

Themes in Aristophanes

WAR

The Acharnians. One might say that the trio of plays—*Acharnians* (425 B.C.E.), *Knights* (424 B.C.E.), *Peace* (421 B.C.E.)—represent three stages of approach to the madness of war, which is permeating the life of ordinary Athenian citizens. The wars with the Persians occupied the first forty years of the century, the Peloponnesian War dragged on throughout the second half of the century, so that a person born in Athens early in the second half of the century—and living through the century; *Aristophanes 446-388 B.C.E.*—would have lived a lifetime under war regime.

In the first play of this trio, Aristophanes adopts the central voice of a farmer businessman, who has decided to carry out his own farm-produce trade negotiations with colleagues from other parts of Greece, who have for a long time been cut off from him. In the second play of the trio, Aristophanes's contempt for the war reaches a new level of personal assault on General Cleon, who by the end of the drama has become the sausage seller plebeian the narrator of the play initially was. In *The Peace* Aristophanes has once again chosen as his spokesperson a simple countryman—like the farmer Dicaeopolis in *The Acharnians*—who makes a personal expedition to Olympus, to persuade Zeus to get rid of War—which in the end he actually does—for a time. Aristophanes has lived to see the *end* of war, the single goal of his desires throughout this trio of plays.

The Knights. From the outset of the second play, Aristophanes expresses his hatred of the military personality, Cleon, who was responsible for much of the adventurism and corruption which was keeping the war alive in Athens (Cleon had sued Aristophanes for slander of the Athenian state, in the young playwright's early (lost) play, *The Babylonians*). In the present play Aristophanes builds his anti-war ire to a boiling level, making Cleon stand for those various army generals—Demosthenes and Nicias included—whom he charges with a mixture of bellicose foreign policies, and filling his pockets from the state treasury. With the recklessness of a youngster—Aristophanes is in his twenties—the playwright stages this frontal attack assault just at the time when Cleon is at the heart of his popularity in Athens, having made a dramatic capture of Spartan hoplites, and brought them back to Athens as prisoners. Viewed through the lens of Aristophanes' writing, we see that the play reflects an unyielding opposition to the military machine. The conclusion of *The Knights* underlines the ferocity of the playwright's attitude: oracles disclose that Aristophanes has been approved as the leader of the polis, while Cleon has been deposed to the level of sausage-seller on the outskirts of town.

Peace. Written three years after the *Knights*, *Peace* reflects the increasing war-desperation of Aristophanes, who is this time again—as in *The Acharnians*—guised as a canny but rural countryman, who has had it up to here with the disturbance of his agricultural life. It happens that the two major drivers of military action—the Spartan Brasidas and the Athenian Cleon—have been killed in battle, and it looks like a good time to travel to Olympus, to ask Zeus what he can do simply to bring all hostilities to a close. It happens that Zeus has just grown terminally fed up with mortals, and has decided to give War free rein in the world. Zeus has buried Peace, who is then unearthed once again—by Trygaeus the countryman—polished up, sent out into the world, and readied for use. The era of peace is on us again.

Lysistrata. In the *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.E.), composed ten years after *The Peace*, and still fully in the midst of wartime, Aristophanes takes us back into the military combat world, which his bold initial trio had not banished, and reawakens our sense (first awakened by the foreign trade tricks of Dicaeopolis in *The Acharnians*) that slyness and personal ingenuity may be the best way to get rid of the world of war. Lysistrata herself finds the best trick in the books, though in the end she simply convinces us that a lasting solution to war will have to be discovered at a level deeper than trickery.