

Themes in Aristophanes
POLITICS

Politics. Politics, for the fifth century BCE in Greece, meant the affairs of the polis, and was largely transparent, for all male citizens were by definition included in the polis, and tended to know, through their participation in public institutions like the Boule and the Ecclesia—where laws were formulated and passed—all the relevant information on the day's 'political' news. (The internet was at that time word of mouth, and divided by party affiliations, as it is today.) Opinions moved rapidly, in the form of trends, and were hard to counter, once they fell into the hands of influential speakers. (The oratorical tradition was strong in Athens, and did a lot to disseminate attitudes and opinions.) The size of the political community was easily compassable, so that Aristotle, in his *Politics*, could describe the statesman as capable of knowing all the affairs of the state.

Acharnians This oldest preserved play of Aristophanes provides a glimpse into ground-level fifth century politics, the politics of the individual negotiating with others for their collective advantage: the wheeling and dealing tradeoff of a small farmer, Dicaeopolis, with neighbors who can use his farm produce and sell him theirs. Aristophanes helps us see this 'system' unfolding on the simplest level, but from the start makes us understand the dreadful impediments which have blocked the functioning of Dicaeopolis' simple economic life. Behind all those impediments is the long running war between Athens and Sparta, the Peloponnesian War, which subordinates individual profits to the advantages of the weapon sellers and the military leaders. Just below that level of endlessly self-multiplying profits, lies the commercial jockeying for power which has left the 'tiller of the soil' part of a 'party of one,' quite naturally drawn to whatever dirty policies he can cobble together with his neighbors.

Knights. At the outset of Aristophanes' writing career the military power figure, Cleon, had charged Aristophanes with treachery, in his (no longer existent) play *The Banqueters*; the charge was *presenting a degrading picture of Athenian politics, and doing so for the delight of the enemies of Athens*. Aristophanes viewed this charge as pure politics, and forever after indulged in attacks against Cleon, having initially established, in the play, the author's special awareness of state secrets, oracles, predicting that there was an imminent political overthrow facing the Athenian state, and that such people as Cleon (and other military bigwigs like Nicias and Demosthenes) were due for replacement by Aristophanes himself, in the alias of a humble sausage seller on the outskirts of the city. By installing that subversive guise, in the narrative of his play, Aristophanes credits himself with the political destiny of retaking the state. His gift at mockery, intertwined with his skill at hiding behind one of his characters, shows how deeply he has himself built the sense of political canniness into his critique of politics.

Clouds. The permeation of daily life with political self-interest is a durable theme in Aristophanes, and nowhere does he anatomize the political mindset more tenaciously than in *The Clouds*, where he goes for the jugular of politics, the argumentative technique of making the worse appear the better argument, in other words the trick of selling pie in the sky. Strepsiades is an old timer, with the rural values of Dicaeopolis, and the contempt for such as Cleon, which the sausage seller expresses in *The Knights*; but this pere de famille is surrounded by a wife who shops til she drops, gullibly consuming hyped up products, and a son who is given over to horse racing, where he blows his money on the unpredictable products of the market. Dad has no recourse but to fight fire with fire, and therefore betakes himself to the Thinkpot, where Socrates—a child of the Sophists himself—presides from an airy basket, giving advice on 'solving your problems quickly.' Dad will fight fire with fire, as Aristophanes has spent his playwrighting youth puncturing cheap political claims.