

CONTEXTUALIZING COMEDY

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Agenda

- Caution: few sources and lots of speculation
- Why Athens?
- Context for the development of tragedy
- Context for the development of comedy
- Social and political role of festivals and drama
- Relationship between types of drama and forms of government
- Parrhesia, Choregoi and Poets

Caution!

- Origins of drama, especially tragedy is murky
 - Probably developed from choral poetry
 - Begins around 534, our first extant tragedy comes from 472
- Evidence is sketchy. From 5-7 poets:
 - 31 tragedies
 - 1 satyr-drama
 - 1 quasi-satyr-drama
 - 9 comedies
 - Fragments and testimonia; several hundred titles remain
 - Aeschylus -- 6 or 7 of 80
 - Sophocles -- 7 out of 120
 - Euripides -- 18 out of 90
 - Aristophanes -- 11 out of 40
 - Menander -- 2 out of over 100

Why Athens?

- Best-known city for drama, but not the first or only city-state with theaters and dramatic traditions
 - Theaters prominent in every Greek city-state by 4th C BCE
 - Alexander's armies enjoyed performances
- Athens not particularly powerful in 6th C BCE
- Three genres formalized into public competitions in late 6th/early 5th C BCE
 - Tragedy under tyrants (ca. 530's)
 - Satyr plays under democracy (ca. 501)
 - Old Comedy under democracy (March 486)

Context for the development of tragedy

- Economic boom in the late 6th C
 - Acquisition of Attica
 - Shift in production from grain to olives/olive oil, clay and pottery
 - Athenian owls from the mines at Laureoin
- Tyranny of Peisistratos and Hippias mid-540's-510
 - Attracted artists and poets to their court like Anakreon, Simonides and Bacchylides
 - Initiated building program
 - Established the Panathenaia (celebration of Athens and Athene)
 - Instituted contests for the recitation of Homeric poems and establishing the first 'official' text of Homer.
 - Creation of the City Dionysia "which overrode all the local festivals and created one official celebration for the people of Attica"

Context for the development of comedy

- February 486: first comedies performed at City Dionysia
- First extant comedy from 425, *Acharnians*
- Ca. 440 Comedic contests at Lenaia
- Character of comedies before the *Acharnians*?
- Old Comedy: topical, personal, breaks theatrical illusion
- Middle Comedy: comedy of manners; “universal”

Rural Dionysia and Lenaia

- Rural Dionysia: December (unknown foundations)
 - Processions and sacrifices
 - Evidence for dithyramb, tragedy and comedy in at least 15 demes
 - Restaged performances from other two big festivals
 - 405 both Aristophanes and Sophocles produced drama in celebration of Dionysia in Eleusis
 - Some demes prefer one genre over another, though Eleusis produced all three
- Lenaia: January (foundation date unknown)
 - Supervised by archon basileus (religious in nature?)
 - Release from inhibitions? (processional invective)
 - Held in the Lenaion
 - Formal contests between choregoi and poets
 - Non-citizen choregoi and choreuts permitted
 - "We are by ourselves" (Arist. *Archarn.*)

Greater Dionysia

- Occurs in March with the opening of sea lanes (founded around 534)
 - *Archon eponymous* chooses competitors and assigns choregoi
 - Schedule of events:
 - Proagon: poets and actors present “previews”
 - Eisagoge: Idol is translated from his temple to a grove outside the city with hymns and sacrifices were made, they brought the idol back to his theater with a torchlight parade
 - Pompe: precise route and order of the procession unknown
 - Led by virgin of "good" family carrying golden basket with first fruits
 - Male citizens carried wineskins and huge loaves of bread on spits
 - Metics carried "basins" (kraters), daughters carried hydria "basin bearers" a term of abuse for metics
 - Choregoi appeared in lavish costume
 - Ephebes (young men of military service) escorted the sacrificial bull
 - Lots of other sacrificial animals
 - Phallic procession
 - Procession stopped for hymns and dances at shrines en route. Sacrificial feast at sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus
 - Dithyramps: by each tribe (50 men and 50 boys)
 - Judgment and Victory procession (komos)
 - Winning Choregos gets crown and tripod.
 - Poet received bull to sacrifice.

Social and Political Role of Festivals

- Who participates in these festivals? Is that significant?
- What was the effect of the *theorica* (i.e. paying for the poor to attend? Pericles or Agyrrhios in 395)
- What was the function of the pre- and post-performance rituals?
- What did the audiences look like? How did they act?
- What social and political functions does drama perform?
- What is the relationship between types of drama and forms of government?
- Was drama a religious offering, an exploration of political identity or an engaging piece of popular entertainment?

“Couched in the equally traditional and aristocratic myths of the past in the case of tragedy (and also some comedies) or in the humorous fantasies of comedy, drama became the vehicle through which the city could celebrate its freedoms while simultaneously challenged and interrogated some of its most cherished ideals.” (Storey and Allen, 71.)

Parrhesia, politicians, *choregoi* and poets

- What sorts of limitations were officially placed on poets?
- To what extent, do you think, that poets (esp. comic poets) performed self-censorship? Does this vary with the form of government?
- Did poets criticize in their own voices?
- To what extent, do you imagine, that *choregoi* affected the content of the plays?
- Is it significant that the state funded at least a portion of each of the dramatic festivals?
- What sort of recourse did poets have against *choregoi*?

“...we would make the argument that the intensely political comedy that we take as typical of Old Comedy is really only a vogue, a very successful one, of the last third of the century. Begun with Kratinos... it was perfected by Aristophanes, Eupolis and Platon and reached its apogee with the demagogue comedy where the comic poet took on one particular target.” (Storey and Allen, 103)

Political/Literary Context of 4th C Athens

After having suffered through two revolutions at the end of the 5th C BCE, i.e. the Council of 400 and the slaughter of the Thirty Tyrants, as well as the unjust executions of Socrates and six of the ten naval commanders who were unable because of the weather to rescue Athenian survivors from the battle at Arginousae, I think comic poets likely reconsidered the wisdom of attacking political figures in such destabilized and frightening times. Middle Comedy lacks three defining characteristics of Old Comedy (or at least, the Old Comedy that extant): the role of the chorus as a commentator on the action, the summoning of public characters on stage (either impersonated or personified) and ridicule of political figures in favor of stock characters. No complete middle comedies survive and so it is difficult to prove this point, but it nonetheless seems likely to me.