

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis
Baum Henry Nietzsche Dumas Flaubert Turgenev Balzac
Leslie Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Scott
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Burton Harte
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Hesse
Hale James Hastings Cooke
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The Eleven Comedies, Volume 1

Aristophanes

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Translator's Foreword

Perhaps the first thing to strike us—paradoxical as it may sound to say so—about the Athenian 'Old Comedy' is its *modernness*. Of its very nature, satiric drama comes later than Epic and Lyric poetry, Tragedy or History; Aristophanes follows Homer and Simonides, Sophocles and Thucydides. Of its essence, it is free from many of the conventions and restraining influences of earlier forms of literature, and enjoys much of the liberty of choice of subject and licence of method that marks present-day conditions of literary production both on and off the stage. Its very existence presupposes a fuller and bolder intellectual life, a more advanced and complex city civilization, a keener taste and livelier faculty of comprehension in the people who appreciate it, than could anywhere be found at an earlier epoch. Speaking broadly and generally, the Aristophanic drama has more in common with modern ways of looking at things, more in common with the conditions of the modern stage, especially in certain directions—burlesque, extravaganza, musical farce, and even 'pantomime,' than with the earlier and graver products of the Greek mind.

The eleven plays, all that have come down to us out of a total of over forty staged by our author in the course of his long career, deal with the events of the day, the incidents and personages of contemporary Athenian city life, playing freely over the surface of things familiar to the audience and naturally provoking their interest and rousing their prejudices, dealing with contemporary local gossip, contemporary art and literature, and above all contemporary politics, domestic and foreign. All this *farrago* of miscellaneous subjects is treated in a frank, uncompromising spirit of criticism and satire, a spirit of broad fun, side-splitting laughter and reckless high spirits. Whatever lends itself to ridicule is instantly seized upon; odd, eccentric and degraded personalities are caricatured, social foibles and vices pilloried, pomposity and sententiousness in the verses of the poets, particularly the tragedians, and most particularly in Euripides—the pet aversion and constant butt of Aristophanes' satire—are parodied. All is fish that comes to the Comic dramatists net, anything that will raise a laugh is fair game.

"It is difficult to compare the Aristophanic Comedy to any one form of modern literature, dramatic or other. It perhaps most resembles what we now call burlesque; but it had also very much in it of broad farce and comic opera, and something also (in the hits at the fashions and follies of the day with which it abounded) of the modern pantomime. But it was something more, and more important to the Athenian public than any or all of these could have been. Almost always more or less political, and sometimes intensely personal, and always with some purpose more or less important underlying its wildest vagaries and coarsest buffooneries, it supplied the place of the political journal, the literary review, the popular caricature and the party pamphlet, of our own times. It combined the attractions and influence of all these; for its grotesque masks and elaborate 'spectacle' addressed the eye as strongly as the author's keenest witticisms did the ear of his audience." [1]

Rollicking, reckless, uproarious fun is the key-note; though a more serious intention is always latent underneath. Aristophanes was a strong—sometimes an unscrupulous—partisan; he was an uncompromising Conservative of the old school, an ardent admirer of the vanishing aristocratic régime, an anti-Imperialist—'Imperialism' was a *democratic* craze at Athens—and never lost an opportunity of throwing scorn on Cleon the demagogue, his political *bête noire* and personal enemy, Cleon's henchmen of the popular faction, and the War party generally. Gravity, solemnity, seriousness, are conspicuous by their absence; even that 'restraint' which is the salient characteristic of Greek expression in literature no less than in Art, is largely relaxed in the rough-and-tumble, informal, miscellaneous *modern* phantasmagoria of these diverting extravaganzas.

At the same time we must not be misled by the word 'Comedy' to bring Aristophanes' work into comparison with what we call Comedy now. This is quite another thing—confined to a representation of incidents of private, generally polite life, and made up of the intrigues and entanglements of social and domestic situations. Such a Comedy the Greeks did produce, but at a date fifty or sixty years subsequent to Aristophanes' day, and recognized by themselves as belonging to an entirely different genre. Hence the distinction drawn between 'The Old Comedy,' of which Cratinus and his

younger contemporaries, Eupolis and Aristophanes, were the leading representatives, and which was at high-water mark just before and during the course of the great struggle of the Peloponnesian War, and 'The New Comedy,' a comedy of manners, the two chief exponents of which were Philemon and Menander, writing after Athens had fallen under the Macedonian yoke, and politics were excluded altogether from the stage. Menander's plays in turn were the originals of those produced by Plautus and Terence at Rome, whose existing Comedies afford some faint idea of what the lost masterpieces of their Greek predecessor must have been. Unlike the 'Old,' the 'New Comedy' had no Chorus and no 'Parabasis.'

This remarkable and distinctive feature, by-the-bye, of the Old Comedy, the 'Parabasis' to wit, calls for a word of explanation. It was a direct address on the Author's part to the audience, delivered in verse of a special metre, generally towards the close of the representation, by the leader of the Chorus, but expressing the personal opinions and predilections of the poet, and embodying any remarks upon current topics and any urgent piece of advice which he was particularly anxious to insist on. Often it was made the vehicle for special appeal to the sympathetic consideration of the spectators for the play and its merits. These 'parabases,' so characteristic of the Aristophanic comedy, are conceived in the brightest and wittiest vein, and abound in topical allusions and personal hits that must have constituted them perhaps the most telling part of the whole performance.

Aristophanes deals with all questions; for him the domain of the Comic Poet has no limits, his mission is as wide as human nature. It is to Athens he addresses himself, to the city as a whole; his criticism embraces morals no less than politics, poetry no less than philosophy; he does not hesitate to assail the rites and dogmas of Paganism; whatever affords subject for laughter or vituperation lies within his province; there he is in his element, scourge in hand, his heart ablaze with indignation, pitiless, and utterly careless of all social distinctions.

In Politics Aristophanes belongs to the party of the Aristocracy. He could not do otherwise, seeing that the democratic principle was then triumphant; Comedy is never laudatory, it lives upon criticism,

it must bite to the quick to win a hearing; its strength, its vital force is contradiction. Thus the abuses of democracy and demagogy were the most favourable element possible for the development of Aristophanes' genius, just because his merciless satire finds more abundant subject-matter there than under any other form of civil constitution. Then are we actually to believe that the necessity of his profession as a comic poet alone drove him into the faction of the malcontents? This would surely be to wilfully mistake the dignity of character and consistency of conviction which are to be found underlying all his productions. Throughout his long career as a dramatist his predilections always remain the same, as likewise his antipathies, and in many respects the party he champions so ardently had claims to be regarded as representing the best interests of the state. It is but just therefore to proclaim Aristophanes as having deserved well of his country, and to admit the genuine courage he displayed in attacking before the people the people's own favourites, assailing in word those who held the sword. To mock at the folly of a nation that lets itself be cajoled by vain and empty flatteries, to preach peace to fellow-citizens enamoured of war, was to fulfil a dangerous rôle, that would never have appealed, we may feel sure, to a mere vulgar ambition.

Moreover his genius, pre-eminently Greek as it is, has an instinctive horror of all excesses, and hits out at them wherever he marks their existence, whether amongst the great or the humble of the earth. Supposing the Aristocracy, having won the victory the Poet desired, had fallen in turn into oppression and misgovernment, doubtless Aristophanes would have lashed its members with his most biting sarcasms. It is just because Liberty is dear to his heart that he hates government by Demagogues; he would fain free the city from the despotism of a clique of wretched intriguers that oppressed her. But at the same time the Aristocracy favoured by our Author was not such as comes by birth and privilege, but such as is won and maintained by merit and high service to the state.

In matters of morality his satires have the same high aims. How should a corrupted population recover purity, if not by returning to the old unsullied sources from which earlier generations had drawn their inspiration? Accordingly we find Aristophanes constantly bringing on the stage the "men of Marathon," the vigorous genera-

tion to which Athens owed her freedom and her greatness. It is no mere childish commonplace with our poet, this laudation of a past age; the facts of History prove he was in the right, all the novelties he condemns were as a matter of fact so many causes that brought about Athenian decadence. Directly the citizen receives payment for attending the Assembly, he is no longer a perfectly free agent in the disposal of his vote; besides, the practice is equivalent to setting a premium on idleness, and so ruining all proper activity; a populace maintained by the state loses all energy, falls into a lethargy and dies. The life of the forum is a formidable solvent of virtue and vigour; by dint of speechifying, men forget how to act. Another thing was the introduction of 'the new education,' imported by 'the Sophists,' which substituted for serious studies, definitely limited and systematically pursued, a crowd of vague and subtle speculations; it was a mental gymnastic that gave suppleness to the wits, it is true, but only by corrupting and deteriorating the moral sense, a system that in the long run was merely destructive. Such, then, was the threefold poison that was destroying Athenian morality—the triobolus, the noisy assemblies in the Agora, the doctrines of the Sophists; the antidote was the recollection of former virtue and past prosperity, which the Poet systematically revives in contrast with the turpitudes and trivialities of the present day. There is no turning back the course of history; but if Aristophanes' efforts have remained abortive, they are not therefore inglorious. Is the moralist to despair and throw away his pen, because in so many cases his voice finds no echo?

Again we find Aristophanes' literary views embodying the same good sense which led him to see the truth in politics and morals. Here likewise it is not the individual he attacks; his criticism is general. His adversary is not the individual Euripides, but under his name depraved taste and the abandonment of that noble simplicity which had produced the masterpieces of the age of Pericles. Euripides was no ordinary writer, that is beyond question; but the very excellence of his qualities made his influence only the more dangerous.

Literary reform is closely connected with moral regeneration, the decadence of the one being both cause and effect of the deterioration of the other. The author who should succeed in purifying the

public taste would come near restoring to repute healthy and honest views of life. Aristophanes essayed the task both by criticism and example—by criticism, directing the shafts of his ridicule at over-emphasis and over-subtlety, by example, writing himself in inimitable perfection the beautiful Attic dialect, which was being enervated and effeminated and spoiled in the hands of his opponents.

Even the Gods were not spared by the Aristophanic wit and badinage; in 'Plutus,' in 'The Birds,' in 'The Frogs,' we see them very roughly handled. To wonder at these profane drolleries, however, is to fail altogether to grasp the privileges of ancient comedy and the very nature of Athenian society. The Comic Poets exercised unlimited rights of making fun; we do not read in history of a single one of the class having ever been called to the bar of justice to answer for the audacity of his dramatic efforts. The same liberty extended to religious matters; the Athenian people, keen, delicately organized, quick to see a joke and loving laughter for its own sake, even when the point told against themselves, this people of mockers felt convinced the Gods appreciated raillery just as well as men did. Moreover, the Greeks do not appear to have had any very strong attachment to Paganism as a matter of dogmatic belief. To say nothing of the enlightened classes, who saw in this vast hierarchy of divinities only an ingenious allegory, the populace even was mainly concerned with the processions and songs and dances, the banquets and spectacular shows and all the external pomp and splendour of a cult the magnificence and varied rites of which amused its curiosity. But serious faith, ardent devotion, dogmatic discussion, is there a trace of these things? A sensual and poetic type of religion, Paganism was accepted at Athens only by the imagination, not by the reason; its ceremonies were duly performed, without any real piety touching the heart. Thus the audience felt no call to champion the cause of their deities when held up to ribaldry on the open stage; they left them to defend themselves—if they could.

Thus Aristophanes, we see, covered the whole field of thought; he scourged whatever was vicious or ridiculous, whether before the altars of the Gods, in the schools of the Sophists, or on the Orators' platform. But the wider the duty he undertook, the harder it became to fulfil this duty adequately. How satisfy a public made up of so many and such diverse elements, so sharply contrasted by birth,

fortune, education, opinion, interest? How hold sway over a body of spectators, who were at the same time judges? To succeed in the task he was bound to be master of all styles of diction—at one and the same time a dainty poet and a diverting buffoon. It is just this universality of genius, this combination of the most eminent and various qualities, that has won Aristophanes a place apart among satirists; and if it be true to say that well-written works never die, the style alone of his Comedies would have assured their immortality.

No writer, indeed, has been more pre-eminent in that simple, clear, precise, elegant diction that is the peculiar glory of Attic literature, the brilliant yet concise quality of which the authors of no other Greek city were quite able to attain. He shows, each in its due turn, vigour and suppleness of language, he exercises a sure and spontaneous choice of correct terms, the proper combination of harmonious phrases, he goes straight to his object, he aims well and hits hard, even when he seems to be merely grazing the surface. Under his apparent negligence lies concealed the high perfection of accomplished art. This applies to the dialogues. In the choruses, Aristophanes speaks the tongue of Pindar and Sophocles; he follows the footsteps of those two mighty masters of the choric hymn into the highest regions of poetry; his lyric style is bold, impetuous, abounding in verve and brilliance, yet without the high-flown inspiration ever involving a lapse from good taste.

One of the forms in which he is fondest of clothing his conceptions is allegory; it may truly be said that the stage of Aristophanes is a series of caricatures where every idea has taken on a corporeal presentment and is reproduced under human lineaments. To personify the abstract notion, to dress it up in the shape of an animated being for its better comprehension by the public, is in fact a proceeding altogether in harmony with the customs and conventions of Ancient Comedy. The Comic Poet never spares us a single detail of everyday life, no matter how commonplace or degrading; he pushes the materialistic delineation of the passions and vices to the extreme limit of obscene gesture and the most cynical shamelessness of word and act.

This scorn of propriety, this unchecked licence of speech, has often been made a subject of reproach against Aristophanes, and it appears to the best modern critics that the poet would have been not a whit less diverting or effective had he respected the dictates of common decency. But it is only fair, surely, before finally condemning our Author, to consider whether the times in which he lived, the origin itself of the Greek Comedy, and the constitution of the audience, do not entitle him at any rate to claim the benefit of extenuating circumstances. We must not forget that Comedy owes its birth to those festivals at which Priapus was adored side by side with Bacchus, and that 'Phallophoria' (carrying the symbols of generation in procession) still existed as a religious rite at the date when Aristophanes was composing his plays. Nor must we forget that theatrical performances were at Athens forbidden pleasures to women and children. Above all we should take full account of the code of social custom and morality then prevailing. The Ancients never understood modesty quite in the same way as our refined modern civilization does; they spoke of everything without the smallest reticence, and expressions which would revolt the least squeamish amongst ourselves did not surprise or shock the most fastidious. We ought not, therefore, to blame too severely the Comic Poet, who after all was only following in this respect the habits of his age; and if his pictures are often repulsively bestial, let us lay most blame to the account of a state of society which deserved to be painted in such odiously black colours. Doubtless Aristophanes might have given less Prominence to these cynical representations, instead of reveling in them, as he really seems to have done; men of taste and refinement, and there must have been such even among his audience, would have thought all the better of him! But it was the populace filled the bulk of the benches, and the populace loved coarse laughter and filthy words. The Poet supplied what the majority demanded; he was not the man to sacrifice one of the easiest and surest means of winning applause and popularity.

Aristophanes enjoyed an ample share of glory in his lifetime, and posterity has ratified the verdict given by his contemporaries. The epitaph is well-known which Plato composed for him, after his death: "The Graces, seeking an imperishable sanctuary, found the soul of Aristophanes." Such eulogy may appear excessive to one

who re-peruses after the lapse of twenty centuries these pictures of a vanished world. But if, despite the profound differences of custom, taste and opinion which separate our own age from that of the Greeks, despite the obscurity of a host of passages whose especial point lay in their reference to some topic of the moment, and which inevitably leave us cold at the present day—if, despite all this, we still feel ourselves carried away, charmed, diverted, dominated by this dazzling *verve*, these copious outpourings of imagination, wit and poesy, let us try to realize in thought what must have been the unbounded pleasure of an Athenian audience listening to one of our Author's satires. Then every detail was realized, every nuance of criticism appreciated; every allusion told, and the model was often actually sitting in the semicircle of the auditorium facing the copy at that time being presented on the stage. "What a passion of excitement! What transports of enthusiasm and angry protest! What bursts of uncontrollable merriment! What thunders of applause! How the Comic Poet must have felt himself a King, indeed, in presence of these popular storms which, like the god of the sea, he could arouse and allay at his good will and pleasure!"[2]

To return for a moment to the coarseness of language so often pointed to as a blot in Aristophanes. "The great comedian has been censured and apologized for on this ground, over and over again. His personal exculpation must always rest upon the fact, that the wildest licence in which he indulged was not only recognized as permissible, but actually enjoined as part of the ceremonial at these festivals of Bacchus; that it was not only in accordance with public taste, but was consecrated as a part of the national religion.... But the coarseness of Aristophanes is not corrupting. There is nothing immoral in his plots, nothing really dangerous in his broadest humour. Compared with some of our old English dramatists, he is morality itself. And when we remember the plots of some French and English plays which now attract fashionable audiences, and the character of some modern French and English novels not unfrequently found (at any rate in England) upon drawing-room tables, the least that can be said is, that we had better not cast stones at Aristophanes." [3] Moreover, it should be borne in mind that Athenian custom did not sanction the presence of women—at least women of reputable character—at these performances.

The particular plays, though none are free from it, which most abound in this ribald fun—for fun it always is, never mere prurien-
cy for its own sake, Aristophanes has a deal of the old 'esprit gau-
lois' about him—are the 'Peace' and, as might be expected from its
theme, lending itself so readily to suggestive allusions and situa-
tions, above all the 'Lysistrata.' The 'Thesmophoriazusae' and 'Eccle-
siazusae' also take ample toll in this sort of the 'risqué' situations
incidental to their plots, the dressing up of men as women in the
former, and of women as men in the latter. Needless to say, no faith-
ful translator will emasculate his author by expurgation, and the
reader will here find Aristophanes' Comedies as Aristophanes
wrote them, not as Mrs. Grundy might wish him to have written
them.

These performances took place at the Festivals of Dionysus (Bac-
chus), either the Great Dionysia or the minor celebration of the Le-
naea, and were in a sense religious ceremonials—at any rate under
distinct religious sanction. The representations were held in the
Great Theatre of Dionysus, under the slope of the Acropolis, exten-
sive remains of which still exist; several plays were brought out at
each festival in competition, and prizes, first and second, were
awarded to the most successful productions—rewards which were
the object of the most intense ambition.

Next to nothing is known of the private life of Aristophanes, and
that little, beyond the two or three main facts given below, is highly
dubious, not to say apocryphal. He was born about 444 B.C., proba-
bly at Athens. His father held property in Aegina, and the family
may very likely have come originally from that island. At any rate,
this much is certain, that the author's arch-enemy Cleon made more
than one judicial attempt to prove him of alien birth and therefore
not properly entitled to the rights of Athenian citizenship; but in
this he entirely failed. The great Comedian had three sons, but of
these and their career history says nothing whatever. Such incidents
and anecdotes of our author's literary life as have come down to us
are all connected with one or other of the several plays, and will be
found alluded to in the special Introductions prefixed to these. He
died about 380 B.C.—the best and central years of his life and work
thus coinciding with the great national period of stress and struggle,
the Peloponnesian War, 431-404 B.C. He continued to produce plays

for the Athenian stage for the long period of thirty-seven years; though only eleven Comedies, out of a reputed total of forty, have survived.

A word or two as to existing translations of Aristophanes. These, the English ones at any rate, leave much to be desired; indeed it is not too much to say that there is no version of our Author in the language which gives the general reader anything like an adequate notion of these Plays. We speak of prose renderings. Aristophanes has been far more fortunate in his verse translators—Mitchell, who published four Comedies in this form in 1822, old-fashioned, but still helpful, Hookham Frere, five plays (1871), both scholarly and spirited, and last but not least, Mr. Bickley Rogers, whose excellent versions have appeared at intervals since 1867. But from their very nature these cannot afford anything like an exact idea of the 'ipsis-sima verba' of the Comedies, while all slur over or omit altogether passages in any way 'risqué.' There remains only our old friend 'Bohn' ("The Comedies of Aristophanes; a literal Translation by W. J. Hickie"), and what stuff 'Bohn' is! By very dint of downright literalness—though not, by-the-bye, always downright accuracy—any true notion of the Author's meaning is quite obscured. The letter kills the spirit.

The French prose versions are very good. That by C. Poyard (in the series of "Chefs-d'oeuvre des Littératures Anciennes") combines scholarly precision with an easy, racy, vernacular style in a way that seems impossible to any but a French scholar.

The order here adopted for the successive plays differs slightly from that observed in most editions; but as these latter do not agree amongst themselves, this small assumption of licence appears not unwarrantable. Chronologically 'The Acharnians' (426 B.C.) should come first; but it seems more convenient to group it with the two other "Comedies of the War," the whole trilogy dealing with the hardships involved by the struggle with the Lacedaemonians and the longings of the Athenian people for the blessings of peace. This leaves 'The Knights' to open the whole series—the most important politically of all Aristophanes' productions, embodying as it does his trenchant attack on the great demagogue Cleon and striking the keynote of the author's general attitude as advocate of old-

fashioned conservatism against the new democracy, its reckless 'Imperialism' and the unscrupulous and self-seeking policy, so the aristocratic party deemed it, of its accredited leaders.

Order, as thus rearranged, approximate date, and *motif* (in brief) of each of the eleven Comedies are given below:

'The Knights': 424 B.C. — eighth year of the War. Attacks Cleon, the Progressives, and the War policy generally.

Comedies of the War: —

'The Acharnians': 426 B.C. — sixth year of the War. Insists on the miseries consequent on the War, especially affecting the rural population, as represented by the Acharnian Dicaeopolis and his fellow demesmen. Incidentally makes fun of the tragedian Euripides.

'Peace': 422 B.C. — tenth year of the War. Further insists on the same theme, and enlarges on the blessings of Peace. The hero Trygaeus flies to Olympus, mounted on a beetle, to bring back the goddess Peace to earth.

'Lysistrata': 411 B.C. — twenty-first year of the War. A burlesque conspiracy entered into by the confederated women of Hellas, led by Lysistrata the Athenian, to compel the men to conclude peace.

'The Clouds': 423 B.C. — satirizes Socrates, the 'Sophists,' and the 'New Education.'

'The Wasps': 422 B.C. Makes fun of the Athenian passion for litigation, and the unsatisfactory organization of the Courts. Contains the incident of the mock trial of the thievish house-dog.

'The Birds': 414 B.C. Euelpides and Pisthetaerus, disgusted with the state of things at Athens, build a new and improved city, Cloud-cuckoo-town, in the kingdom of the birds. Some see an allusion to the Sicilian expedition, and Alcibiades' Utopian schemes.

'The Frogs': 405 B.C. A satire on Euripides and the 'New Tragedy.' Dionysus, patron of the Drama, dissatisfied with the contemporary condition of the Art, goes down to Hades to bring back to earth a poet of the older and worthier school.

'The Thesmophoriazusae': 412 B.C. Another literary satire; Euripides, summoned as a notorious defamer of women to defend himself before the dames of Athens assembled in solemn conclave at the Thesmophoria, or festival of Demeter and Persephone, induces his father-in-law, Mnesilochus, to dress up in women's clothes, penetrate thus disguised into the assemblage, and plead the poet's cause, but with scant success.

'The Ecclesiazusae': 392 B.C. Pokes fun at the ideal Utopias, such as Plato's 'Republic,' based on sweeping social and economic changes, greatly in vogue with the Sophists of the day. The women of the city disguise themselves as men, slip into the Public Assembly and secure a majority of votes. They then pass a series of decrees providing for community of goods and community of women, which produce, particularly the latter, a number of embarrassing and diverting consequences.

'Plutus': 408 and 388 B.C. A whimsical allegory more than a regular comedy. Plutus, the god of wealth, has been blinded by Zeus; discovered in the guise of a ragged beggarman and succoured by Chremylus, an old man who has ruined himself by generosity to his friends, he is restored to sight by

Aesculapius. He duly rewards Chremylus, and henceforth apportioned this world's goods among mankind on juster principles—enriching the just, but condemning the unjust to poverty.

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