

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Plutus (*Wealth*)

Aristophanes. 388 B.C.E.

Story

Plutus. This last preserved play of Aristophanes was first produced in 408 B.C.E., then revised and represented in 388 B.C.E, only a little later than the *Ecclesiazusae* (391 B.C.E.) The difference between these two plays, both written after the end of the Peloponnesian War, underlines a large change not only in dramatic forms but in social styles, the philosophical perspectives, and socio-economic conditions which was to mark the opening of the fourth century.

In terms of drama—technique, and perspective—we are on the brink of transition from Old to New comedy; a transition which will leave a creator like Aeschylus, whose work was created only a century earlier, seeming dated—or dignified and lofty, depending on your position. *In terms of 'socio economic conditions'* on the edge of a postwar slump, in which the peace so wished for by Aristophanes becomes the ruling condition, but appears to us now stripped of the power and magnificence of the second half of the fifth century. We are entering a world moment when it should hardly surprise us to find works and studies like those of Plato and Aristotle serving as directional pursuits for a generation that has survived great achievements and wants now to reflect on what they mean.

Plutus itself is already a philosophical reflection, in a sense which one would normally not use, in talking about a fifth century achievement. We have long seen Aristophanes preoccupied by economic issues—the decline of trade, the price and devastation of crops, the social utopianism of *The Birds*—and we have seen Euripides (in his post war plays about the end of the Trojan War) lament the sudden downfall of personal welfare among the not long ago great—but in *Plutus* we are looking at such issues as the nature of wealth and poverty, and the economic composition of what was becoming an increasingly direct attention to the very texture of society.

The play opens onto two Athenians—a grumpy Athenian householder, Chremylus, and Carion, his cheeky servant—returning home after a pilgrimage to the Delphic oracle. They are still wearing their petitionary wreaths, and talking about the mission they have been on, to determine whether Chremylus should encourage his only son to become a thief or con man—money being the only source of happiness in their new world. The oracle suggests that Carion and Chremylus should follow the first person they meet, on leaving the oracle; they do, and that old bent person turns out to be the god of wealth, blinded by Zeus, and therefore unable to follow the path he would like, which is to give away money judiciously, to the good, but not to 'just anyone.'

Later in the complicated play, when Chremylus is taking *Plutus* (Mr. Wealth, the god of wealth) to regain his eyesight at a local shrine, he comes on a penurious old crone, who turns out to be the goddess of poverty, and who manages to stage manage a powerful argument on behalf of the condition of poverty; without it, she insists, mankind would not struggle and invent, work hard to make life and its conditions better, make art and even plays. In the very end, an 'informer' intrudes on the play, to tell Chremylus and the crowds gathered at his house in support of *Plutus*, 'in search of wealth,' that the gods cannot manage without wealth, for it is the source of the sacrifices that mankind offers to the Olympians. It is imperative, insists the 'informer,' that wealth should be restored to full power. Whereupon Wealth is restored to its full godly role, *Plutus* is enthroned in the Temple of Athena—wealth with eyesight, that can make good men happy.

Themes.

Wealth. The extreme poverty of the Athenians, after their exhausting multi-decade conflict with Sparta, provokes Aristophanes to think through the welter of ills brought by poverty, and to go straight to the central issue of money. Money is the lingua franca of this work. Yet at the same time, as Chremylus learns, money without discernment is idle, and inferior to that kind of poverty which leads to invention and the better life.

Poverty. Poverty is ingeniously supported by the decrepit old lady who becomes its advocate. By the end she joins the parade of celebrants who dance off to the Temple of Athena, to express their appreciation of wealth. Poverty has been amply defended, as integral to wealth, and carries no stigma in the social enterprise.

The gods. As in *The Birds*, where the gods complain that they have been cut off from human sacrifices, by the establishment of Cloud Cuckoo Land, so the same robust figures reappear, in the present play, to complain that mortals are forgetting them.

Characters

Cario, servant of Chremylus
Chremylus, elderly Athenian householder
Plutus, god of wealth
Poverty, hanger-on of Plutus
Wife, of Chremylus
Honest man, Athenian citizen
Informer
Old woman, Athenian citizen
Young man, Athenian citizen
Hermes, messenger of the gods
Priest, of Zeus the savior
Chorus, of farm laborers

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Chremylus Chremylus opens the play with a quest, to find out how to raise his son. Wealth and money seem to be where it's at, and perhaps dad's responsibility is to raise a good thief. From the start, though, the encounter with Wealth, the discovery that wealth is blind, and the arguments of Poverty, concerning the drive to inventiveness, all contribute to Chremylus' apparent conclusion, that judicious use of wealth is the way to go in life. He should not raise a thief.

Planning. Chremylus urges Plutus to stay with him, so that he can free the god from blindness, and make the distribution of wealth more just.

Jubilant. At the end of the play Chremylus leads, to the Temple of Athena, the procession honoring the restoration of Plutus as the seeing God who knows how to distribute his largesse.

Rejective. Chremylus rejects the position of Poverty, and scorns her argument that poverty is more important than wealth, in society.

Pro-slave. Chremylus defends the use of slaves, in order to sustain the wealth of the community. He scorns Poverty's boast that she can eliminate the condition of slavery, by equalizing the money available to the citizens of a society.

Parallels B. Traven's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1927) recounts the fictional expedition of three hombres in search of the gold hidden in the northern Sierra Mountains of Mexico. While they start off as a team, sharing plans and strategies, they gradually, one by one, find traces of the treasure, hoard

for themselves, and break apart into three individual greed groups, who will have to murder before they complete their mission. Scrooge, Balzac's Pere Goriot, and even Lear, greedy for love, can squeeze into the large genus of the greedy, one of Dante's favored examples, of the fallen human condition.

Discussion questions

Can you identify distinctive ways in which *Plutus* is a different kind of Aristophanic play? Do you see in this play new styles/tone of characterization, choral use, or moral argumentation?

Aristophanes is known as a topical dramatist; that is, he deals with real situations and identifiable individuals. Is either of those traits applicable to his work in the present play? If not, how is he handling place and time in *Plutus*?

Plutus is known to have been one of Aristophanes' most popular plays, and most often performed. How would you explain that? What, in particular, does it offer the audience? Does it transcend its own time, and have meaning for ours?