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Colin Dueck:
Tom Cotton's Only the Strong

Douglas A. Jeffrey:
Merle Haggard

Jeffrey H. Anderson:
"Our Democracy"

Myron Magnet
Bradley C.S. Watson:
Clarence Thomas

Barry Strauss:
Julius Caesar

Charles Murray:
Is Diversity Our Strength?

Peter Berkowitz:
Walter Russell Mead on Israel

Christopher Caldwell:
The Death of Rock'n'Roll



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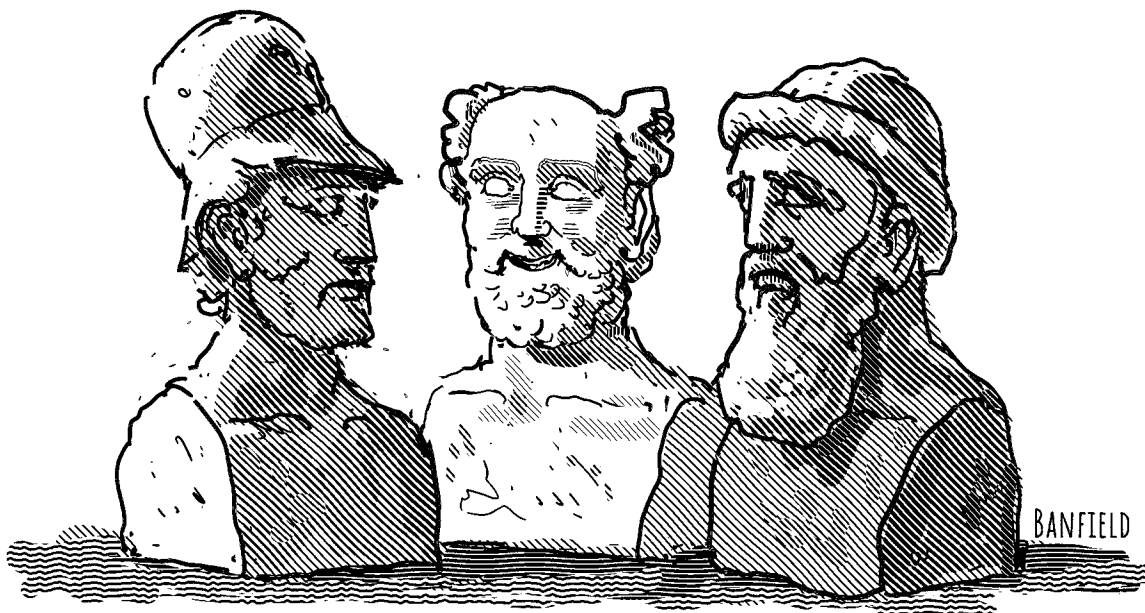
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Essay by Algis Valiunas

TAKING ARISTOPHANES SERIOUSLY

The original gross-out comic.



WE TEND NOT TO TAKE ARTISTS TOO seriously if they make us laugh. Comedians, we assume, are there to divert us from the struggle of daily living—and the very word “diversion” suggests a departure from the prescribed path, the one we are supposed to follow toward our edification and maybe even our salvation. The canonical accounts of Yahweh’s justice and Christ’s mercy are notably short on amusement. On the other hand, the modern clowns we love—Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, the young Evelyn Waugh, the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, John Belushi, Monty Python—are notably short on solemnity. There are of course comedians who aspire to some higher purpose, often having to do with easy pathos or liberal enlightenment—the political grandstanding of late-night talk show hosts comes readily to mind. Still others may make us wince at our follies and failings but leave us no better than they found us. Of these, it is striking how many have come to grief themselves—witness Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, Robin Williams.

But there are also colossi of comic genius down the ages who tower over even the best of those named above: Mozart (with his operatic librettists Lorenzo Da Ponte and Emanuel Schikaneder), Molière, Cervantes, Shakespeare. Their sublime comedy raises audiences to heights unapproachable by more common laughter. They give us pause and

make us consider what we are laughing at, prompting a pang of recognition that more is at stake than a few hours’ gaiety. We may even come to realize that the very condition of our souls depends on our reaction to Susanna’s feigned betrayal of Figaro, to the overinflated sense of integrity that consigns Alceste to misanthropic loneliness, to Don Quixote’s daft chivalric infatuations, to the sharpness of Beatrice and Benedick’s elegantly cutting romantic banter.

But what are we to make of Aristophanes (c. 450–385 B.C.), the classical world’s premier comic writer, who indulged in humor that can hardly be called sublime? As the Bloomsbury wit Lytton Strachey wrote, Aristophanes’ style is, “in the ordinary sense of the word, indecent.” Strachey’s 1913 essay “The Old Comedy” traced “that long line of writers who, from Aristophanes to Anatole France, have taken as the theme for their variations of humor and fancy one of the very few universal elements in the nature of man.” Aristophanes reveled in obscenity as a dog off its leash will roll happily in filth; his Athenian audience, surely as perceptive as the crowds at the Globe Theatre or the grandees at the court of Louis XIV, found high sport in the debauchery. The imagination of the private parts knew no more enthusiastic public advocate. Nothing was too nasty for him to find entertaining. Some of his choicest gross-out gags surprise one into sputtering with laughter even now,

when one has seen and heard everything. His preferred instrument was not rapier wit, but the bludgeon that stuns its victims into a belly laugh.

Which is not to say that Aristophanes lacked inventiveness: quite the contrary. He was inexhaustible in dreaming up new sources of amusing disgust. In his final play, *Wealth* (388 B.C.), the clever slave Cario details the bouquet of an old hag’s fart with the expert nose of a sommelier (she is “[f]arting for fear with a stench worse than a weasel”). Cario proudly declares by comparison that his own farts bear no resemblance to frankincense. It’s the kind of thing we are familiar with from Mel Brooks and the class cut-up in fourth grade, though carried out with singular panache.

And Aristophanes gets far bolder than that. *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.), the one play he is widely known for today, is the story of a women’s sex strike designed to end the Peloponnesian War by withholding gratification until the belligerents relent. One poor soldier with an erection that won’t go down—the actor wears an immense phallus—is teased almost to combustion by his wife. Despite her own desire, she runs offstage just before the “climactic” moment can occur. In the *Ekklesiiazousai*, or *Women of the Assembly* (c. 390 B.C.), the bumbling old man Blepyrus squats and struggles with a refractory bowel movement as he carries on a lengthy conversation with a neighbor. It is unquestionably a



theatrical *tour de force*: in two and a half millennia, no other playwright has surpassed its bravura crudity.

In *Wealth*, the chorus of farmers threatens ultra-violence against Cario, whose master is proposing a loopy (but ultimately successful) scheme to make all good people rich: “Mimicking the Son of Laertes, we shall hang you up by the balls, / And befoul your nose with dung like a goat! / A very gaping Aristyllus, you will say: / ‘Follow mother, pig-gies!’” In their edition, the excellent Straussian scholars Wayne Ambler and Thomas L. Pangle relay the helpful note of an ancient commentator that Aristyllus was notorious for his coprophiliac tastes. *Wealth* was not the only place where Aristophanes brought this fact up.

Even today, no one can top him for sheer relish of scatological matters—though in the Roman Imperial period Petronius matched him in lewdness, and in Renaissance France Rabelais outdid him in loathsomeness. Our modern tastes have grown extravagantly coarse in some ways, but Aristophanes still manages to transgress the 21st century’s few remaining pieties. For instance, what we might now call “gay-bashing” was a staple of his humor. Sometimes he singles out certain Athenian men well known for their effeminacy or sexual voracity; other times his characters turn to the audience itself and lambaste its members as a gang of shameless sodomites. So in some ways his plays can shock today’s critics most of all: progressive tastemakers have grown too delicate for him. Lytton Strachey, himself a homosexual but always up for a laugh, would not have approved of our new prudery. Too much goes missing.

The Sublime and the Ridiculous

OF COURSE, FART JOKES AND QUEER jokes and public defecation are not the only reasons to recommend Aristophanes to a modern audience. The scabrous is no small part of his shtick, and it must be acknowledged as essential to his art, but it is only one of many registers at his disposal. For Aristophanes deploys a manifold comic arsenal: Stephen Halliwell, translator of Oxford World’s Classics’ 1998 edition of *Aristophanes: Frogs and Other Plays*, writes that “to some extent a modern audience is disposed to find in his work elements of, say, stand-up comedy, farce, pantomime, cabaret, topical satire, variety or vaudeville shows, and even theatre of the Absurd, all synthesized into a rich theatrical kaleidoscope.” Aristophanes knows from funny—from uproarious—all the way up and down the scale.

What may not be so obvious is his seriousness. That he has attracted faithful translators and astute commentators among Straussians, however, is *prima facie* evidence of that seriousness. Not only have Professors Ambler and Pangle given us three translations in *Birds/Peace/Wealth: Aristophanes’ Critique of the Gods* (2013), but Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West have also included Aristophanes in *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito, and Aristophanes’ Clouds* (1998). Moreover, Allan Bloom, in both his 1968 translation of Plato’s *Republic* and an essay collected in *Giants and Dwarfs* (1990), eloquently describes the profound antagonistic relationship between political philosophers and comic poets. All

low and something very high.” The audience of course included men of the utmost intellectual refinement, but Strauss means here the vast majority of the Athenian theater crowd. The groundlings, to borrow a term from Shakespeare’s time, gobbled up the ribaldry while serious reflections on justice or the gods sailed past them. Strauss never quite says so, but one gets the impression that he believes Aristophanes, like many great philosophers, disguised his most significant and subversive thoughts in order to avoid outraging the conventional citizenry. The multitude preferred their gods just the way they had always been, thank you very much, and atheism or theological innovation was a capital offense. But the more riotous the laughter, the more innocuous the affronts to Zeus and his Olympian posse or to the venerable Athenian lawmakers appeared. Laughter could bury the evidence of many crimes. Conviction for impiety, on the other hand, could bury *you*. The case of Socrates has stood for millennia as the salient example of how hard Athenian justice could be when the mob was riled by wrongthink.

According to Plato, whose account has become canonical, Aristophanes played a crucial role in Socrates’ conviction. Plato had reason for his belief. The *Clouds*, written and staged 24 years before the philosopher’s legally compelled suicide in 399 B.C., lampooned Socrates as an unbeliever in the gods of the city; a worshipper of the Clouds and of Vortex or perhaps of no gods at all; an examiner of the heavens and the things under the earth (both forbidden territory for decent people); and a teacher of a vicious moral rhetoric through which wrong arguments triumph over right ones, thereby licensing incest or violence against parents. In Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, the defendant attributes his legal difficulties to a whispering campaign on the part of “dangerous men” who have dishonestly poisoned the minds of many younger citizens against him—“And the most remarkable thing of all is that it is not even possible to know and say their names, unless a certain one happens to be a comic poet.” The legions of slanderers, Socrates continues, were herded into accusing him of corrupting his pupils “by making the weaker speech the stronger.” The charge was rendered plausible not by Socrates’ own actions, but by that poet whom Socrates at last deigns to name: “For you yourselves also used to see these things in the comedy of Aristophanes, in which a certain Socrates was carried around claiming that he was treading on air and spouting much other drivel about which I have no expertise.”

Discussed in this essay:

Birds/Peace/Wealth: Aristophanes’ Critique of the Gods, translated by Wayne Ambler and Thomas L. Pangle. Paul Dry Books, 223 pages, \$18.95

Aristophanes: Frogs and Other Plays, translated by Stephen Halliwell. Oxford University Press, 400 pages, \$13.95

Four Texts on Socrates: Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito, and Aristophanes’ Clouds, translated by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West. Cornell University Press, 192 pages, \$14.95

Aristophanes: Four Plays, translated by Aaron Poochigian. Liveright, 432 pages, \$39.95 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper)

these formidable scholars gratefully proclaim their debt to Leo Strauss’s own *Socrates and Aristophanes* (1996), a very nearly line-by-line reading of the 11 extant plays and a portrayal of Aristophanes as not only funny but wise.

Strauss homes in on the surpassing excellence of Aristophanes’ method: “The peculiar greatness of the Aristophanean comedy consists in its being the total comedy; the ridiculous is all-pervasive; the serious appears only in the guise of the ridiculous; the serious is integrated into the ridiculous.” Every Aristophanean play “is a combination of crude comedy and something surpassing the capacity of the audience, of something very

The Unjust Argument

THE CLOUDS IS SUCH A MADCAP AFFAIR that it is hard to believe it issued in such a solemn reckoning. Strepsiades, an old coot nearly bankrupted by his son's exorbitant passion for horsemanship, has heard that (as Thomas and Grace Starry West put it in their translation) Socrates' "Thinkery" next door might offer salvation. His deadbeat's calculating mind sees rich possibilities for a debtor like him who aspires to be an unimpeachable swindler: he seeks instruction in the "unjust speech" that gets the better of the just and will enable him to stiff his creditors. A student introduces him to the Mysteries that the Thinkery explores: Socrates had just been determining the distance a flea can jump in relation to its foot size by dipping its feet in wax, waiting for the wax to harden, and then removing the improvised footwear and measuring the space the feet had occupied. One thinks immediately of the Academy of Lagado in *Gulliver's Travels*, where experimenters try to extract sunbeams from cucumbers and to "reduce human Excrement to its original Food." But Jonathan Swift's Academicians are laborers in the modern scientific project for the conquest of nature and the relief of man's estate. Aristophanes' Socrates is a natural philoso-

pher, seeking not practical usefulness but pure knowledge.

Aristophanes' caricature renders the noblest and most exquisite human enterprise patently absurd. Indignities multiply. Once when Socrates "was gaping upwards" to observe the night sky, the student tells Strepsiades, a lizard on the roof dropped a load on the hapless savant. Strepsiades, who appreciates coarse Aristophanean humor, is delighted. He is so astonished by Socrates' reputation for ingenuity that he begs to meet the great man and to begin his course of study straightaway. Socrates makes his appearance in a basket high in the air, where he "contemplate[s] the sun" and looks down with disdain on the "ephemeral one," whom he nevertheless accepts as his student. Initiation into illicit thinking ensues, as Socrates informs Strepsiades that the customary gods don't exist and that he worships the Clouds instead. Lyrical magniloquence enriches Socrates' apostrophe to these goddesses, while Strepsiades, overcome with their beauty and splendor, worries aloud that he may soil himself. Encountering the highest things he has ever seen, Strepsiades immediately feels and announces, in truly Aristophanic fashion, the lowest urges.

Socrates is reverent toward the Clouds but despises certain of their louche worshippers: "Song-modulators of circling choruses—men

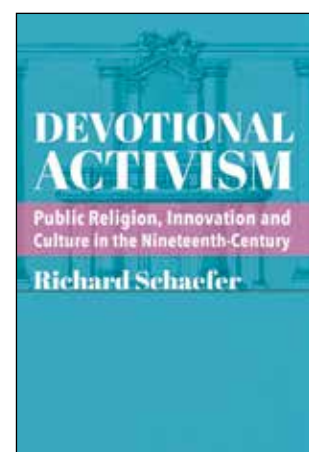
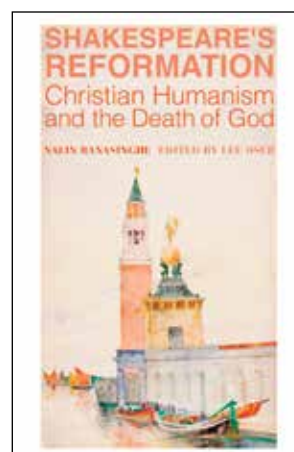
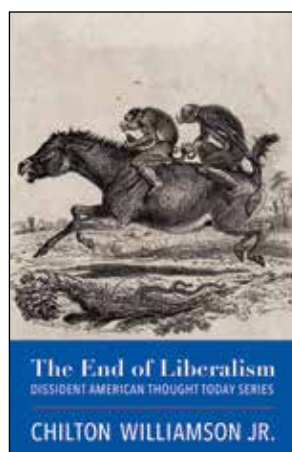
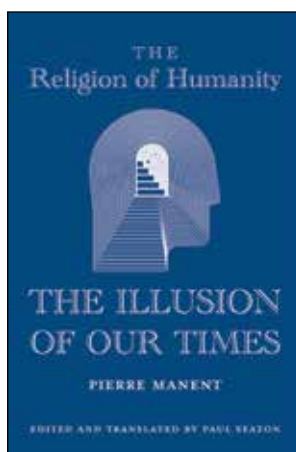
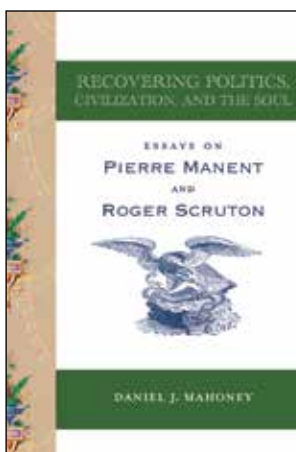
who are impostors about the things aloft— / idle do-nothings they nourish too, because they make poetry and music about these Clouds." The uncomprehending poets, all of them really poetasters and pretenders to wisdom, are enemies of the truth. Aristophanes turns the cutting edge against himself and his kind, though inevitably it will twist around to Socrates' disadvantage. The philosopher will be shown to be worse than those he contemns. The battle between philosophy and poetry is on in full force.

The knowledge Strepsiades pursues is meant for the young, the Clouds declare: it is Machiavellian wisdom *avant la lettre*, intended for the mastery of fortune and for making a fortune. The old reprobate longs to become expert in the base arts of shrewdness and outright deception that will win him riches. He imagines himself thoroughly versed in Socratic wisdom,

a bold, glib-tongued, daring go-getter,
a stinking concocter of falsehoods,
a phrase-finding lawsuit shyster,
a statute-book, a rattler, a fox, a sharpster,
supple, ironic, slippery, boastful
a stinging, disgusting, twisting pest,
a cheater.

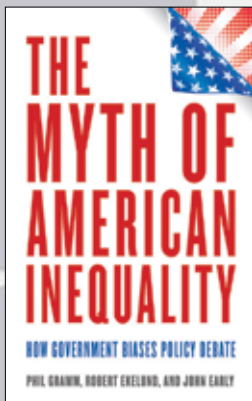
Within the secret (and flea-ridden) chambers of the Thinkery, hidden from the prying eyes

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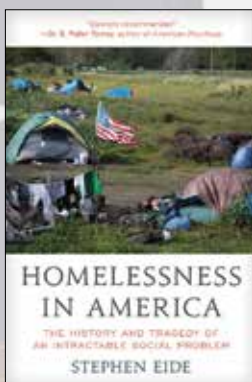
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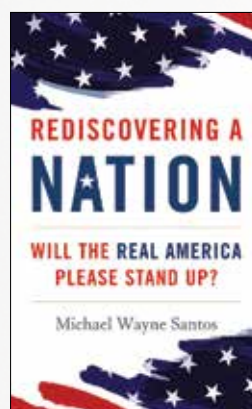
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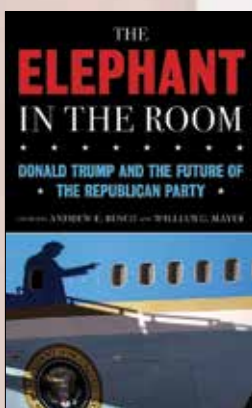


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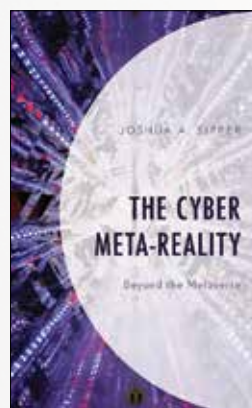
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By Joshua A. Sipper

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of boors like us, Socrates furnishes Strepsiades with the esoteric intellectual fundamentals for such a career. Yet Strepsiades proves too slow to be a capable student.

He enlists his son, Pheidippides, to try the course in the hopes that a younger mind will prove more supple. To demonstrate the benefits of philosophical instruction to the skeptical equestrian, Socrates brings out Just Speech and Unjust Speech to engage in debate. Against the moderate, old-fashioned education that produced upstanding heroes in the days of the Persian Wars, Unjust Speech offers the beguiling assertion that “everything shameful / is noble, and the noble is shameful.” The debate reaches its climax when Just Speech points out that evildoers are sometimes punished with buggery, and Unjust Speech protests that there is nothing wrong with being bugged: the public advocates, the tragedians, the popular orators, and many in the audience enjoy it all the time. Overwhelmed by the truth, Just Speech defects to the ranks of the Unjust.

Pheidippides goes in for this philosophy racket whole hog and proves a clever learner. After a quick tutorial in fast talking and sharp practice from his newly initiated son, Strepsiades likewise turns out to be sufficiently skilled in unjust speech to bilk several creditors when they try to collect. But then Pheidippides, fully fledged in shamelessness, displays the imposing extent of his new wisdom by beating his father ruthlessly. He claims it’s only right, since his father beat him when he was a child, and promises to beat his mother too. When Strepsiades cries out to the Clouds and blames them for this filial monstrosity, the leading Cloud informs him that it is he who is culpable: the Clouds lure those disposed to villainy into an evil plight, in order to teach them “dread of the gods.” With that, Strepsiades undergoes a rapid conversion to the side of the just. He visits his rough justice on Socrates and the other students, setting the Thinkery on fire with them in it. The play ends with Strepsiades chasing Socrates and his acolytes out of the theater. The Clouds and the god Hermes, who exists after all, like what they see and pronounce it good. Philosophy and all its works meet their rightful end.

No Joke

BUT JUST HOW SERIOUSLY ARE WE SUPPOSED to take Aristophanes’ teaching? Wasn’t the comedian himself indulging in unjust speech by savaging the philosopher? Although it is true that Socrates in his youth was a natural philosopher like Aristophanes’ character, seeking to uncover the secrets of the

heavens and the earth, he left such concerns behind and became the principal political philosopher of the classical period. The mature Socrates was a student of *human* things—above all, of the philosopher’s relation to the *polis*. And in any case, Aristophanes’ Socrates bears but the scantest resemblance to the figure Plato and Xenophon describe. His dialectic was not a primer in cunning injustice for embryonic evildoers, but generous conversation in quest of truth.

Could Aristophanes conceivably have foreseen that his play would help bring about Socrates’ trial, conviction, and execution? It appears more likely that the terrible legal upshot of the *Clouds* was the last thing Aristophanes intended. Socrates and Aristophanes were friends joined at the intellect: in his *Symposium*, Plato shows them at a banquet speculating brilliantly together on the nature of Eros, staying up long after the other guests to discuss whether a poet could be both comedian and tragedian. Sadly, Plato left that conversation itself unrecorded. But the poet and

Of course, fart jokes and queer jokes and public defecation are not the only reasons to recommend Aristophanes to a modern audience.

the philosopher clearly respected each other’s claim to seriousness. In this light the *Clouds* may be understood as a joke that got out of hand once the multitude seized on it, a lampoon taken for fatal truth about Socrates and philosophy by a credulous and volatile public. Aristophanes may have been one of the “dangerous men” whom Plato’s Socrates mentions in the *Apology*, but perhaps he did not realize until too late how serious a danger he posed. If so, then his role in Socrates’ judicial killing was not remotely malicious, but rather the unfortunate collateral damage of rhetorical carelessness.

That does not mean Aristophanes thought as highly of philosophy and philosophers as he did of his own poetry. He was a lover of wisdom, but the sort of wisdom he loved runs contrary to that pursued by the devotees of the purely rational life. What men and women really want, he taught, is evident without the intent examination of a relentless mind. Writing through the long years of the Peloponnesian War and the gruesome oligarchic aftermath of Athens’ defeat, Aristophanes

became, with Euripides, the most eloquent advocate of peace and its blessings. Where the tragedian showed war’s naked horror in such works as *Hecuba* (c. 424 B.C.), *Andromache* (c. 425), *The Trojan Women* (415), and *The Suppliant Women* (423), the comedian spoke directly for the serene, peaceable, everyday life whose unsurpassed excellence only the war-weary can truly appreciate. In *Acharnians* (425 B.C.), *Peace* (421), and *Lysistrata* (411), Aristophanes’ tribute to peace is the obverse of, and profoundly influenced by, the tragic sense of life. His loving catalogues of the simplest peacetime pleasures mirror Homer’s beautifully melancholy evocation of ordinary pastoral life via heroic similes, which take their full effect from their contrast with war’s savagery.

Aristophanes’ men and women know in their hearts, in their guts, and in their loins what makes life really worth living. He is the arch-poet of the body’s wisdom, which resides in the human capacity for ease, comfort, and delight. His vulgar humor reflects his acceptance of the body’s appetites and imperatives in all their grossness. Conjugal contentment, domestic tranquility, belly cheer, great sex, and the abolition of fear constitute the good life for Aristophanes’ heroes and the mass of humanity. The pleasures of peace that he invokes may seem trivial to those who have never been deprived of them, or to the philosophers who scorn them because they know something better. But to those ordinary people, experienced in suffering, they are priceless.

Tragicomedy

IN PEACE, TRANSLATED HERE BY AMBLER and Pangle, the farmer Trygaeus rides a gigantic dung beetle, a superlatively disgusting creature, up to heaven. There he lodges his complaint that the gods’ love of war has made human life—Greek life in particular—unendurable. That is to say: a man must be well acquainted with the world’s filth if he is to succeed in bringing Peace to human beings—Peace capitalized because it is the goddess herself, long buried by the god of war and resuscitated by Trygaeus’ efforts. He must learn, and Hermes will instruct him, that men are at least as culpable as gods for the prolonged conflict; the lesson renders him expert in the human potential for happiness. As he exhorts the chorus of farmers who help with the excavation:

when once we’ve gotten her, then rejoice
And shout and laugh;
Then you’ll be able
To sail away, to stay at home, to screw,
to sleep,

To go and see the great festivals,
To feast, to play drinking games,
To be sybaritic,
To shout "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Whether the peace that Trygaeus achieves will last, however, is not clear. The avarice of rich and poor alike, the flim-flam of religious personnel, the shamelessness of demagogues who whip the citizenry into war frenzies, the appetite for bloody heroism bred into warriors' children, the special interest of the arms merchants who fear losing their livelihood: Aristophanes presents these impediments to enduring concord. Trygaeus has a cogent reply for them all, though, and the play ends with his joyous wedding to a beautiful former denizen of Heaven. No one ever had it so good, at least for now. This is life as it should be, Aristophanes concludes. It's hard to disagree.

Aristophanes presents a more searching examination of what the good life really is, and what it definitely isn't, in *Women of the Assembly*, newly and vividly translated by the poet Aaron Poochigian in *Aristophanes: Four Plays* (the other three are *Clouds*, *Birds*, and *Lysistrata*). This is the play of his that speaks most tellingly to our own time and place. The subject is a revolution pulled off by Athenian women to save the floundering polis; they dress as men and convince the assembled (male) citizenry to adopt the purest communism as the city's new regime. Communist Athens will be ruled by women—or really, by one woman. The audacious eloquence of Praxagora carries the day, and transforms the world utterly. As she informs her husband Blepyrus, he of the agonizing constipation, "what I propose is that henceforth / there be identical conditions of

existence for us all." Perfect fulfillment will be the rule: she cannot even imagine anyone objecting to her fabulous program. There will be no more thieving or gambling or courts of law: "All will be satisfied with what they have." The traditional family will be defunct, universal promiscuity a legal mandate; no child will be able to say who his father is, so every man will be father to every child. Everyone will eat together in a public refectory. The walls that divide one household from another will be torn down, "so everyone can enter every space." The private life will be an old discredited relic. Oh, but there will still be slaves: emancipation would be going too far, for someone has to do the dirty work.

Praxagora disappears from the scene halfway through the play, as Aristophanes devotes the second half to the results of her policies—the city in speech put to the test by the city in action. Immediately a dissident appears. To a man hauling away his household goods to hand them in to city officials, the dissident scoffs, "Why would I give up all of my possessions? / I'd be a wretched moron if I did." This nefarious kulak defies the authorities; he prefers his own to the common lot. There is no convincing him otherwise. What is to be done with him? The question hangs in the air.

The most horrifying new law enforces strict equity for sexual intercourse. The young and beautiful are required to sleep first with the old and ugly before they can do so with the partners they really desire. Aristophanes depicts a handsome young couple, clearly made for each other, kept apart by three hideous old crones who all claim first crack at the youth. The less ugly hags have to defer to the ugliest, whose newfound right will undo generations

of injustice to the likes of her. What is natural must give way before the idea of equity, which Aristophanes identified as a moral abomination well before the Democratic Party came to embrace it as its *raison d'être*. The equitable offends the beautiful young woman's sense of justice, and no normal person can blame her for wanting to have her lover to herself as the prerogative of her superior comeliness. Permanent enmity between the beautiful and the ugly is being established; there is no suggestion that the truly virtuous shall learn to ignore the difference between beauty and ugliness, and thus renounce the immorality of lookism. The ridiculousness and patent wrong of the new arrangement arouse indignation rather than laughter. The pathos of normal Eros defiled is almost unbearable; this scene has a bitter tragic flavor quite unlike anything else in Aristophanes.

So when at last the Athenians gather for their communal feast, the various foods enumerated gaily by the chorus of women, the joy is attenuated by the nagging thought of the less savory aspects of Praxagora's communism. Gourmandise will not erase the insult to heart and mind of the new order's grotesque oppression in the name of justice. Aristophanes has introduced the specter of political evil into the midst of contented prosperity, and left his audience to deal with the contradiction as they may. The ultimate achievement of his art is to answer the question posed by Socrates at the end of Plato's *Symposium* with the suggestion that the same poet might indeed be capable of writing both comedy and tragedy.

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