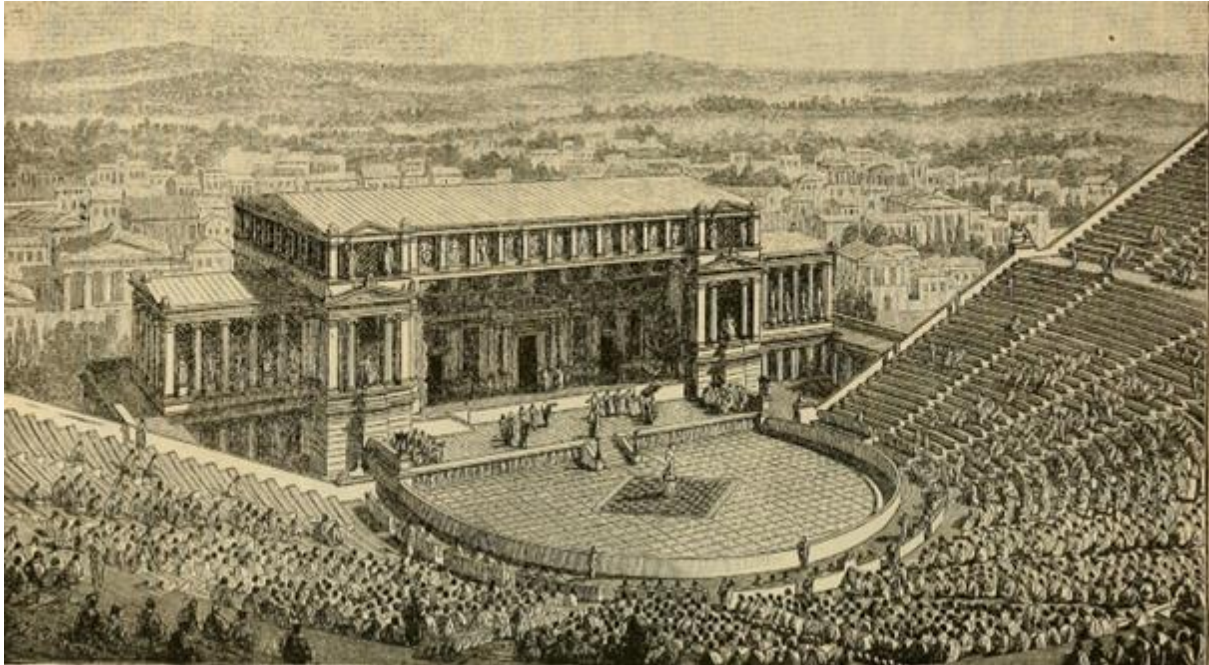


Figure 5. The Theater of Dionysus (Athens, Greece): reconstruction (top image) and now (bottom image).

Secondly, the more abstract setting or basis of *Lysistrata* is the conflict immediately presented by Lysistrata to the audience in her opening monologue: the war, specifically the contemporary Peloponnesian War. This setting is fantastical to the Greek mind because the gender of the protagonist charged with this conflict is female. In the eyes of the extremely patriarchy Athenian society, the concept of a woman holding an assembly of sorts at the symbolic location of Athenian power would be a completely ridiculous concept. It has been argued that Lysistrata might be based off a real historical figure, a female priestess of Athena that would have held the most power of any woman in Athens.³² However, even if this theory was accurate, that power would still not be enough for the audience to have taken this opening setting as a legitimate possibility. The context of *Lysistrata* can serve as an example for how Aristophanes often asked the audience to suspend their disbelief and get wrapped up in the adventure and humor of his plays. While Aristophanes had to work within the confines of Old Comedy's conventions to be competitive in the dramatic festival, there was still a considerable amount of imagination that he infused his plays with. The creativity (and surrealism) of the protagonists' "great ideas" reflects the expansiveness of the conflicts that Aristophanes so often employed in his plays. In other words, big problems like war require big solutions.

In contrast, Menander's conflicts were on a smaller scale, concerned with the inner workings of Greek life, and often employed the family to represent a microcosm of Greek society. Menander's conflicts or introductory situations are often direct results of the actions of his primary characters. In *Grouch* it is the contrast between the innocence and manners of Knemon's daughter and Knemon's grouchiness that sets up the initial conflict. Both character's natures and actions, which we hear about briefly during the prophetic prologue from Pan characterize and trigger the conflict we follow for the rest of the play. In *Girl from Samos*, the

³² Lewis, (1955).

seduction of Chrysis and Plangon, and the varying legitimacy of their children sets up the misunderstanding plot. In both plays the conflict is caused directly by previous actions of characters we follow throughout the play. Where Aristophanic conflict and exposition is not directly related to his characters but is affecting them in some way, Menander masters the realistic setting, where the conflicts are not only prevalent and relatable in contemporary Greek life, but are direct results of choices that his characters made before the play begins. These domestic problems showcased a sense of realism, seen through the abandonment of the “great idea,” the shift towards more accurate costuming, and the ebb and flow nature of his plots. As the focus of the comedies shifted from large scale, culturally altering problems, towards everyday life, the conventions of Greek comedy shifted to match the subject.

This leads directly into the primary focus of this thesis: to justify how and why the Greek sense of humor changed in the ways just outlined. In the following chapter of my honors thesis, I will examine greater cultural shifts in Athens, such as contemporary historical events and philosophical movements in an attempt to explain the revolution in Greek humor we see between the eras of Old and New Comedy.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER 2

In order to evaluate the ways in which contemporary culture influenced ancient Greek comedy, it is important to have a firm sense of the chronology of events in and around Athens for both the Old Comedy and New Comedy eras. Greek literature frequently imitated, criticized, and engaged with contemporary events. Even New Comedy, known for allegedly not engaging explicitly with contemporary events, was affected by overarching societal changes such as Athens’ loss of the Peloponnesian War and contemporary philosophical movements, even if

these effects are only seen in the examination of themes and the logistics of the plays' production. In addition, there is no doubt or dispute that Old Comedy themes consistently paralleled contemporary events, dilemmas, and concerns of the public. This engagement with contemporary issues is visible often within the first lines of Aristophanes' plays, as his introductions frequently are riddled with politicians' names and jokes concerning political events. Engagement with societal concerns and interests as a function of art means that the immense changes we see in culture, economy, and philosophy from Old Comedy to New Comedy can serve as an invaluable source of reasoning as to why the Greek sense of humor and comedic conventions changed so drastically.

MIDDLE COMEDY

Between Old and New Comedy, there is an entirely separate genre (outlined by ancient scholars) called Middle Comedy. Because it is assumed by historians that the changes we see in Old to New Comedy occurred gradually over time, it is assumed that some of these gradual changes would have been seen in Middle Comedy, as it comes chronologically between the other two genres. It is unfortunately difficult to speak in a general way about Middle Comedy, due to the loss of all but fragments of the plays. Scholars can loosely agree that Middle Comedy likely contained plots centered around mythological burlesque and often employed food as a main motif.³³ Some have argued that the mythological burlesque was employed as an allegory for contemporary events and public figures, but confidence in this theory is limited simply due to our limitations in source material.³⁴

Aristophanes' final two surviving plays, *Assembly Women* and *Wealth*, produced in 392 and 388 BCE respectively, have been flagged as potentially signifying the beginning of Middle

³³ Shaw, (2010): 1-2.

³⁴ Mastellari, (2016): 1-3.

Comedy and the transition towards conventions we see solidified in New Comedy. For *Assembly Women*, the domesticity seen in New Comedy reveals itself. Although it still contains the “big idea” that characterizes Aristophanic comedy, the source of the conflict and the application of the “big idea” is much more inward than in previous Aristophanic plays. Praxagora serves as the main protagonist and proposes that the women of Athens disguise themselves as men and form their own governing body because the men of Athens have initiated countless political blunders and no longer should be trusted to govern. Although the idea of women taking over and establishing their own rule in Athens follows the fantastical nature of traditional Aristophanic comedy, the solution being an upheaval and abandonment of traditional Athenian ideologies is entirely novel. This “big idea” emphasizes Aristophanes’ introspection after the defeat of the Peloponnesian War. With Athens in such disarray, bordering on complete bankruptcy, Aristophanes turns his scrutiny inward and proposes a solution that places responsibility on Athens herself.

Wealth demonstrates a different change in comedic convention, with its plot skewing towards mythology more than previous Aristophanic comedy. The deity Wealth in this play emphasizes an engagement with mythology and religion to an extent not previously seen in Old Comedy, or at least in the surviving plays of Aristophanes. Although Dionysus plays an active role in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, he contrasts the inclusion of other gods in dramatic theater, by actively participating in and advancing the plot, rather than only setting up the conflict or inserting himself to resolve it.³⁵ Aristophanes plays with the religious depiction of Wealth by characterizing him as an old man instead of a youthful son of Demeter, which was traditional in Athens at this time. Through changing Wealth’s physical appearance, Aristophanes emphasizes

³⁵ In Greek tragedy, gods are usually employed in one of two ways: the prophetic prologue or *deus ex machina*. The prophetic prologue example can be seen Euripides’ *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus*. *Deus ex machina* is seen in Euripides’ *Medea* and *Helen*. In addition, Menander utilizes Pan in Grouch for a prophetic prologue. Dionysus fulfills neither of these roles in *Frogs*.

that economic disparity has always been a consequence of faulty human government, a topic that would have been particularly pertinent to the bankrupt Athens at the time. In addition, the character names in *Wealth* seem to hint at the eventual development of stock characters in New Comedy, with Aristophanes naming his characters after their key characteristics in the play (e.g., Cario could be translated as “Smartly” or Chremylus translated as “Mr. No-nonsense”).³⁶ Although this kind of naming convention is not entirely new for Aristophanes, as characters in his previous plays were named intentionally to hint at their role in the play (e.g., the name “Lysistrata” = “Disbander of Armies”).³⁷

In addition, the connections between Aristophanic comedy and Menandrian comedy have not been restricted to just *Assembly Women* and *Wealth*. While these plays are chronologically the closest to Menander’s time, and therefore more relevant to the argument for a gradual change in convention starting during Old Comedy and eventually forming the distinct genre of New Comedy, Konstantakos (2016) argues that Lamachus in Aristophanes’ earliest surviving play *Acharnians* potentially represents the beginning of the braggart soldier stock character.³⁸

In my estimation, Aristophanes did not write a play that could truly be considered “Middle Comedy,” mostly based on how we do not have enough examples of Middle Comedy to determine what characteristics are necessary for a play to be considered as belonging to that historical phase of comedy. However, Aristophanes’ final surviving plays undeniably lean towards new themes and conventions that were not present in the beginning of his career. These subtle changes in style over the course of his career supports the idea that the changes seen between Old and New Comedy were gradual and that comic playwrights were actively

³⁶ Roche, (2005): 666-667.

³⁷ Olson, (1992): 4.

³⁸ Konstantakos, (2016).

interacting with contemporary events and their consequences, which in turn had a concrete effect on the literature and theater produced in their aftermath.

PRACTICAL OR ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENTS

One of the biggest explanations for some of the changes in convention we see from Old to New Comedy is related to the economic devastation that Athens faced in the years following its defeat in the Peloponnesian War. An explicit example of comedy being affected by Athens' bankruptcy is the reduction of money spent on comedic productions (costuming, stage furniture, etc.), as well as the reduction in the number of comedies staged during the dramatic festivals, following the Peloponnesian War. Instead of five comedians each producing one play during both the Lenaia and the City Dionysia, the comedic performances were reduced to three. The primary reason for this reduction was to limit the costs of both festivals in the wake of the economic recession Athens faced after its loss in the war with Sparta.³⁹ The post-war diminishing of comedic performances also came with a reduction of the comedic chorus. The chorus was one of the costliest aspects of an Old Comic play since it usually consisted of up to twenty-four performers (along with a chorus leader) that would have to be enlisted. In some plays, the chorus of twenty-four was split into two groups, each containing twelve actors so they chorus could debate or interact within itself.⁴⁰ The size of the chorus was notably large, even in contemporary times, especially compared to the tragic chorus, which was usually limited to fifteen performers.⁴¹ Hiring the actors as well as outfitting them in the extravagant costumes that were traditional for Aristophanes' plays would have been exorbitantly expensive, even at the height of Athens' imperial strength and economic stability. Ancient evidence reveals the

³⁹ MacDowell, (1995): 8.

⁴⁰ Lysistrata is an example of the split chorus. Half the performers belonged to the "Chorus of Men" and the remaining half performed as the "Chorus of Women."

⁴¹ Weiner, (1980).

economic demand of the chorus even during the Peloponnesian War. Through *scholia* on Aristophanes, whose author(s) quoted Aristotle, we know that the *choregai* (rich Athenian citizens who covered production costs for dramatic performances) had to be increased from one per playwright to two around 412 BCE because the economic demand of the performances could not be fulfilled with just one anymore.⁴²

The economic effects of the Peloponnesian War were not only seen on the logistical side of the comedic performances but also in the plays themselves. In Aristophanes' last two surviving plays, *Assembly Women* and *Wealth*, the chorus' role was considerably reduced. The characteristic *parabasis*, where the chorus addresses the audience towards the end of the play, is notably gone from both of these plays. It is important to note that although the disappearance of the *parabasis* coincides with the economic hardship of Athens after the Peloponnesian War, it is not a direct cause-and-effect relationship. Athens experienced economic stability throughout the Peloponnesian War, with Aristophanes producing plays throughout this period. If economic instability was the sole reason for the reduction of choral participation in Old Comedy, hints of this reduced role presumably would have materialized before Athens' definitive loss in 404 BCE. In addition, the decreased size of the chorus does not prevent Aristophanes from employing the same tactics he used in his earlier plays. The choral size does not impact the delivery of the *parabasis*. Therefore, we must consider that the practical and logistical changes made to comedy after the Peloponnesian War worked together with stylistic changes to produce a change in convention.

INTERACTION WITH CONTEMPORARY FIGURES

Just as the chronology of contemporary events influenced ancient Greek comedy, so did the contemporary literary and philosophical figures. Aristophanes' interface with the events of

⁴² Maidment, (1935).

his own time is very extensive and so it would be impossible to cover it exhaustively within this thesis. Therefore, in this section I will examine Menander in particular, since his interaction with the philosophy of his time is less extensive and less straightforward.

It is generally believed that Menander's initial interaction with contemporary philosophers happened at a very early age. In fact, there are several ancient accounts that credit Theophrastus, commonly known as Aristotle's successor, as Menander's tutor or teacher in his juvenile days.⁴³ Although this link could have been fabricated by ancient scholars after Menander's death around 290 BCE, there are undeniable similarities between Theophrastus' work in moral philosophy, particularly his work *Characters*, and the stock characters that Menander employed in his comedic plots.

In his *Characters* Theophrastus outlines thirty different archetypes, almost all of which are unsympathetic or unsavory in some way or another. He focuses on the traits of the characters, outlining examples which they would display their principal archetype, such as the "The Penurious Man" not lending things to his neighbors when they ask. Theophrastus is not particularly interested in why the characters do what they do, nor in how one might guide them away from their principal archetype. Rather, *Characters* is a work of observation and categorization of behaviors that must have been common and easily recognizable in daily Greek life.

In many ways, Menander's use of stock characters takes the information of Theophrastus' work and makes it dynamic. Instead of simply observing and noting these behaviors, Menander brings them to life through his use of stock characters. One character starts out as a "The Penurious Man," (easily recognizable by the audience by the way he dresses and

⁴³ Hunter, (1985): 148.

his mask's expression) but throughout the play, the audience uncovers the mystery as to why this character behaves this way. Menander, as part of his commitment to realism in the New Comedy style, aims to illuminate the justification for these unsatisfactory behaviors. Not only does he provide justification for the actions throughout the plot, but he also gives the stock characters opportunities to subvert and overcome the audience's expectations. Menander's plots are mobile despite relying on stock characters because he allows his character to grow.

I am not making the argument that Menander's stock characters are exact replicas of Theophrastus' *Characters*, however. Rather, Menander, being contemporary with Theophrastus, created a dialogue between their respective works, with Menander likely taking inspiration from Theophrastus' thinking and incorporating it into his own writing. Regardless of who took inspiration from whom, the similarity we see between Menander and Theophrastus demonstrates a trend in Greek thought at the time, a trend towards a more individualistic, categorical, and introspective way of thinking than that of Old Comedy.

The best example we have of this exchange is in Menander's most complete play, *The Grouch*. This play depicts Knemon as the grouchy old man/father stock character, and much of the play revolves around his grouchiness preventing the marriage of a rich young man named Sostratos, and his own daughter. Knemon can be seen as a combination of several different characters that Theophrastus outlines, but the primary ones are "The Surly Man" and "The Penurious Man."

Knemon's introduction to the audience is through Pyrrhias, who tells Chaireas that while encountering Knemon, he "in a friendly fashion, put [his] hand out in greeting." Although Pyrrhias' salutation was polite and respectful, he tells Chaireas that Knemon "right away" said "Damn you, are you spying on my place" and then "picked up some sod and threw it in [his]

face.”⁴⁴ Before Knemon has even appeared on stage, Pyrrhias’ anecdote sets up the crowd’s expectation of him as the stock character “The Grouch.” In addition, this interaction which Pyrrhias describes resembles the style in which Theophrastus introduces categories in *Characters*. Theophrastus often outlines the archetypes of his character through multiple hypotheticals of domestic situations in which the character’s behaviors would shine through the most. For example, in “The Surly Man” Theophrastus posits that if “The Surly man is one who, when asked where so-and-so is, will say, ‘Don’t bother me’; or, when spoken to, will not reply.” Although this introductory anecdote of Knemon’s behavior is assumed by the audience to have just actually happened to Pyrrhias, there is an element of hyperbole that not only emphasizes his stock characteristics to the audience but also mirrors the way in which Theophrastus is diving his characters into archetypes.

Knemon displays his “penurious” nature later in the play when it is revealed that he has fallen down a well because he refused to replace the rotten rope.⁴⁵ Knemon hears of the pail falling to the bottom of the well, and immediately storms in, shouting “Where’s the thief?”⁴⁶ This characteristic almost directly parallels “The Penurious Man” from *Characters* who can be recognized, according to Theophrastus, will “take the value out of... rations” if “a servant has broken a jug or a plate,” because it was in fact Knemon’s slave, Simiche that initially broke the rope.⁴⁷

Menander’s stock characters, specifically Knemon, clearly interact and corresponds to several of the archetypes from Theophrastus’ *Characters*. Even the situations in which the personality traits are especially apparent seem to be correlated between the two authors.

⁴⁴ D’Atri, (1998): 15-16.

⁴⁵ D’Atri, (1998): 44-45.

⁴⁶ D’Atri, (1998): 44.

⁴⁷ Jebb, (1870).

However, Menander does not just present these traits at face value. While Knemon's dialogue stays within the bounds of his stock character, his actions represent a shift towards community. Menander beautifully molds the plot to trigger actions from Knemon that represent change from his stock character. Knemon's stock traits prevent him to ask for help. So, Menander manipulates the plot to put him in a situation where he has to ask for help or face dire (potentially fatal) consequences. It is exactly Knemon's stock characteristics that get him into the well (his cheapness making him unwilling to replace the rotten rope) and it is directly subverting his stock traits that gets him out (asking for help from others). Menander's plots move to facilitate the true theme and focus of his plays, an individual's ability to change. In this way, Menander takes the scaffolding of Theophrastus' theory and animates it, engaging with the philosophy of the individual and questioning the ways these traits affect a community, and how characters' philosophies might be manipulated, subverted, or overcome when the plot forces them into certain situations.

While Old Comedy was thinking in wide brush strokes and tackling external issues such as war, peace, and politics, New Comedy grappled with the human condition and daily behavior and how that affects not just the individual, but the community. *The Grouch* imparts on its audience that grouchiness and solitude extends their harm beyond the individual, and the final scene of *The Grouch* explicitly illustrates that when you engage with others in lightheartedness, even if you must be forced into it, there is a happy ending for the community (the marriage).

Sorting people into categories and stereotypes were not strictly connected to Theophrastus and New Comedy, however. Some traits from Theophrastus' archetypes seemed to have been in the Greek sphere of thought before Theophrastus ever wrote them down. The chief example of this is elements of "The Proud" from Theophrastus have been seen in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, in the character Lamachus. While the framework of Theophrastus' characters had

not yet been written in Aristophanes' time, he frequently made caricatures of contemporary political figures and cast them as characters in his plays, either directly named or more vaguely alluded to.

In *Acharnians*, the character Lamachus has been flagged for displaying several of the traits of the future stock character: The Braggart Soldier. Lamachus was a real historical figure during Aristophanes' time, so it is possible that this character was simply a comedic exaggeration of Lamachus' real behavior. However, Konstantakos (2016) asserts that the qualities that Lamachus demonstrates in *Acharnians* are almost all of the qualities typically associated with the "Braggart Soldier" in Middle and New Comedy, even into Roman adaptations of the stock character.⁴⁸ It would be a reach to assert that Aristophanes' depiction of Lamachus paved the way for the eventual development of stock characters. However, the methodology behind Lamachus, taking stereotypes of soldiers and applying them to a recognizable and contemporary figure for comedic effect, demonstrates a movement towards the categorical thinking mentioned above. With political callouts falling out of convention in New Comedy, the naming of the soldier becomes irrelevant and arbitrary, but the qualities that made Lamachus the butt of the joke stayed prevalent and present in the Greek imagination.

POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION

Aristophanes' audience participated in the long-standing tradition of direct democracy in Athens. While the stability of democracy was failing towards the end of his career, democracy was one of the key features of Athenian civic identity, and potentially the most important feature. Even the visitors from different *poleis* in attendance at the City Dionysia were often from *poleis* allied with Athens, creating a common ground or at least familiarity with the ideals that were

⁴⁸ Konstantakos, (2016): 2.

essential to the Athenian experience. Although Aristophanes was put on trial by Cleon for defaming Athens in front of her allies due to offensive remarks made in either his play *Banqueters* or *Babylonians* (we know that the remarks came from a play before *Acharnians* but are unsure which of these previous plays the remarks are from). Aristophanes reveals his earnest desire for a peaceful Athens, through Dicaipolis' remarks in *Acharnians* denouncing corruption in Athenian's public figures as well as when the chorus addresses the audience in the parabasis, saying that "this brilliant poet... [has] the nerve to steer the Athenians towards what is right."⁴⁹ Aristophanes viewed his plays as guiding forces for Athenian political thought, and the unifying civic identity of Athens at the time allowed him free speech on this front, with minimal consequences, because the very foundation of direct democracy was oration and open expression of opinion. The participation of citizens in democracy, as well as the participation of citizens in the ritualized performance of the dramatic festivals, created an audience that was somewhat homogeneous. This means that Aristophanes had the freedom to assert some of his more extreme points on the ground that the people receiving those messages were coming from a familiar background and identity, regardless of more minute differences in opinion. As Aristophanes' career continued, the unified civic identity of Athens began to splinter. This is primarily seen in the oligarchal coup of 411 BCE.

The exact chronology of Athenian political events in 411 BCE is not preserved. It is hard to know when the oligarchal coup was successful in suspending Athenian democracy until its restoration in 410 BCE. However, Aristophanes produced two plays in this year, with *Lysistrata* being performed at the Lenaia and *Women at the Thesmophoria Festival* produced at the City Dionysia. Although neither of these plays is an outlier in terms of theme, setting, or scope for Aristophanes, it is interesting that these two plays in particular were produced in the same year

⁴⁹ Roche, (2005): 35.

that Athens' civic identity was experiencing separation and polarization. *Lysistrata* invokes key elements that are integral to Athenian identity. The women unify under a common cause, they take over the Acropolis, they negotiate diplomatically with Sparta. In many ways, the women of *Lysistrata* operate as a utopic Athenian state. The patriarchal lens under which Athens would have viewed this play is what makes this performance a comedy, as well as how Aristophanes depicts how the women think and proceed. This play is by no means a feminist statement by Aristophanes. However, at times, particularly when Lysistrata is brokering the peace treaty with Sparta at the play's conclusion, her reasoning is relevant, serious, and legitimate enough to make the audience pause and consider the ways in which the current state of Athens is not functioning effectively, to compare their own involvement in war to the fantastical (and peaceful) success of the women in *Lysistrata*. Lysistrata is by no means disengaged from the political topics at the time. However, there is a considerable tone of hope, fantasy, and return to key elements of Athenian identity that seems too relevant to the hardship that Athens was facing at the time to be coincidental. During a time of intense political tension, amongst the brewing splinter in civic identity, in the wake of the failed Sicilian expedition, Aristophanes makes a bold plea to the best aspects of Athenian civic identity, at the festival where the audience would have been almost exclusively citizens or residents of Athens.

In the same year, 411 BCE, at the City Dionysia, Aristophanes veiled his democratic sentiments slightly in *Women at the Thesmophoria Festival* for an audience that would have been more varied, with visitors from other *poleis*. Although this audience is not as homogenous as the Lenaia audience, Aristophanes engages still with uniquely Athenian symbolism throughout the play. The Thesmophoria festival took place around the Greek world, but it was known, especially in contemporary Greece, that the festival was spectacular and particularly sacred to the women of Athens. The comedic basis of the play, Euripides' treatment of women in his

tragedies, acknowledges and centers the Athenian tragic playwright, who critically acclaimed and revered outside of Athens. In the wake of a more hostile audience, signified by the civil unrest of 411, Aristophanes produced two plays which explicitly engaged with Athens' civic identity.

Aristophanes was not above prosecution due to certain controversial statements in his plays. Cleon's accusation and prosecution of him saliently demonstrates this point. However, the plays of 411 BCE tell us two things about the qualities of Old Comedy. First, it is not above being affected by modern politics. These plays were considerably less critical of the actual events going on in Athens at the time, in contrast with plays like *Banqueters*, *Knights*, and *Wasps*. Aristophanes demonstrates his ability to adjust his messaging depending on the political atmosphere and reception of the audience. An aggressively democratic or critical play in the wake of the oligarchal coup could have conceivably resulted in less than ideal consequences for the poet himself. However, the political atmosphere of Athens did not affect Aristophanes' attempt to be politically and topically engaged. The allusions to his Athenian utopia become more veiled, and women are used as a facade in both plays to lessen the seriousness of his points, but Old Comedy, despite political turmoil, stays topically engaged as a consequence of the style. While Aristophanes could not be as explicit in the past, Old Comedy requires a play that is interactive with contemporary events on some level.

This creates a direct contrast with the conventions and messaging style of New Comedy. Menander was born into the exact inverse of the political atmosphere that Aristophanes experienced in his lifetime. Aristophanes experienced the traditional system of Athenian direct democracy unraveling, facing pressure from various oligarchal groups. Menander, however, was born into Macedonian domination and occupation of Athens, with Philip II's victory in the Battle of Chaeronea occurring when Menander was only four years old, in 338 BCE. Throughout

Menander's lifetime, the dominating force was the oligarchal imperial Macedonians, with the revolutionaries being Athenian democrats.

Menander also contrasts Aristophanes in that he was punished by the political unrest of his time, without including politics in his comedies. Menander's access to free speech in the dramatic sphere appears to be considerably more restricted than Aristophanes'. To contextualize the ways in which Menander might have been silenced on political dealings, we have to understand his association with Demetrius of Phalerum.

Demetrius of Phalerum was, alongside Menander, a student of Theophrastus, in his younger years. As an adult, Demetrius was given an ambiguous but authoritative title over Athens by his friend Cassander. While he was Athenian himself, he represented Macedonian domination over Athens. Multiple ancient accounts characterize his rule in drastically different ways.⁵⁰ However, it is documented that after his removal from power in 307 BCE, there was a substantial increase in the democratic practice of inscribing on stone. Lape and Hendrick claim that this action from Athenian democrats was in reaction to his repressive policies on documentation and free speech during his reign.⁵¹

Menander seemed to have been linked to Demetrius of Phalerum and as a result linked to Macedonian imperialism through his association with Demetrius of Phalerum, in fact, after he was deposed in 307 BCE Menander stood trial, having been accused by Athenian democrats of "being a friend" to the Macedonian oligarchal regime and specifically a friend to Demetrius of Phalerum.⁵² This association is important for the topics in which Menander addresses in his comedies twofold. First, it contradicts Susan Lape's claim that Menander was promoting

⁵⁰ Lape, (2004): 44.

⁵¹ Hendrick, (1999) and Lape (2004): 45.

⁵² Major, (1997).

democratic ideals through citizen marriage as the happy conclusion of his plays. Second, it demonstrates the difference between Menander's audience and Aristophanes' audience. Menander's audience was not unified through one civic identity, making political comments in comedies significantly more difficult to navigate, especially when the turnover of power between the warring sects were so short. While it's true that Menander's plays finish in marriage of two citizens, the majority of Menander's plays deal with domestic plots that involve the stock character, the young man in love. A natural conclusion of this structure for a comedy is for the young man in love to encounter obstacles, whether that be misunderstanding, objection from the woman's family, etc. only to ultimately get everything he desires at the conclusion of the play: the blessing of the family and the ability to wed the woman he loves.

Through refuting Lape's claim, we arrive back at square one. Only speculation is possible in terms of Menander's personal political beliefs if it is found that there is not significant evidence of any political leanings in his surviving writings. All we have is the scholia reporting on his prosecution in the wake of Demetrius' fall from power. However, there seems to be significant evidence that the public opinion tied Menander to Macedonian ideals on some level. Therefore, we can assume that on some level Menander had to tread carefully around the ways his comedies reflected his own opinions.

This is seen through how Menander experienced explicit censorship during his lifetime from other political groups. His play *Imbroi* was blocked from production at the Dionysia, likely in the year 300 BCE. No reason was given for this censorship, but it was noted that the action came from Athenian oligarch Lachares.⁵³ It is possible that Lachares' block of *Imbroi* was because the poet breached a sensitive political topic, however, this seems unlikely since

⁵³ Major, (1997).

Menander's style was so limited to the domestic sphere. It is also possible that the setting was controversial, since Imbros was a former Athenian colony before Cassander lost it to Antigonus. It also does not seem out of the question for Lachares and the Athenian oligarchs to block Menander's play as personal punishment. Menander clearly played a role in the political dealings of Athens and continually found himself in the minority when the power exchanged several times throughout his career, yet evidence of strong political messages is absent from his plays.

Some comments have been made about the physical make-up of New Comedy's audience as well, mostly concerning the presence of lower-class Athenians. In the wake of the economic bankruptcy that Athens faced because of the Peloponnesian War, the state sponsored fund to cover poorer citizens' entrance fee to the dramatic festivals was either revoked or severely limited.⁵⁴ This would have limited the Greek audience in attendance, potentially skewing it towards more elite viewers and excluding the lower classes after the Peloponnesian War. However, it is hard to draw a definitive conclusion on this subject. There is no evidence that there was an entrance fee for the Lenaia, at least not in the same way that there was at the City Dionysia. Therefore, the audience, at least at the Lenaia, might have been unchanged following the Peloponnesian War.⁵⁵ Regardless of the slight changes in audience following the Peloponnesian War, my argument stands that while Aristophanes was performing to a crowd that was almost entirely united under a single civic identity (excluding the visitors from other *poleis* during the City Dionysia), Menander's audience was split between different political and civic ideologies: Macedonian sympathizers, Athenian oligarchs, and Athenian democrats. Because of the split interests of the audience, Menander did not have the stability or security to make the same jokes and references that Aristophanes did. In addition, the messaging or focus of New

⁵⁴ Rosivach, (2000).

⁵⁵ Rosivach, (2000).

Comedy excluded these topically engaged jokes in the first place. Aristophanes was burdened to adapt his comedy to somewhat appease the political atmosphere of his time, while Menander was unburdened with trying to articulate political points. The focus of New Comedy was decentralized from the political present of the time, and instead turned inward, universalizing themes and patterns that occur in domestic situations regardless of the civic identity of the viewer.

CONCLUSION

The most important thing to understand while examining the changes between Old and New Comedy is both were participating in a fairly alien tradition of dramatic competition. The competitiveness of Greek comedy results in an effort to appeal to the audience that is more foreign to our modern perspective than one might think. The necessity to appeal to the majority of the audience is especially essential when considering the intense changes Athens' civic identity (and therefore dramatic audience) underwent in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, the political unrest of the 4th century BCE, and Macedonian domination of Athens, a previously (and famously) autonomous state. This unrest triggered a splintering in the Athenian way of thought, a division in opinion and association that went deeper than the bickering in the assembly (seen in Aristophanes' time).

When the audience has a divided civic or political identity such as Menander's audience did, the ability to be politically engaged becomes near impossible, considering that the foundation of Greek dramatic performance is competition, and as a result, audience reception. The splintering of Athenian civic identity works in tandem with several other factors to produce the revolutionary changes in convention and humor we see from Old to New Comedy. The economic struggle of Athens contributed to the shift towards realism in costuming and set design, as the expense of the fantastical settings and characters of Old Comedy was not possible

in the bankruptcy Athens faced in the wake of their loss to Sparta. Economic troubles also contributed to alterations in the participation of the chorus. Philosophical thought evolved over time to turn more inwards and focus on the individual and their characteristics created a dialogue between New Comedy's study of stock characters, demonstrating the connection between philosophical thought and dramatic focus.

My argument in this thesis attempts to synthesize the political, philosophical, social, and economic factors in Athens during the times of Old and New comedy. Using these trends as a lens, I align their effects with changes in convention seen between the two comedic genres. My argument, although ambitious, recognizes the complexity of attempting to explain such drastic change in something as malleable and fluid as a sense of humor. However, I believe that this thesis attacks this question in a uniquely overarching way compared to other academia. Most recent studies narrow in on one factor and attempt to show evidence of its effects on either Old or New comedy, not even considering how following that factor through history might connect the dots for the revolutionary changes we see between the two genres. While this method of study is exact and specific, allowing more details and closer readings to be considered, it operates under the assumption that no other factors contributed to the change. My study, however, recognizes the intermingling of the trends it focuses on, establishes the changes between Old and New Comedy, and identifies ways in which multiple changes in Athenian society could have equally contributed to the shift in convention we explicitly see in comedy.

None of these factors occurred in a vacuum and none triggered the changes we see in New Comedy without intersecting with another element of the time. The evolution of Greek comedy is not a one-to-one matching game of cause and effect. Instead, it is a fascinating study of how literature intersects and interacts with civic identity, political and philosophical thought, and privilege or economics. While the changes we seen in Greek comedy happened centuries ago

in a culture alien to us, the way that humor morphed to adapt to what the audience needed at the time is a powerful lesson that can be applied to the ways in which we interact, laugh at, and attempt to understand our world today.

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