



## THE BIRTH OF COMEDY

### *Discussion 1 – Aristophanes' Athens*

I'm **James Robson** and for this programme, I'm lucky enough to be joined by three people who between them have vast experience of teaching, writing on, and staging the ancient Greek playwright, Aristophanes: **Nick Lowe**, reader in Classics at Royal Holloway College, University of London: **Edith Hall**, Professor of Classics at Kings College London: and theatre director **Helen Eastman** who is associate artist at Oxford University's Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman drama. Today we're looking at the way in which the city of Athens, the place where Aristophanes lived and worked, features in his plays. And I'll begin with a quick anecdote - when Dionysius I the ruler of ancient Syracuse in Sicily, wanted to find out more about Athenian politics, it's been said that the philosopher Plato actually sent him a copy of Aristophanes' plays. Nick, whether or not this really happened, we'll probably never know. But what do you think we can find out about contemporary Athens from Aristophanes' plays?

**Nick:** The important thing about Aristophanes is that he's writing in a popular medium for a popular audience and so he's reflecting the world of contemporary Athens back to its own citizens and although he may have his own elite stance towards that audience, he knows that in order to succeed in a competitive festival environment, he needs to give that audience a reflection of a world they understand. So Aristophanes is a key source not just for social history, for the way the ordinary Greeks speak, for the kinds of things they found funny and troubling in their own time, but actually for the live political debates that were unfolding in this extraordinary generation at the very time that these plays were being put on.

**James:** Do you want to give us a bit of a picture of what those debates are? And I'm particularly interested in the contrasts you've drawn up their between Aristophanes, as having a more elite viewpoint, and his audience, who perhaps don't have that.

**Nick:** Aristophanes belongs to a group of young playwrights who emerged in the early years of the Peloponnesian War - there's a big generational shift in the early years in what was to turn out to be one of the fulcrum points not just of ancient history but of world history - the war between Greece and Sparta that staggered on in various forms for about 27 years and ended with the destruction of the Athenian empire. That generation of playwrights emerged in an Athens which was intensely competitive, not just artistically but also politically. In particular there was a wave of radical democratic politics which was bound up with the more aggressive, hawkish war party and Aristophanes found himself with other figures of a similar

political persuasion, like the historian Thucydides, on the more conservative side of that political divide. But his audience were much part of the radical democratic world that comedy itself was sustained by. And so there's an interesting dialogue between not just on hawkish and dovish positions on the war but also between radically different styles of politics within the figures competing for leadership.

**James:** So in the early days of the democracy, influential were often aristocratic figures anyway, but it was actually at the time Aristophanes was writing, things were changing politically. One figure who features often in Aristophanes' earlier plays is Cleon and I wondered whether, Edith, you wouldn't mind saying a few words about him?

**Edith:** Well the relationship between Aristophanes and Cleon as a comic playwright and very, very powerful and popular political leader is one of the most interesting in theatre history. We very rarely have an example of such an intense personal relationship being played out on the public stages, both of the assembly where Cleon spoke and in the comic theatre where Aristophanes' actors spoke. The fascinating thing to me is that it's deeply personal, it wasn't just political. Athens was not a big city - there were probably about 30,000 male citizens - and so they really could know quite a lot of each other, but these two little boys were actually from the same deme, which is like being in the same parish. They had been to primary school together, they had knocked around together in the playground and I think there were deep-seated grudges - they were both incredibly able and incredibly verbally gifted which went right back to childhood.

**James:** And how does this play itself out in the plays?

**Edith:** Well, it gets played out because Aristophanes when he's lampooning Cleon, and he does it with a passion and a venom which he does for no-one else, I mean he treats Socrates with kid gloves in comparison with what he does to Cleon. He uses every weapon in the book - he says he's lower class, he's a tanner's son and he's vulgar, he's a mob-o-crat, he talks down to the lowest common denominator, he's a wild, warlike savage, he sounds like a barbarian, he can't even speak Greek properly - and we know after Pericles he's probably the best Greek orator that classical Athens ever produced in terms of persuasive power! So Aristophanes is quite merciless and quite unusually after he dies, he doesn't usually do this after people are dead, even after Cleon dies and I have to say heroically charging into battle, he was not one of those generals who sit on the sidelines, he was a brilliant soldier - even after that Aristophanes still has another go in his *Peace* of 421BC, he still has a go at this guy and I think there was deep personal animosity.

**James:** I love the fact that year after year in the plays and the 420s - 421 is the date of *Peace* and 45, 44, 43, we have the plays of those years. And year after year after year, you get

another meal of venom against Cleon and apart from anything else, I know that a lot of people have discussed the extent to which there was a real animosity played outside the theatre too and there's some evidence to suggest that it was, but it just makes great theatre and I can imagine the audience coming to watch an Aristophanes play and just dying to know what happens next.

**Edith:** Well it does make great theatre and Cleon is presented in the two great anti-Cleon plays; *The Knights* and *The Wasps*, in very different ways, different strategies. In *The Knights* he's presented as a really manipulative chief slave in a household which is Athens, who's managed to get complete control of his master's mind. And in the other play, *The Wasps*, he's actually a dog, a dog who goes to court and barks which is Aristophanes trying to take the mickey out of his style of delivery. So Aristophanes was a constant source of creativity for different kinds of theatrical images. However, we must emphasise that we don't have Cleon's side of the argument here, who's one of the most popular leaders Athens ever produced, always got the people to do what he wanted, who died gloriously in battle and in the 4th century, two or three generations later, we happen to have just one precious source which is a law court speech where someone proudly says there were a descendent of the famous and noble general Cleon. So we just have one voice of what a lot of people really felt about him.

**James:** One figure Edith mentioned of all the figures in the plays is Socrates. There are so many named individuals some of whom appear on stage and some who are just throwaway references in the plays. But Socrates is such a huge cultural figure. Helen, could I ask you to talk a bit about Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates in *Clouds*?

**Helen:** Well, it's significant that he gets his own play, so it's not a throwaway reference and he's portrayed as being something of a charlatan, as a comic figure, someone who's a buffoon, taking money for educating people and for a long time that dominates our cultural understanding of who we think Socrates might be. It's interesting to think about how that would play out with audiences at the same time because presumably that would be seeded in suspicion or some fear of new philosophies and the unrest that may cause. But by creating a character like that which dominates the narrative of a play is a sustained comic performance which is a very different thing to some of the throwaway references we get elsewhere in Aristophanes where as an audience you don't normally expect that level of development of character or plot from a named figure whom everyone is culturally aware of and is a different type of satire to the references we see in quite a lot of other plays.

**James:** Sure and one of fascinating elements about Socrates is that Socrates was put to death in 399BC and we have at least two versions of the speech which Socrates may or may not have given at his trial but in Plato's version of that - the more famous one - he makes this reference at the beginning about his public image being formed by a comic playwright and it's

really tantalising that reference, is it meant to be ironic on Socrates' part or is it actually an indication that Athenians really did have their minds changed by *The Clouds* about Socrates and I guess that's a question we're never going to know the answer to...

**Helen:** We have to remember how extraordinarily dominant a platform comedy is at that stage in terms of the reach it has, in terms of the percentage of people within a community who are there. We have no equivalent to that now in terms of the universal reach a performance can have - everyone was there. So to whatever extent it may have been ironic in a comment, you can't escape from a comic portrayal your community has seen and that's a level of access that Aristophanes has to an audience that we can't conceive of now in a culture where there are no artistic text which reach everybody.

**Nick:** One thing that complicates the picture is that seven years after *The Clouds*, is the dramatic dialogue of Plato's dialogue, *The Symposium*, which represents Socrates and Aristophanes as on the very best of terms. They're the guests of honour at this major dinner party involving hugely famous figures from the Athens of their day and they're the ones left still capable of debate, they're not completely ratted by the end of it and they're the ones keeping the dialogue going even after the witness to the dialogue, who passes it on eventually to the figure who is meant to be reporting it, passes out. And so whatever the relationship between the historical Aristophanes and the historical Socrates was, the image that was presented on the stage lingers on. One of the things that is so fascinating about Aristophanes is the way he is capturing these extraordinary moments of pivotal change as they happen and I'm sure he would have been both mortified and thrilled to know that Socrates was still haunted by the memory of this play ... even to death.

**James:** We've established I think that Aristophanes' plays are very political, they engage in the current politics of the time, sometimes they're very personal too. But in general was he trying to affect some kind of political change in the city? Was he using his plays as a vehicle? Or was this more of a whinging pub philosopher-type stuff which just happened to make great theatre?

**Nick:** I don't think he's under any illusions that he has the power to change Athenian policy, the only time he had any demonstrable influence in *The Frogs* which advocated the reinstatement of citizen rights to the surviving ringleaders of the anti-democratic coup five years earlier and that advice was eventually taken, although not necessarily because of *The Frogs*. Aristophanes clearly does display certain consistent political attitudes in the plays which are at odds with the broadly democratic base of his audience and that's always an interesting tension and I think it's one of the things that gives his plays their energy. He comes from, as Edith says, a relatively conservative moneyed background and he's not a Cleon-style politician. Cleon is of course the ultra-democrat but Aristophanes has a suspicion of

democracy as an engine of political decision making and thought which allows him to yank his audience's chain in interesting ways and you often see a surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of Sparta considering for most of the time he's writing they're at war.

**Helen:** I think it's important not to judge the political success or agency of a play by direct change. I think you're right that there are fairly few examples of things that directly change as a result of the plays. But definitely the same questions are being raised time and time again about the same issues - so there's a consistent questioning of the positioning of the grounds for war, there's a consistent questioning about citizen rights, there's a consistent questioning about questions of gender and that level of persistence of comic questioning of certain issues has political impact but it also creates a culture in which people are aware they can be publically lampooned for their views and for their speeches, the impact of which must be to change the way that people are creating their own political identities in terms of knowing they can be lampooned for them in a massive public sphere.

**Edith:** I really radically disagree with most critics on Aristophanes. I think that Aristophanes is playing for a very specific class identity which is the top of the urban working class and the richer peasants - the top of the thete class which is the lowest one in Athens which is the biggest constituency and the one which will actually most important political change. He doesn't get them, I don't think he gets the urban working class, they go with Cleon and they all know that unless they keep on expanding the empire they will use their civil rights. They know that, they don't like it, and Aristophanes is trying to blur the fact that their freedoms depend on imperial revenue.

**James:** OK so thanks very much. Thanks to my guests Nick Lowe, Edith Hall and Helen Eastman.