

Comedy

With Greek comedy we are still dealing with annual public performances, held at major religious festivals in Athens, in the Theater of Dionysus. The same intense competition for prizes, the same lively and personally involved audience. But from the first glance we note a change in the kinds of theme presented. With Aristophanes we find no mythical titles, no actions based on 'slices from Homer's feast,' and total involvement with contemporary issues—the folly of war, the vagaries of the legal system in Athens, mundane but hilarious rivalries between competing dramatic poets, the practice of 'selling wisdom' in public (the practice imputed to the Sophists. In other words we find Athenian comedy highly 'issue oriented,' as was the tragic drama of Euripides; while the earlier tragedians were, we might say, 'myth driven.') We have seen tragic dramatists concerned with 'actual events'—*The Persians* of Aeschylus, for example---or with temporarily relevant events—the practice of Euripides—but with Aristophanes and Greek comedy we see the veil of the mythical almost totally stripped away. If you pursue the historical background of this genre difference, you will enter into competing theories of the kinds of dance festival tragedy and comedy split off from, in Archaic Greece. (That byway of historical investigation will bring you to the door of the satyr play, the 'extra play' the tragedian would insert into his trilogy as an entertainment, and in fact a conduit back into another kind of bumptious and erotic rural archaic past.) The secret to the peculiar *reality-driven* character of Greek comedy may lie hidden in the archaic roots of the genre. The roots of the comic are doubtless in fertility rites and harvest ceremonies, which themselves have around the world been drivers for rural ritual.

Is the comic drama 'conservative'? Greek comedy, while dealing with the foibles of the real present, works from a position of assured value, generally the rightness of the old ways, and sees the present as falling away 'comically' from the standard occupied by the comedian: who believes in old fashioned wisdom, the traditional dispensation of justice, the dignity of the creative artist as derived from the Homeric model. Greek comedy, like comedy in general, looks down from a confident view point. How else can you mock?