

# Greek Old Comedy

The Greek komoidia means "the song of the komos." A komos is a communal ritual carouse: on a small scale it is the ancient equivalent of party-crashing and bar-hopping rolled into one, but as part of a communal festival of Dionysus it recalls modern carnivals such as that of Mardi Gras (although the ancient rites were usually more carefully scripted and ordered) — a time when normal social rules and inhibitions are cast aside and people party in the streets, singing, dancing, and (often) drinking.

The ancient komos often involved masks and costumes, as does Mardi Gras, but was marked by another practice foreign to most festivals in modern North America: aischrologia or the ritual abuse of individuals. Another distinctive feature, found in many Dionysiac rites and no doubt in some komoi, was the phallos: an imitation penis, often too large for one person to lift with ease, carried on a pole or cart. As with Mardi Gras, these rites tended to occur in spring (or mid- to late-winter) and although they may have served a number of psychological, social, or political ends, their main function was to promote fertility by honoring or encouraging the god (and driving away any spirits of blight) through a boisterous display of health, prosperity, and virility.

Many of these same elements make up the essential core of Old Comedy. The actors wore padded costumes, grotesque masks, and (in the case of the male characters) a large leather phallos. The latter could at times serve as a useful prop (Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, for example, involves a sex-strike by the women of Greece: the males who come on stage are made the butt of "is that a screwdriver in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"-type jokes) but this seems to be relatively rare. Props and scenery are employed a great deal more, both for sight gags and as part of the earthy, humorous realism for which comedy strives. Devices like the eccyclema and mechanê are employed more freely, with the playwright often calling attention to their use in order to shatter the dramatic illusion and thereby raise a laugh.

The chorus of comedy often appears dressed as animals, insects, or in some other non-human guise (as the titles of many plays indicate: e.g., *Wasps*, *Birds*, *Frogs*); Old Comedy teems with vitality: it abounds in references to food, drink, and sex, and frequently concludes with a triumphant revel — often celebrating a marriage — reminiscent of the komos.

It generally celebrates the life of the countryside, presenting the fantasy of an idyllic agrarian utopia, and frequently incorporates rites of Dionysus into the plot of the play. Most distinctive, perhaps, are the frequent attacks on prominent individuals — politicians, the wealthy, philosophers, artists.

In contrast to the tragedians, the comic playwrights produced their works at two festivals of Dionysus: the City Dionysia (March) and the Lenaia (January).

The chorus is larger (24 members as opposed to 12 or 15 in tragedy) and, as we have seen, often appears dressed in elaborate attire. The size and costuming of the chorus is

essential to many of the plots (e.g., the chorus frequently breaks into two opposed camps, one of which supports the hero while the other opposes him/her) and was made possible by the fact that the producer (choregus) of comedy had only one play to finance, whereas the producer of tragedy had four (three tragedies and a satyr play).

Ancient Greek comedy was one of three principal dramatic forms in the theatre of classical Greece (the others being tragedy and the satyr play). Athenian comedy is conventionally divided into three periods, Old Comedy, Middle Comedy, and New Comedy. Old Comedy survives today largely in the form of the eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes, while Middle Comedy is largely lost, i.e. preserved only in relatively short fragments in authors such as Athenaeus of Naucratis. New Comedy is known primarily from the substantial papyrus fragments of Menander. The philosopher Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics* (c. 335 BC) that comedy is a representation of laughable people and involves some kind of blunder or ugliness which does not cause pain or disaster.

The Old Comedy subsequently influenced later European writers such as Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, and Voltaire. In particular, they copied the technique of disguising a political attack as buffoonery. The legacy of Old Comedy can be seen today in political satires such as *Dr. Strangelove* and in the televised buffoonery of Monty Python and *Saturday Night Live*

<http://homepage.usask.ca/~jrp638/CourseNotes/Aristophanes.html>

Aristophanes and Greek Old Comedy

by John Porter, University of Saskatchewan