

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Peace 421 BCE

Aristophanes

Characters

First and second servants of Trygaeus
Trygaeus, a countryman of Attica
First and second daughters of Trygaeus
Hermes, messenger god
War, Ares
Riot, servant of War
Hierocles, a soothsayer
Sickle seller
Helmet seller
Breastplate seller
Bugle seller
Spear seller
Chorus of Attic farmers

Story

For this repeat of his preoccupation with peace, —the theme that maddened Dicaeopolis in the early play, *The Acharnians*—Aristophanes once more adopts the perceptual platform of a countryman, Trygaeus, from a deme near Athens. Like Dicaeopolis, Trygaeus is dependent on peace and trade for his living, and finds himself so thwarted, in his efforts to care for his family during WAR, that he decides it is time to go and talk to Zeus about the matter. As in the case of the *Acharnians*, a single complainant—Dicaeopolis or Trygaeus—is therefore made spokesperson for Hellas, in the pursuit of a workable universe.

At this point, we are twenty seven years into the war between Athens and Sparta—which is just about the same age as Aristophanes, himself. Possibly fruitful negotiations are underway, into ways to bring hostilities to an end but the moment is delicate, and the moves toward peace are fragile. The two most influential promoters of war and the military—our friend Cleon, whom Aristophanes loathes, and the Spartan military commander, Brasidas—have been killed in battle—and Trygaeus feels it is a good time to take the big chance, and to visit Zeus on high and to wrap things up. Fattening a local dung beetle for the long flight, Trygaeus heads for Olympus, to see what help the Father of the gods can be.

Unfortunately, as Trygaeus learns when he completes his trip, Zeus has already sickened of human beings, and has decamped, with a majority of the gods, to another part of the heavens, from which they will be free from human intrusion. Zeus and the vacationing Olympians have given WAR free rein, even permitting the vicious god to bury Peace—never a reliably major player among the gods—in a cave.

The remainder of the play continues to give Aristophanes free rein for imagination, and he takes it gladly, as along with it he can keep reinforcing his substantive point, that war is destroying his culture and his own life. Peace is unearthed, emerges as a lovely statue and is all cleaned off, and a new social era is ushered in. Fields are cultivated, the market for helmets and shields collapses, wine is plentiful and plentifully drunk, and folks like Trygaeus once again enjoy the marital life:

His fig is big and strong,
Hers is ripe and sweet.

Themes

Agriculture. Like *The Acharians*, *Peace* celebrates, throughout, the blessings of the bounty of nature, when it is protected and nourished by old-fashioned countrymen. The grape, the olive, the fig, the spices, and the goats and pigs that thrive in this environment. We have constant reference here to the goodness of the life that takes place when people like Dicaeopolis and Trygaeus can carry out their labors on the land they have inherited, and which, even a few decades prior, they had been able to cultivate. The restoration of the old agricultural world is continually thematic in this play—which breaks forth many times into lyrical enthusiasm:

Listen all: let the farmers gather up
Their farming instruments and go home
back to the country when they choose,
free of spear, sword, and lance, because
our whole world now is ripe
with the mellow-fruited vine of peace...

Sex. The joy of sex is front and center throughout the play, and is as polymorphous as it gets. Pricks and cunts are colorful dramas of the landscape, as pleasant as peace, part of the bonus of digging the Old Girl up.

Lyricism The entire play is shot through with lyrical, even Romantic passages, summoning up the beauties nature had provided.

To the chorus, Trygaeus chants

Remember men, the former way
Of life we led
Which the goddess Peace
Made possible for us.
The figs, the myrtle berries, and the new
Raw, sweet wine, the bed
Of violets by the well.
The olive trees
That we adored.
For all
Of these
Raise your voice to Peace
In gratitude.

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CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Trygaeus The main character is Trygaeus, although Aristophanes is more interested in creating a dynamic symbol, than in exploring the interior of a personality. Trygaeus' nature might be said to be composed of the moves he makes—his voyage to heaven, his unearthing of the Peace statue, his eventual marriage in festival mode, a poem of praise to the bounty of nature. Aristophanes is not drawn to portraying psychological subtleties, but rather to punching at broadly drawn and immediately topical social issues.

Whimsical. As Trygaeus prepares to fly his dung beetle to Olympus, to ask Zeus for help, he warns his wife and family not to go to the bathroom for three days, lest the beetle fly back to earth to graze on the shit, and leave his passenger stranded.

Pacific. Trygaeus is forever exhorting his fellow countrymen to abandon war, and to honor the image of Peace. He is delighted to free himself of anything in his house that could be used as a weapon.

Celebratory. Trygaeus delights himself and us with lists of natural pleasures:

'the ivy leaf, the muslin for the wine,
Bleating sheep, the breasts of women
Hurrying to the fields, the kitchen maid,
In her cups and swaying...'

Testamental.

That barley be plentiful, and wine as well, with figs to nibble,
And that our wives bear us young
And that all we love once more belong
To us.

Parallels In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod, the eighth century Greek epic poet from Boeotia, addresses the world from the viewpoint of a backcountry Boeotian farmer, who speaks to us concerning his crops, the cycles of nature, and best farming practices as he knew them. The world of Dicaeopolis or Trygaeus is reminiscent of that of Hesiod's Boeotia, if allowance is made for place difference—Boeotia more 'backward' than Attica—and time difference—the wars rocking Attica in the fifth century B.C.E. were unknown to Boeotia. In literature in Latin one celebrates often the *Eclogues* of Virgil (37 B.C.E.), the author of the *Aeneid*. In those pastoral poems Virgil praises the country life and its simple bounty—he picks up this inspiration from the Greek master of pastoral, Theocritus (first half of third century, B.C.E.) For a 'modern' verse poem, on the bounty of the rural life, one can always turn to the masterful Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1799)—'nature hath ample power to chasten and subdue'—which is devoted to the spirit of the rural Lake Country in Northwest England.

Discussion questions

We know that Aristophanes portrays characters who long for peace. We suspect that Aristophanes includes himself among those characters. But how does Aristophanes think peace can be achieved? Is he at all a strategist of the return to peace?

What seems to be the dominant cause of war, in Aristophanes' work? Is it fundamental human evil? Bad management on the social level? Can the problem of war be solved, to judge from Aristophanes' work?

What is fundamentally 'good' about nature, in the present dramas? Is nature a friend to man, as the modern Romantic poets thought? Is nature wild and dangerous? What did the fifth century Athenian think about the relation of nature to human beings?