

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THEMES IN ARISTOPHANES

QUEST

Overview From the Holy Grail to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, to the ultimate search imposed on the returning Odysseus, that he should seek for a man living so far inland that he mistakes an oar for a winnowing fan, world literature and myth are full of quest tales. That these quests can be of many kinds we can see from any of the great writers, for as we sense, writing is itself a quest—for articulation, for historical self-locating—and can barely breathe without incorporating elements of quest. The following four instances from Aristophanes illustrate the breadth of forms the quest theme can adopt.

Lysistrata. The driving figure of this play, the fiery Athenian citizen housewife Lysistrata, shares the view of her fellow female citizens, that war is what is wrecking the Athenian state. She has formulated an anti-war plan and shared it with several of her fellow housewives. These women know how sexually frustrated their husbands are since they are fighting away from home, and have no female companionship. Lysistrata (and her team) take it on as part of their peace-quest, to refuse to sleep with their husbands until the men have made peace and stopped the war. The women's quest for peace is concrete and forceful. Lysistrata's own husband, Cinesias, proves to be the best example of the success of her quest.

Frogs. *Make Athens great again* might serve as the banner over the quest of *The Frogs*. Aristophanes knows that his city state is degenerating under the pressures of war, famine, and demoralization; he thinks it essential to restore the poetic greatness of Athens, its universal vision and literary power. He decides to send Dionysus—the patron god of drama—down to the underworld to find a new guiding spirit for the city, after the demise of both Euripides and Aeschylus. (Sophocles has just died, so is no longer a candidate for resuscitation.) *The Frogs* narrates the author's semi comical quest to find a worthy successor to the reigning tragic poets, someone who can return the city to its greatness. Like the quest for peace, in *The Lysistrata* (and in *Peace*, and in *The Acharnians*) the quest for peace in *The Frogs* basically involves changing mindsets and personal values. Aristophanes is an intellectual, like Euripides.

Thesmophoriazusaë. In both this play and the *Ecclesiazusaë*, Aristophanes' quest is to attempt to take the temperature of women's society, in Athens, and to figure out how to promote collaboration between the sexes. In the *Thesmophoriazusaë* we track the effort of Athenian women to found a new state, in which women will show their abilities --to rule, and to impose an egalitarian harmony. In the *Ecclesiazusaë*, a spy is sent into the midst of a central women's festival, to find out how the ladies feel about the literary giants who represent—or is it misrepresent?—them. In each play Aristophanes is probing; his quest is to understand his society's women and their complaints. Why does he pursue this quest? He wants the best for his society, which he longs to understand.

Plutus. In *Plutus*, Aristophanes probes fundamental questions of social economy, that is issues of what makes for a healthy state, or a suffering state. His quest is to determine whether wealth is the mother of social health, or whether poverty, by promoting resourceful skills and human invention, does more than wealth for the good of society. His quest seems to bring him down on the side of wealth, for it is she, Wealth, who is ultimately enshrined in the Temple of Athena, and who elicits the applause of the Athenian crowd. And yet a probe of the rift between the two conditions, wealth and poverty, has provoked us to rethink the fundamental goods of society.