

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Aristophanes

## Search

**Preface.** Another entry in these thematic notes concentrated on *quest* in Aristophanes, from which we here distinguish *search*, a related category of intentional experience. Under *quest* we included *Lysistrata*, *Frogs*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Plutus*; four plays in which a sustained quest took place; under *search* we will again review *Plutus* and *Frogs*, for we will be inspecting them from a different angle—which look different when viewed under a fresh light, as the ends of *searches* rather than of *quests*: while we will be throwing *Peace* and *Birds* into the mix, plays in which both quest and search are involved.

No elaborate justification seems needed, for conjoining these closely related categories—search and quest coinciding provocatively as dominating themes in Aristophanes, and opening the present entries on the question, why *should* quest and search play such central roles in Aristophanes' work? The answer may lie in a peculiarity of comedy, as a genre, and in the traits that sharply distinguish ancient comedy from ancient tragedy. From its inception in critique, in looking down at mankind's foibles, ancient Greek comedy was about ideals, the ideals of behavior, thought, honesty which were taken to be regulatory for 'man in society,' while ancient Greek tragedy was about existential immersion in the human condition, shall we say about 'learning' rather than developing critique. Quest and search, categories aligned with critique rather than the quality of experience, will both serve as legitimate rubrics for the comic.

**Plutus.** The driving search, in *Plutus*, is to find your way to your money, where happiness awaits. Chremylus has heard that the way you find your money is not of great importance, money itself being the justification of the way you acquire it, our search for the pot of gold finds its wealth in one way or another. Taking it as his responsibility to his son, to supply him with the necessary path to cash, whenever and however acquired, Chremylus ignores the advice of an old hag he meets, and who advises him that poverty is in fact what one should seek—for out of poverty comes inventiveness. For Chremylus the search for money almost as important as the acquisition of money. Quest this is not, search it is.

**Frogs.** The search for a new master poet drives the action of *The Frogs*, in which Dionysus and his servant Xanthias go down to Hades to find a candidate for resurrection, who will help to bring Athens back to greatness. There is a sense in which both quest and search are in play here, as Dionysus takes the two competing poetic giants through their traces. The final choice of Aeschylus, as the poet on whom the search has landed, represents, like the money search of Chremylus, the search for the right guy, rather than the result of a quest.

**Peace.** Does Trygaeus search for peace or is Peace his quest? Though we have chosen *search* for our rubric here (and not quest, a more focused and targeted goal searcher) we come in the present instance onto an example in which quest and search intersect closely, and at which it makes sense to ask what the overall pursuit of ancient Greek comedy is. Is it a search or a quest? Comedy looks down on 'man's imperfections,' and to do so nourishes itself on an attitude of both quest and search. The comedian seeks for a goal—for a needed poet, a valued peace, but at the same time searches for the place of peace and independence we all strive for, the Cloud Cuckoo Land where we can build our own society, and live a free and simple life.

**Birds.** Do Euelpides and Pisthetairus *search* for their ideal haven, or for the Hoopoe bird who will lead them to their promised land? The question may seem as arid as the question, about the search/quest for peace, which we discussed just above. Our two Quixotesque friends, in the present play, quest toward a goal, or do they search and come upon a solution to what they want to find? Arguably the uncertainty, of how to answer this question, takes us back into the question of the distinctive nature of comedy, which is both a search and a quest at the same time.