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Aristophanes (448-380 B.C.)

The Clouds (423 B.C.) takes aim at precisely the 'public selling of wisdom, or argumentative skill,' of which the Sophists were accused. In fact Socrates, who was in no way guilty of such 'public selling,' is the butt of the joke in this drama about an ambitious farmer, whose son has racked up a huge debt, and whose dad is facing an angry law court. The son is sent to Socrates' 'Thinkery,' a thought-house where one learns not only to forget about the traditional values of the Athenians, but how to trick the law courts, and pull the wool over juries' eyes. The ensuing turmoil is terribly funny, but not innocuous, for in fact the bias against Socrates, which we see the results of in Plato's *Apology*, is being established right here in this play, written a quarter century before Socrates' death. There could be no more compelling argument, that comedy bites hard into the social fabric.

Lysistrata (411 B.C.). The downward spiral of Athenian political life, toward the end of the exhausting Peloponnesian War, the growing influence of women in social life, and the delights of bawdy sex: all these conditions converge to support this hilarious/biting comedy. Basically, the women of Athens are fed up with war, and with male ineptitude, and in a series of moves take over the Acropolis, the sacred center of Athens, and read the riot act to their husbands. No sex until the war ends. The way this torture plays out is as phallic and uproarious as Athenian public amusement could be, joining serious points to outrageous fantasies.

The Frogs (405 B.C.)
05 B.C.). Dionysus, the god of the theater for the Athenians, is disgusted at the low quality of dramatic presentations in Athens, Sophocles and Euripides having died the previous year. He decides to descend into Hades and to bring back Euripides, his favorite poet. However when Dionysus arrives in the underworld he finds himself in the midst of hubbub and a literary duel between Euripides and Aeschylus, over which is the better poet. In the end Dionysus returns from Hades with Aeschylus, but what brings down the house is not that outcome, but the subtle/raucous debate, between Euripides and Aeschylus, over which is the better poet. It is this debate that I stress, *the subtleties of literary points aired to a delighted citizen audience*!

We have already noted, in the *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes' inclination toward the bawdy, and in fact the bawdy, connected with fertility rites and harvest festivals, goes far back into the origins of comedy. It is the purpose of this entry simply to reinforce the sense, which we have from *Lysistrata*, that Aristophanes (and his audience) delight both in political theory and in the juggling of the male-female balance in society; stressing female power, control over men, and the regular incompetence of men to shape their own social political destiny.

In the *Ecclesiazusae* (391 B.C.), on the occasion of a major female festival day, the women of Athens take over the Assembly—by a sequence of burlesque cross-dressing tricks, by which the men are thrown off the scent—and set up what we might call a Socialist state, all property in common. One of the provisions of this state is that all men can sleep with all women, with one proviso: that before sleeping with a beautiful woman each man must first sleep with an ugly one. The meat of the play lies in the power the women obtain thereby, and their eventual conversion of the poor men, helpless and confused, into reasonable citizens who will work maturely on their democracy. So, just as in the *Lysistrata*,

Aristophanes works in the *Ecclesiazusae* to overjoy the audience and make a solid political point.
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The *Thesmophoriazusae* (411 B.C.) is also set during a major women's festival in Athens. In this play the women, dressed in their husbands' clothes, are attempting to take over the Acropolis, and to set up a new government. Their hilarious efforts, which eventually lead the men to a sane view of political behavior, turn around the efforts of the men to insert a spy, dressed in women's clothes, to get the lowdown on the women's movements.

Chorus singing
Look quickly for the traces that might show you a man hidden here, let your glances fall on every side; look well to the right and to the left. If we seize some impious fellow, woe to him! He will know how we punish the outrage, the crime, the sacrilege. The criminal will then acknowledge at last that gods exist; his fate will teach all men that the deities must be revered, that justice must be observed and that they must submit to the sacred laws.