

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Aristophanes

GRUMPINESS

Overview Aristophanes is a master caricaturist, and what with the cultural panoply before him—housewife revolutionaries, obscenely self-centered military bigwigs, scallywag servants, itinerant literary critics embedded in the underworld—it is no wonder that his stylus makes its way to the characteristic, the striking and distinctive in personal types. The drift toward the universal type, which will be one hallmark of Hellenistic drama—say in Menander, a century after Aristophanes—will be part of the broad pattern of the grumpy--clubby, mutually bonded, inseparable--as it takes its useful place as part of the set pieces that punctuate Aristophanes' plays—and that prove comic relief in such American entertainment pieces as *The Odd Couple* or *Grumpy old Men*.

Grumpiness can be 'funny, as it is with Dicaeopolis or Lemmon and Matthau, in *Grumpy Old Men*; it can be semi-senile male collectiveness, as in *Wasps*, or it can be an outgrowth of personal dislike, as in *The Acharnians* or *Knights*, where Aristophanes is dipping into the lastingly toxic attitude he has toward Cleon. Whatever the brew that helps concoct the grumpiness of certain Aristophanic characters, we note that this playwright masters the recipe for the character type. Does he not rival Dickens in his eye for character defects?

Wasps. Lovecleon is a retired Athenian businessman, who spends his days in the law courts, judging the cases that come up before the city. (Citizen law courts are at the heart of Athenian law, and the jurors, who serve there without judges or juries, as independent determiners of guilt or innocence, are able to fill their time both as buddies—who bring home three obols pay a day just for voting—and as contributors to the state.) The outgrowth of this situation is a culture of mutually bonded male gossips, who gather every day, discuss cases at hand, and form their own sub-culture. It is no surprise that among these self-bonding old codgers there are cut ups, like the Lovecleon of *The Wasps*. Lovecleon himself selfishly demands the attention and support of his whole family, demanding that he be given free rein to party, cut up with pretty girls, and rule his household like a highly deserving participant. Lovecleon is a grump, who thrives among fellow grumps. He knows how to be grumpy, and enjoy it.

Acharnians. Dicaeopolis, the grumpy old man of Aristophanes' first play, *The Acharnians*, is an old and embittered farmer version of Lovecleon. Dicaeopolis is living the full brunt of the Peloponnesian War, and is bitter at the destruction of crops, the breakdown of trade, and the devastating behavior of politicians like Cleon or of Ambassadors to Persia, who return from the East complaining about the 'difficult lives' they have been having 'at court.' Like Lovecleon, Dicaeopolis finds a way to gripe about every new development of the war and corruption society. The last straw hits his shoulders when his own government generates new taxes to punish the little enterprise he is able to muster. Like Lovecleon, in *The Wasps*, Dicaeopolis is all about grumbling and grumpiness, though like Lovecleon he knows how to *kick up his heels* as a vigorous grump stereotype.

Knights. In this play, Aristophanes presses forward with his own grumpiness, which is of course the backstory to his mastery at characterizing the grumpy type—whether Lovecleon or Cleon. Aristophanes' second play, *The Banqueters*, had been sharply criticized by the politician-military Cleon, who had taken deep umbrage at the scurrilous portrayal of himself which dominated the play. A suit had followed, in which Cleon charged Aristophanes with treason, for mocking the Athenian state, and Aristophanes had thenceforth not tired of ridiculing Cleon. Aristophanes, we might say, was during this time of early writing, forming a powerful grasp on the revenge motif, and exercising what would eventually be a grumpy world-view against a world which is always happy to squash the little guy.