

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Acharnians. 463. B.C.E.

Aristophanes

Characters

Dicaeopolis.	A worthy citizen, the spokesperson of the play
Crier,	a herald
Amphitheus,	Dicaeopolis' envoy to Sparta
Senior Ambassador,	emissary to the King of Persia
Pseudo-Artabas,	envoy from Persia
Theorus,	envoy from King of Thrace
Daughter of Dicaeopolis	
Xanthias,	servant of Dicaeopolis
Servant,	of Euripides
Euripides,	the tragic poet
Lamachus,	Athenian general
Megarian,	from Megara, on nearby Isthmus of Corinth
First and Second Girls,	daughter of the Megarian
Informer,	a Spartan spy
Boeotian,	trader in farm produce
Nicharchus,	Spartan general
Dercetes,	Attican farmer
Best Man,	at wedding of Athenian soldier
Three messengers,	from the Athenian high command
Chorus,	old Athenian charcoal burners

Story.

This is the oldest play of Aristophanes to survive: he composed forty four plays, of which eleven remain virtually intact. (We have seven plays from Aeschylus, seven from Sophocles, and some nineteen from Euripides, either a paltry or a bountiful harvest of antique thought, depending on your viewpoint. We can safely think ourselves lucky, in every case, for having both comedies and tragedies to dwell on, and in both genres a not negligible storehouse of assorted fragments.)

Only twenty when he wrote the *Acharnians*, Aristophanes struck from early on a tone which was to characterize his work: satirical, topical—dealing with the day to day life and culture of Athens,—highly innovative in language and choreography, recklessly direct. In the *Acharnians* he trains his guns on war itself, sharing the horror of his contemporary Euripides, for the destructive aggression—Persian Wars in the first half of the century, Peloponnesian in the second—which had made daily life nightmarish in Athens, a city which, enclosed behind its heavy Long Wall fortifications, was enduring the agonies of the plague (typhoid fever) which killed a quarter of the population in the third quarter of the century. More to the point, for the background of the present play, the creator of *The Acharnians* is speaking of desperate times from the view point of a guy from the villages around Athens, the little guy from the village/suburb of Acharnia, who sees the vineyards and olive groves of the region destroyed, who finds his agricultural produce taxed at every move, and who has lost his small scale trading partners, many of whom are residents of enemy demes. The bitter, sarcastic, biting tone of the main character, Dicaeopolis, can be attributed to the rotten world in which he finds himself, a world which, however, we must at the same time remember for its greatness in art, political experiment, and social sophistication.

Themes

Independence. We see the events of this play through the eyes of a 'worthy citizen of Athens,' a small farmer, trader, and businessman, who decides to set up his own 'free trade zone,' in which he can interact with business folk from 'across enemy lines,' who will share with him a mutual interest in doing business. The independence Dicaeopolis pursues puts him in conflict with the war management muckety mucks of Athens, and with a startling variety of military high ups, cranky writers like Euripides, and ordinary guys trying to trade off their daughters as 'piggies,' sacked and packaged whores.

Misery. Dicaeopolis stands for the just, uncorrupted, enemy of the war, which to such as him, a modest businessman and farmer, causes only destruction and grief. When first we meet Dicaeopolis he is hanging around waiting for the assembly to open, so he can express his grievances to his fellow citizens. As the assembly members arrive, we quickly see how single mindedly each citizen is devoted to arguing his own advantage.

Language. Language is a theme—here and throughout the work of Aristophanes. The prosody of the line—the exquisite manipulation of iambs and anapests—and the dexterous, hilarious choral passages, with their regular use of the parabasis, in which the author introduces his plentiful commentary on public officials, dirty politicians and fellow writers: all this prominence of how the world is presented is thematic for Aristophanes.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dicaeopolis Dicaeopolis is the main character. He is a salty individualist—think Vermont farmer—tired of being plagued by war and taxes, and impatient with pompous bureaucrats, military bigwigs, and self-aggrandizing diplomats, like the Ambassadors to Persia, who 'complain about living the life of luxury.' Dicaeopolis is witty and cynical, and ready to mix it up with would be heroes, like the self-indulgent general Lamachus, or with touchy playwrights like Euripides, whom Dicaeopolis feels free to mock in the sharpest terms.

Mocking. In need of beggarly props to use for his own disguise, Dicaeopolis makes his way to the house of Euripides, who has—from using them in his own dramas—an abundance of old clothes and disguises. Lamachus, the pride swollen Athenian general is as lavishly mocked at Euripides, by the scornful Dicaeopolis.

War hating. Dicaeopolis makes a point of criticizing the war, at any new visitor intrusion. From the beginning of the play, when the Ambassadors to Persia are brought before the Assembly, Dicaeopolis is strident with scorn, for these highliving do nothings who line their own pockets with the money they make from the war.

Practical. Dicaeopolis is a practical businessman, who sees that war-- in addition to plague—is causing him constant financial loss; the weapons makers make the money, while he and his kind pay taxes, suffer crop and field destruction, and lose their personal values.

Parallels. When Odysseus returns to Ithaca, at the end of the *Odyssey*, he meets his Father's old servant, and begins to orient himself, with the help of this crusty local. This type, or say the watchman at the opening of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, are of a tough, common man level, in Greek culture, of which we are reminded throughout by the independent posture of Dicaeopolis. Many works of later American and European literature remind us of the desolation of the world of the *Achaeans*—the Goncourt brothers' scathing critiques of dehumanized modern cultures, or the works of Maurice Barrès (*Les Déracinés*, 1897), mourning the loss of a healthy older world of agricultural integrity. Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots* (1949) sheds a brilliant critique over the problem of disintegrating societies, especially those torn apart by war.

Discussion questions.

Euripides is a contemporary of Aristophanes. We know, from the *Acharnians* already, that for Aristophanes war was an abomination. Does Euripides share that attitude? How does the comedian express his hatred of war? How does the tragedian?

What is the function of the chorus, in the *Acharnians*? Whose point of view do they represent? What kind of choral steps are they capable of? Do they agree with the 'practical politics' of Dicaeopolis? Why do they want the war to continue?

Is there any difference between the voice/attitude of Aristophanes, and that of Dicaeopolis? Do their voices overlap? Or does Aristophanes reserve some space for himself, in which to critique his own work, without being identical to it?