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## Laughing at Aristophanes? An Evaluation of his Parabases

Alexandra Berardelli

Throughout millennia, audiences have indulged in laughing at timeless skits and stories that take them out of their daily lives and immerse themselves in a different world. Comedy is a lasting feature of entertainment, which is meant to be funny. In its evolution, comedy has taken on several forms to fit a narrative an author or artist wishes to present to an audience: amusement, dark humor, romantic comedy, etc. But, perhaps, comedy is more than simply a form of humorous entertainment.

Analyzing the roots of comedy in Ancient Greece suggests that an audience can understand comedy as more than an amusing spectacle and instead as valuable guidance. The Ancient Greek comedic playwright Aristophanes presents his own pieces of advice. Not found in the contents of one of his play's stories, but rather through an external device: the parabasis. In several of his plays, Aristophanes uses the ancient comedic technique of choral parabases to address the audience while dealing with serious matters in a comedy.

The chorus plays a crucial role in establishing a relationship with the audience in both Greek comedy and tragedy. The parabasis, only seen in comedy, is central in establishing this relationship. It is defined as "(literally a 'step aside') often presented direct audience address separate from the main plot of the play," it is often meant to offer advice from the author's point of view to the audience (Marshall, 132). Therefore, Aristophanes allows himself to speak to the audience through this artistic medium, both as the author and a fellow Athenian.

The *Clouds* and the *Frogs* are arguably two of Aristophanes' more famous works. They both contain parabases; however, they appear to be superficially different in content for the

audience to reflect upon. Although they may seem ostensibly different, upon deeper interpretation, a reader or audience member may understand both parabases to address serious matters for the audience. So, if Aristophanes had intended it or not, the audience could interpret them through a similar lens.

Before the parabases could be worked out to be more similar than they seem, it is necessary to observe why they appear so different. In the *Frogs*, just when Dionysus and Xanthias center Hades' palace in the underworld, the chorus enters and performs the parabasis (*Frogs* v. 674-737). Here, Aristophanes is relatively straightforward in outlining what he believes is essential for the audience to understand and takeaway, explicitly focusing on contemporary social and political issues. In contrast, Aristophanes uses the *Clouds*' parabasis first as an outlet for spouting off his anger for not winning at the play's first performance (*Clouds* v. 510-626). It is known to many scholars to be "expressed in passing the belief that the parabasis is more humorous than revealingly expository." (Major 132). Thus, there is a lot of debate about a deeper meaning of this parabasis. While it is true that Aristophanes angrily confronts the audience about their reaction to the play, he also offers valuable advice, just as in the *Frogs*' parabasis. Aristophanes' parabases in both of these plays address similar themes with different contents, which is why they might seem too different beyond comparability.

By the nature of the chorus and parabasis, there is a significant social element to this part of the play. Both parabases contain social commentary, making compelling arguments that should spark reflection for the audience to think about their role in society. Aristophanes likely tailored his parabases in the *Clouds* and *Frogs* around the citizen because they share a similar historical context. These plays were performed during the Peloponnesian war: a war fought between Athens and Sparta from 431 to 405 BCE. *Clouds* was the first to be performed in 423

BCE during a pivotal time when peace between the two powerful city-states was promising. The Athenians did not know this yet, but they were in for a rude awakening that would change their city forever. *Frogs* would be performed later at the end of the war, where Athenians see their powerful city-state endure a fatal loss of power. And so, both plays are a suitable outlet for Aristophanes to urge the audience to act for their Athenian society.

In the latter part of the *Frogs*' parabasis, Aristophanes outlines what a good citizen is, using a metaphor of old versus new gold. He shows that the new gold, or the finest of Athenian citizens, are typical examples of "well-born, well-behaved, just, fine, and outstanding men" (*Frogs* v. 727). Aristophanes is just describing his audience. But instead of acknowledging how well they use their exemplary citizenship for their advantage during the war, he recognizes that the city does not use its citizens to their advantage and must accept good citizenship for the betterment of society, especially during these times of warfare.

Still addressing the audience, Aristophanes concludes this parabasis, "But even at this late hour, you fools, do change your ways and once again choose the good people. You'll be congratulated for it if you're successful, and if you take a fall, at least the intelligent will say if something does happen to you, you're hanged from a worthy tree." (*Frogs* v. 733-738). As previously mentioned, the *Frogs* was performed at the end of the Peloponnesian war; thus Aristophanes addresses the audience, to act even at this "late hour," because the war is ending. More importantly, in an earlier part of the parabasis, Aristophanes urges people in the audience, whom he may call "fools," to use the best citizens to their advantage during the war. However, even if they choose the best people for the war effort, Aristophanes acknowledges that they will be honored regardless of whether they come out on top or not. By crafting this parabasis around the ideal citizen, Aristophanes argues to the audience what type of citizens Athens desperately

needs to, at least, try to save the city. Given the historical context, this sentiment would have been quite notable for the audience, thus helping tailor their reflection regarding themselves as ideal citizens.

Rather than outlining the ideal Athenian citizen or any other formal social matter, Aristophanes focuses on his own emotions about his play's first failed performance in the *Clouds*. In this parabasis, Aristophanes is upset with his audience because the first time the *Clouds* was performed, it was a failure. So, in this fury, he uses the parabasis to challenge the audience while giving them advice. But, the latter may not be so prevalent amid humorous spouting. Because he is angry at the audience for not choosing his play the first time, Aristophanes seems to undermine their collective intelligence. He hopes the second time, "to win for an audience of great intelligence and considered this play to be my most sophisticated, deeming you most worthy to taste it first, a play worked on extra hard." (*Clouds* v. 520-524).

So, if Aristophanes uses this spout to question the audience's intelligence in choosing a winning play, he too can evaluate their intelligence and judgment as members of society. By further evaluating the addressed audience in its historical context, there is more depth to his rageful fit. He is speaking to some of the most powerful political figures in the world, in 423 BCE: where a feeling of peace was promising during the Peloponnesian war. Upon personal interpretation, by calling out their lack of intelligence in judging his play, Aristophanes may also be calling out their actions during the war and urging them to do better, similar to in the *Frogs*.

If the audience looks beyond all of Aristophanes' foolish remarks, he may suggest political thoughts through alluding to political figures the audience would be familiar with. For instance, in his spouting, Aristophanes says, "I'm the one who hit almighty Cleon with an uppercut, but I wasn't so brazen as to hit him again when he was down." (*Clouds* v. 549-550).

While Aristophanes does not directly comment on the political career of the politician, Cleon, this could have sparked serious political contemplation in the audience.

Wilfred E. Major offers a helpful insight into why Aristophanes might have used politicians in an otherwise humorous parabasis. He writes about the lines above, “An elaborate, extended brag on Aristophanes’ heroism against Cleon follows (1018-1043) and then the punch line: the Athenians betrayed their hero by failing to appreciate his play of the previous year.” (Major 142). This supports that what Aristophanes was saying here was not all nonsense. Aristophanes elaborately thought of what he would say to the audience, and he, being an articulate author, likely did not do things unintentionally. Cleon was an Athenian leader during the Peloponnesian War, and at this point of the war, Athens was very close to peace. But, they failed. So, making fun of him here could spark the audience to question their political authorities. This political allusion can be greater than another outlet through which Aristophanes spouts. Instead, it may motivate the audience to internalize their Athenian society and its good leadership, or lack thereof.

Aristophanes uses the parabasis in the *Frogs* to explicitly outline principal pieces of political advice: the improvement of leadership, equality, and voting (*Frogs* v. 686-705). Scholars have already established that this parabasis made this play so popular. W. Geoffrey Arnott writes about the political influence of the political purpose of this parabasis, “should 'change their ways and use their good men again' as leaders (734f.), were meant to be taken seriously as a call to political action. And they did have serious consequences, although most commentators have either ignored them or stopped their historical exegeses shortly before reaching the crucial events.” (Arnott 19). This supports the fact that it has been established that Aristophanes is offering practical, serious advice in the middle of his comedy. Since

Aristophanes is so direct with providing political advice to the audience in the *Frogs*, the ideas from this parabasis manifest themselves in the future.

There is no doubt that Aristophanes uses the *Clouds*' parabasis as an outlet for his artistic rage. Still, it can also be interpreted as a similar political parabasis as the one in the *Frogs*. He accomplishes serious political commentary in both parabases by evaluating the political leadership in the context of the Peloponnesian war. Through personal interpretation, there is political value in each. But, the mode by which they are presented skews the superficial purpose. These two parabases are not the same, but the audience can view them as inherently similar with further interpretation.

The examples in Aristophanes' plays show that the parabasis is a unique method for expressing genuine, serious advice. However, excluding this device does not necessarily mean a comedy would lack profound depth. In another one of his plays, *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes stages a sex strike by Athenian women as a solution to end the Peloponnesian war. In the end, the main takeaway is that war is not necessarily wrong, but what is truly bad is not being able to unite against common enemies and work together to fight them. This is a strong statement to make amid the Peloponnesian war because its final statements would reveal to the audience that Athens and Sparta should unite against the Persians. Many scholars would argue that Aristophanes did not write a parabasis for this play, so he just weaved his serious ideas throughout the comedy. Even though there may not be a parabasis, it still holds significant political opinions merely throughout the comedy rather than taking a step outside of the play.

After evaluating the parabases or lack thereof in Aristophanes' plays, I pose the question: should we be laughing at Aristophanes' comedies? While there are plenty of times where comedy is the central tone of the play, there are still many instances of serious and thoughtful

consideration for the audience. So, maybe we should be doing less laughing and more reflection. But, do not give up laughter and humor. It is indeed necessary!

Perhaps, it was part of Aristophanes' artistic plan that the audience might look at the parabases similarly. But, for the sake of comparing the parabases in the *Frogs* and *Clouds*, further interpretation can present that they are similar in their social-political commentary and encouragement for Athenians to take action for their society. After all, Aristophanes wrote comedies articulately well, so there is much room for humor and valuable sentiments. However, one thing is sure that Aristophanes openly shares his advice with his audience, hoping that they will listen and use it wisely.

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