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Snapshots of Aristophanes and Menander
From spontaneous reception to belated reception study

Reception of Plutarch’s reception

The reception of Aristophanes and Menander may well be one of the oldest cases of ‘spontaneous’ reception. Imagine the Athenian who has just watched one of the comedies and who regales his neighbours and friends by replaying some of the jokes or scenes for them: ‘Stop me if you’ve heard this one already...’. The reception of Aristophanes and Menander may well be one of the oldest cases of ‘studied’ or ‘directed’ reception, too. It was most likely Plutarch himself who subjected both playwrights to an (unfair) comparison, and who fiercely condemned Aristophanes in favour of
Menander (Moralia 853a–854d). Plutarch set the stage for many centuries of history and criticism in the same vein. Aristophanes’ reputed knock-about comedy or his bömolochia (or aischrologia), his mixing of styles, and the perceived public role of his ridicule in Socrates’ conviction and death suffered under the weight of the comparison with his younger counterpart. However, Aristophanes suffered under the burden of the comparison with the grand and ‘consistent’ style of tragedy as well. In seventeenth-century France, for instance, Greek tragedy was honoured more than Greek comedy primarily for its influence on neoclassical drama – in particular on the plays of Racine, Corneille, and their followers. Early modern through nineteenth-century Western thinkers related to Socrates; their defence of the philosophe avant la lettre, or the patron of the Enlightenment, came at the expense of Aristophanes, in a reductionist treatment of his Clouds but also of the person of the dramatist himself. Voltaire, for instance, compared himself to Socrates, or was frequently compared to him, and his bias against Aristophanes took the undertow of a personal attack. Such an approach resonated with the agendas of early modern ethical, political and aesthetic criticism. But this thinking also led the West to rediscover Aristophanes: critics from various countries joined in the widespread debate about Clouds, the essence and ‘rules’ of the playwright’s comedic licence, as well as the purity of his Attic Greek and his lyrics versus the bawdiness of his verbal and visual expression of sexual or scatological matters.

An early modern interest in Aristophanes’ Clouds strengthened a prior fascination with Wealth, and thus with the humanist inquiry into the playwright’s potential as a moralist. Matthew Steggle aptly sets the time frame in which we need to (re)conceptualize the reception of his work – and life:

“It is no longer possible to adhere to the traditional model of the reception of Aristophanes, according to which Greek Old Comedy is almost unknown until a nineteenth-century ‘rediscovery’ of Aristophanes.
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The ‘missing centuries’, from the Renaissance through the early nineteenth century, of the reception of both Aristophanes and Menander proved Plutarch wrong, and recent decades have further favoured the former over the latter. These centuries will be the first focus of this chapter but a few caveats are in order. The reception histories of both playwrights were never closely intertwined, not even in the rigid framework of comparison that Plutarch’s lingering terms might force upon us. It would be misconceived to think of their work and legacy as mirror-images of each other. It is important, therefore, to restore each author’s autonomy and uniqueness, and to reiterate that the popularity of either one hardly ever came ‘at the expense’ of the other.

As much as Aristophanes was a source of controversy, he was also a source of productive tension from early modern times through the early twenty-first century. His corpus inspired modern literary criticism of comedy or the theory of the comic, and it lent itself to a rethinking of the reception study of the genre of Old Comedy. The same cannot be said of the tradition of Menander, whose direct (as opposed to Roman-mediated) reception suffered from having to rely on fragmentary texts with many variants. My aim in this chapter, then, is to outline some of the trends, movements and landmark versions that characterize those ‘lost’ centuries in which Aristophanes’ reception is hardest to trace, and to devote less attention to twentieth-century developments, the study of which is greatly facilitated by the availability of online databases. Even for those ‘lost’ centuries, I will necessarily have to confine myself to ‘vignettes’ of reception and will refer to recent studies that paint a fuller picture, especially of the playwright’s reception in Britain, France, Germany and the United States. A brief chapter on the reception of Aristophanes cannot attempt to be exhaustive. This study does not purport to be a comprehensive summary of the history of the poet’s reception, nor does it present a critical review of scholarship on the topic. My objective is rather to outline some of the primary associations of Aristophanes in Western culture of the sixteenth through the early twentieth century, to provide a background to other scholars’ discussions of the playwright’s reception from the 1950s to 1960s through the present day (which nobody can discuss from a global perspective without leaving blatant, and culturally insensitive, lacunae).


Aristophanes of the lost centuries

The Cretan scholar Marcus Musurus, compiler of the first printed edition of the Aristophanic corpus (*editio princeps*, 1498) for the Venetian publisher Aldus Manutius, excluded both *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria*, which were not published until 1515. He and many of his contemporaries probably took offence at Aristophanes’ loose-lipped female figures, who were, even if only on the page, ‘stains’ on the sought-after classical decorum. Musurus’ influential edition remained one of the standard texts for nearly three centuries. The sixteenth through mid-seventeenth-century humanists in Italy, Germany, France, England, Spain and Switzerland produced the first translations into Latin, such as the important 1538 Latin translation of, notably, *all* of Aristophanes’ comedies by Andreas Divus, an Istrian humanist. Greek-Latin editions appeared by the mid-sixteenth century, followed by imitations and occasional performances (most of them in ancient Greek) of primarily *Wealth* and *Clouds*. Vasiliki Giannopoulou concludes that ‘the 1546 Cambridge performance of *Peace* seems to have been something of an exception’. Nicodemus Frischlin, professor at the University of Tübingen, issued an early defence of Aristophanes in his 1586 Greek-Latin edition of five of Aristophanes’ comedies (*Wealth*, *Knights*, *Clouds*, *Frogs* and *Acharnians*). Frischlin addressed the criticisms of Plutarch directly, but was more influential in the German, Dutch and English academic world than in France. Typically, Aristophanes was appropriated first by the academic elite, and he only gradually became accessible to the broader public.

The early humanists cast Aristophanes as an apt moralist or an ethical and didactic guide, and they valued the allegorical figures of *Wealth* such as Poverty, the title character’s antipode. *Wealth* is relatively free of obscenities and personal attacks, and its language is less lyrical and more

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9 Giannopoulou (2007) 310. Giannopoulou (2007) compiled an extensive list of translations of Aristophanes published in various languages from the Renaissance until 1920, and she includes some significant printed editions and adaptations. Her research, which was commissioned by the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, incorporates older sources. Her findings are confirmed by Walsh, who appended an expanded chronological list of published English translations and adaptations of Aristophanes’ plays, 1651–1902. Walsh (2008) 40–9, and appendix A, 198–207. See also the list in Walton (2006), appendix.
11 See further Steggle (2007), who discusses Aristophanes’ reception in the context of the Renaissance and early modern theatre of Shakespeare, Johnson and their contemporaries. In Britain through the eighteenth century, Aristophanes was subjected to a variety of popular treatments, on which see Walsh (2008) 39–65.
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readily intelligible. Also, the play held first place in the Byzantine triad of Aristophanes (consisting of Wealth, Clouds and Frogs). ['Signs of interest' in Frogs and Birds began to show in England, France and Italy in the seventeenth century, whereas 'the “peace”, “Cleon” and “demagogue” plays Acharnians, Knights, Wasps and Peace' made their first lasting impact in the late eighteenth century: translators and imitators of the latter plays creatively responded to the French Revolution, a historical moment for both supporters and detractors to relate to the classics to enhance social and political negotiations.\(^{12}\) François-Benoît Hoffman wrote an intriguing revolutionary adaptation of Aristophanes’ Lysistrata, which was staged a mere four times in 1801–1802: the moral censors banned it, sensitive as they were to the shifting political and military fate of the Revolution.\(^{13}\) Other Western contemporaries equated the French revolutionary leaders with the classical demagogues such as Cleon, and they used Aristophanic references to foreground the ‘excesses’ of democracy. The revolutionary turmoil in Europe and in colonial America revitalized the playwright’s reception in Britain, in particular, where the political content of his comedies and especially their relationship to democracy became the basis for a cutting critique of the democratic state system.\(^{14}\)

Britain saw a landmark of an early Aristophanic adaptation in a burlesque play by the prolific Victorian playwright, James Robinson Planché: The Birds of Aristophanes: A Dramatic Experiment in One Act was staged at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London, in 1846.\(^{15}\) Meanwhile, influential translators such as the poet John Hookham Frere gave the playwright increased visibility: his minimally adapted translations of Frogs, Acharnians, Knights and Birds offered up viable scripts for performance.\(^{16}\) An 1883 premiere of Birds (in ancient Greek) at Cambridge claimed to revive Attic comedy in the first complete play production, but it underestimated several earlier stagings (also at secondary schools such as Dulwich College, London, where Frogs was presented in 1876).\(^{17}\) Starting in the 1850s, Benjamin Bickley Rogers issued a series of translations that were prudishly Victorian – and that served the Loeb series for several decades.\(^{18}\) It took the


\(^{14}\) See further Walsh (2008) ch. 2 and (2009); for the German states, see Holtermann (2004) 74–6, 317.


\(^{16}\) Walsh (2008) 139 n. 91.


\(^{18}\) See further Walsh (2008) ch. 3 and 161f.
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publication of Aubrey Beardsley’s pen and ink illustrations of Lysistrata (1896) to expose Britain to Aristophanes’ sexual humour. Beardsley’s carefully crafted but very revealing drawings accompanied a prose translation of the play by Samuel Smith. These illustrations, which embarrassed even Beardsley himself later in life, helped to ‘mark a transition from Romantic and Victorian Hellenism to the modern era’. 19

In the early 1900s, Gilbert Murray’s translations popularized a pacifist Aristophanes and again galvanized the playwright’s Anglo-American reception. 20 Students and amateurs active in British university drama clubs as well as Classics departments produced a fair number of early twentieth-century revivals of Aristophanes, and less elitist forms of that tradition continue to this day. The Cambridge Greek plays included Wasps (1897, 1909), Birds (1903, 1924, 1971, 1995), Peace (1927), Frogs (1936, 1947), Clouds (1962) and Lysistrata (1986). 21 For many years professional British theatre dared to invest only in Lysistrata and Birds. Terence Gray, for instance, produced Lysistrata in an interesting 1931 double bill with Sophocles’ Antigone. As director of the Cambridge Festival Theatre he also staged two versions of Birds (1928, 1933). Norman Marshall’s Gate Theatre successfully presented an unexpurgated Lysistrata in 1935. 22

The French neoclassical prejudice against Aristophanes barely waned during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This European divide led D. K. Sandford, professor of Greek at Glasgow University, to conclude that the playwright was a casualty of ‘those egregious judges of antiquity – the French’. 23 Many French critics reduced Aristophanes to a text for reading, a source from which to mine Attic Greek. Revolutionary detractors went on to call Socrates the victim of the poet’s democratic frenzy. According to Chantal Grell, ‘Aristophane fit l’objet d’une réprobation quasi générale’ (‘Aristophanes was the object of near-universal reprobation’). 24 Martin Holtermann, too, singled out the seventeenth-century French advocates of classicism as some of the playwright’s most virulent enemies. He declares, with a whiff of national pride: ‘It was up to intellectuals in a German context

20 See further Stray (2007), even though Murray’s work on Aristophanes does not figure prominently in this volume.
23 Sandford is quoted by Walsh (2008) 32.
24 For the broader background to the reception of the classics in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, see Grell (1995), especially 102 (n. 187, quotation), 316, 1105.
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to develop a new taste for his comedies and to detect their political aspects.\textsuperscript{25}
But the German states, too, took a slow start on actual stage performance of Aristophanes. It was ancient tragedy that Goethe and Schiller brought to the forefront of German theatre, heralding Weimar classicism. Apart from Goethe’s amateur production of \textit{Birds} (1780), Attic comedy performance was overlooked in Germany until 1908, although more or less liberal translations were available. In 1908 Max Reinhardt, the celebrated Austrian director active in Germany, put on a bawdy \textit{Lysistrata} in Berlin.\textsuperscript{26} Despite its immense success, it was not followed by any other significant pre-1950s attempt to reinterpret the Aristophanic repertoire for the stage, let alone to establish a tradition of comic revivals.

As in Britain, elite academic circles conceived of the earliest stage revivals of Aristophanes in North America, but the playwright soon reached broader audiences. In 1886, male students from the University of Pennsylvania staged a performance of \textit{Acharnians} (in ancient Greek) at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. Concerns about the play’s obscenity resulted in documented acts of self-censorship.\textsuperscript{27} This early production outstripped in importance a few American academic stagings of \textit{Birds}, such as the one presented (in the original language) in 1903, at the inauguration of the Hearst Greek Theatre at the University of California, Berkeley.\textsuperscript{28}

The year 1930 saw the first American \textit{Lysistrata}, a turning point in the United States’ popular acceptance of classical drama. The production of Norman Bel Geddes in Gilbert Seldes’ adaptation had been inspired by the touring 1923 \textit{Lysistrata} of the Moscow Art Theater.\textsuperscript{29} Notwithstanding some negative reviews, the show resisted censorship pressure and ran for more than 250 performances in several urban venues (Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, etc.). In 1936, the Federal Theatre Project, the artistic offspring of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA), sponsored the creation of an African American \textit{Lysistrata} adapted by Theodore Browne. But its premiere at the University of Washington in Seattle was closed by the WPA for being too risqu´e. Susan Day suggests that the ban resulted from the show’s attempt to subvert white hegemony: it

\textsuperscript{26} See further Kotzamani (1997) ch. 2.
\textsuperscript{29} On this Soviet \textit{Lysistrata}, which toured New York and Chicago in 1925–1926, see also below. See further Kotzamani (1997), who discusses Seldes’ adaptation in her ch. 4; Day (2001) ch. 2; Walsh (2008) 192f.
undermined racism with ‘sophisticated, self-assured, multilevel humor’ and ‘laughter about bigotry’. The war years witnessed further efforts to revive *Lysistrata*. The comedies that are typically less popular with modern audiences than *Lysistrata* and *Birds* were first staged in the United States, as in most Western European countries, after 1950.

**Modern Greece as touchstone**

The fifteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries may be the centuries during which performances of Aristophanes remained a rarity, but the playwright figured prominently in the theoretical discourse about the nature of comedy. Franciscus Robortellus, for instance, a mid-sixteenth-century theorist, adapted Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy to comedy and delivered an influential synthesis of the Renaissance ‘rules of comedy’. He also upheld, however, Plutarch’s verdicts on Aristophanes’ lack of decorum and on his ‘raillery’ of ‘that best of men, the most venerable Socrates’. From Robortellus to Adamantios Koraes, a Greek expatriate to France and founding father of modern Greece, Socrates is the victim of the unchecked public ridicule that both firmly associated with the work and life of Aristophanes. The major controversies in this extended debate pivoted on the competing claims of philology, Enlightenment rationalism, moral and aesthetic criteria, and theatre practitioners’ status as legitimate interpreters of the plays. These issues continued to steer the discourse on Aristophanes through the late nineteenth century, as is manifested by the inherited and expanded discussions that accompanied the playwright’s belated reception in the modern nation of Greece itself: the newborn state of (nominally) 1821 had missed out on the experience of the Renaissance because of the four-centuries-long Ottoman occupation, but it adopted the poet’s contemporary European reception, complete with its nodes of controversy.

By 1868, *Wealth* had become the play of choice also of modern Greek translators and performers interested in reviving Aristophanes in his ‘homeland’. It was the work that secured the leap from a text-based to a performance-oriented reception of the playwright. *Wealth* became the vehicle of the politico-satirical (and distinctly socialist) wit of Michael Day (2001) ch. 3, 99 (first quotation), 137 (second quotation).

My choices here *qua* references reflect my aim to use the reception of Aristophanes in modern Greece as a touchstone to the playwright’s reception in other locales.

Herrick (1964) 79.

Translated from the original Latin by Marvin Herrick (1964) 230 (both quotations).

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Chourmouzes and Sophokles Karydes who, with the help of a professional theatre company, gained a first breakthrough for Aristophanes on the modern Greek stage. Their popular production, which fed a permanent taste for contemporized political satire, competed with an antiquarian staging of *Clouds*. *Clouds*, too, was produced in 1868, but qualms about 're-staging' the execution of the 'father of rationalism' in Greece itself had delayed the Athenian debut of the long-contested comedy. The long-lived French bias, mediated by Koraes, affected the modern Greek reception of Aristophanes in palpable ways. Expatriate and local Greek intellectuals were keen to promote Socrates as a 'moral ancestor' and to sideline the comic pundit. However, the sought-after pedigree from the Golden Age came with Aristophanes, the 'poisoned gift from antiquity', in tow.

The 1868 *Wealth* represents the kind of bold adaptation that typified, both in Greece and elsewhere in western Europe, the risks that the urban satirical press and stage were willing to take, with Aristophanes lending the classical cover or pretext. These adaptations helped to ease Old Comedy into the legitimate sphere of contemporary amateur revivals of Greek tragedy. Aristophanes-the-satirist developed into an outspoken mouthpiece, often against oppressive censorship. He initiated a wave of free versions and imitations that swept the early-twentieth-century urban stages (and comic genres), and that revolutionized the public treatment of his 'immoral' women's plays. The taboo on modern Greek stage productions of *Clouds* was only broken by the unstoppable wave of biting satire launched at the turn to the twentieth century by Georgios Soures, a political pundit, translator, and director of *Clouds*. Soures and Polyvios Demetrakopoulos, another prolific Demotic translator, then upped the ante and introduced risqué versions of the women's plays in the anti-feminist vein. Through the 1930s, Aristophanes remained the alibi-author behind popular (often transvestite) adaptations of *Lysistrata*, in particular. Such a para-economy of bold adaptations shook up the authoritarian and nationalist patterns that, up until the 1900s, had grounded the field of modern Greek cultural production. Key in this development was the very popular 1892 French adaptation of

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Lysistrata by Maurice Donnay, a poet, playwright, and co-founder of the Chat Noir cabaret. Since its 1892 premiere at the Grand-Théâtre, Donnay’s comedy had seen substantial reworking, repetition and imitation in Paris and elsewhere in Europe. Donnay radically altered the original plot, structure and themes, and he introduced ancient courtesans (hetairai), whom he cast as the odalisques of an Oriental harem. Conceding to the fascination of the boulevard with extra-marital love and sexual intrigue, he transformed Aristophanes’ Lysistrata into a comedy of sexual manners that showed little concern for a current socio-political critique. The Aristophanic cachet thus helped to revolutionize and ‘europeanize’ the urban entertainment business with sensual or ‘hedonist’ spectacle à la grecque, which dislodged the last barriers between classical and modern, elite and mainstream, ‘high art’ and popular culture. A British Lysistrata production of 1912–1913, on the other hand, started to champion women’s suffrage and female political aptitude in general. The adaptation by Laurence Housman had opened at the Little Theatre in London in 1910 and was directed by Gertrude Kingston, who also played the title role. More recent theatre practitioners, too, have drawn Lysistrata into the discourse on feminism, to deconstruct gender stereotyping.

Revival tragedy in Greece has revealed long-lasting ties to the more conservative literary and cultural tradition. The intelligentsia promoted classical tragedy as a vehicle of German-style Bildung, according to the cultural role of theatre as Bildungstheater or, in Greece’s case, classicizing, ‘restored’ or restorative theatre. The elite expected revival tragedy to act as a nationalist or nativist bulwark against modernist aesthetics and to serve Greece’s mission of nation-building. After the barrage of the notorious Lysistrata productions of Greece through the 1930s, it took the avant-gardist approach of legendary theatre director Karolos Koun to transform classical drama into an instrument of modernism, with Aristophanes’ comedies in the lead. Directors such as Alexes Solomos, Spyros Euangelatos and countless others debunked decades of stultifying conventions and helped to define the reception of the playwright in Greece of the second half of the twentieth century. Most contemporary directors, however, have worked in dialogue or competition with, or in counter-distinction from, Koun. The outcomes of their work have revealed the greatest diversity and variation of what proves

41 See also Solomos (1961).
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to be a Protean modern Greek Aristophanes. Philip Walsh, however, issues an incisive and timely warning:

[explicitly celebrating the polyphony or multidimensionality of Old Comedy is itself a phenomenon of the past one hundred years or so; before then, dogmatic readings overwhelmingly prevailed. Negotiating contradictions was not the business of Plutarch or the French neoclassical critics... It is prevalent in the twenty-first century to identify and emphasize the conflicting impulses within the plays and to argue that definitive resolution is impossible, but previous generations took a very different approach. If anything, Aristophanic comedy forced them... to take sides on matters of politics, morality, history, and aesthetics.]

The modern Greek reception of Menander, on the other hand, has been rather thin, but it provides an excellent illustration of the classicizing drive behind revival drama. This reception started with a characteristic example of what has pejoratively been called the ‘museum treatment’ or the approach of ‘faithfulness’ to the archaeological as well as to the philological legacy of the past. Thus, in 1908, the Athenian Philological Society ‘Parnassus’ staged a premiere of Menander’s *Men at Arbitration*. The production was meant to celebrate the recent discovery of papyrus fragments that had yielded substantial new finds. The performance had to put image to the text, and it was received against the backdrop of lectures and newspaper articles on the subject of the papyrus finds. After the first few years of philological excitement, however, modern Greek interest in the Menander of the stage abated. The Greek theatre historian Giannes Sideres commented: ‘Thus Menander made his first appearance in our theater and was promptly forgotten. He would, however, return with honor and with successes.’ But Sideres did not elaborate on what that subsequent modern Greek reception held. Stavroula Kyritsi answers the lingering questions, but she also confirms that Menander was only infrequently performed before the last quarter of the twentieth century. Even after, his plays were most often staged in academic settings.

New Comedy and Menander toned down the complexity of Old Comedy. Richard Hunter concurs: ‘That New Comedy is structurally and tonally both simpler and more uniform than Old Comedy requires no lengthy demonstration.’ These characteristics of New Comedy, which Plutarch preferred to the unpredictable changes of style and tone of Aristophanes, may explain why the reception of Menander found few new incentives through the (modern) ages. Menander’s tradition has not enjoyed the

sequence of reinvigorating dramaturgical discoveries that modern generations have made as they re-read Aristophanes. This does not exclude, however, a future era in which the perceived lack of complexity of New Comedy may appeal to many more contemporary readers, performers and audiences, who might find respite from their overly demanding predicament in the simple, almost foreseeable plots.

How to slice it?

The above capsule description of the modern Greek tradition in revival comedy touches on a larger problem: how to slice the huge topic of twentieth-century developments in the reception of Aristophanes in Greece, or any place else, without invoking another instance of local exceptionalism? In this chapter, therefore, I can only hope to point to trends as markers of where to look and, if at all possible or desirable, as tools to ‘quantify’ the reception of Aristophanes. Recording regular productions and repeat performances is relatively easy for those who expect to find the poet’s comedies among the steady features of the grand outdoor festivals, such as the ones at Athens and Epidaurus (both founded in the mid-1950s). But even those physical sites that seem geared for a heightened degree of reception can be deceptive: the classical drama festival at Syracuse in Sicily (founded 1921), for instance, featured a 1927 production of *Clouds*, but its next Aristophanic comedy, a modern version of *Frogs*, was not performed until 1976.

Scholars have covered the reception history of Aristophanes mainly by geographical region or country, which might appear as an odd organizing principle to break down a centuries-long and versatile tradition. Reception study also tends to be genre-based: from translations to adaptations to performances – a pattern that is too often presumed to be a natural progression. Article titles such as ‘Lysistrata on the Arabic Stage’ and ‘Aristophanes between Israelis and Palestinians’ disclose recent examples of the playwright’s reception with regional focus.44 Typical divisions qua space, with Aristophanes negotiating local conflicts and borders, are often extended by the limits of time periods and by the possibilities as well as the restrictions of venues and/or modes: scholarship and the edited and/or translated text, the stage, opera, musical entertainment, experimental...
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theatre, ballet and dance, comics, the cinema, the Internet, and all else.\textsuperscript{47} Each of these categories enriches, but also detracts from, a more holistic perspective on the development and the reception of the multi-faceted genre of Old through New Comedy. Other scholars have examined the legacy of particular ingredients of Aristophanes’ work, such as the nature of his humour, his political side (conservative or progressive politics?), the ritual and metatheatrical aspects to his art, or his blend of literary, aesthetic and socio-political criticism.\textsuperscript{48} The concerted modern quest for a socio-political critique in Aristophanes’ comedies emerged in tandem with the search for a type of proto-feminism in the women’s plays (see above).\textsuperscript{49} Recently, the Lysistrata Project, the brainchild of two North American actresses, Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bower, crossed geographical boundaries to spotlight Aristophanes’ most popular comedy against the backdrop of the imminent outbreak of the Iraqi war: on or around 3 March 2003, more than 1,000 organized readings of the play took place across the globe. The Project is indicative of the ongoing movement to stage Aristophanes’ work as truly contemporary and activist theatre. As Marina Kotzamani has noted, the Internet, which was an essential tool to the Lysistrata Project, has allowed twenty-first-century generations to become world citizens through theatre.\textsuperscript{50}

Holtermann’s detailed monograph examines the political modes in which intellectuals of the German Enlightenment interpreted, imitated and adapted Aristophanes from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century (from c. 1770 to c. 1914). These historical foundations established Aristophanes as a political playwright in contemporary Germany. Peter Hacks built on these foundations with his utopian and neo-Brechtian adaptation of Aristophanes’ Peace, directed by Benno Besson at the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin in 1962. The production became one of the most popular shows in German-speaking countries.\textsuperscript{51} In the case of Africa, the geographical cum political approach encompasses an entire continent, as in the section ‘Aristophanes in Africa’ in the important 2002 book of Kevin Wetmore, Jr.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{47} See recently Gamel (2007) on Stephen Sondheim’s 1974 musical Frogs, in which Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw are substituted for Aeschylus and Euripides. The adaptation by Burt Shevelove was first conceived in 1941 for performance in the pool at Yale University. Issues of translation and adaptation have been the lifelong concern of Michael Walton, who devoted chs. 8 and 9 of his 2006 volume, Found in Translation, to the challenges of translating Aristophanes. See also Walton (2007).

\textsuperscript{49} The literature on each one of these aspects is large. For a recent reading, however, of Aristophanic humour and obscenity, see Robson (2006) and (2008). See also Revermann (2006a) and Silk (2006a).

\textsuperscript{52} See Seidensticker (2007).
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Wetmore observes: ‘it seems fairly safe to conclude that Greek comedy is not nearly as popular in Africa as Greek tragedy, in any African nation.’\(^{53}\) He sees the (far more accessible) native traditions of the African continent fulfil functions similar to those of Aristophanes’ work.\(^{54}\) In the 1970s, South Africa, the most prominent locale of reception, saw several stagings, among them a 1971 Afrikaans adaptation of *Birds* and a 1974 version of *Lysistrata*.\(^{55}\) Lastly, one is always tempted to concentrate on the well-known productions that define a local politicized tradition, such as Koun’s *Birds*, and to let possibly equivalent productions escape notice, such as an interwar staging of *Birds*, directed by Aleksander Wegierko at the Polish Theater in Warsaw.\(^{56}\)

When Koun was a student in Paris, he likely saw the famous 1928 satirical revue, *Birds*, of Charles Dullin, the modernist French director, actor, teacher and proponent of (a sophisticated approach to) folk theatre. With Dullin, Koun shared the conviction that the theatre had to broaden the social basis of its audience, and that Aristophanic comedy was an ideal vehicle to reach that end.\(^{57}\) Dullin envisaged a *théâtre du people*, or a ‘theatre of the people’. At his Théâtre de l’Atelier (founded in 1922), he searched for and experimented with popular and physical forms of performance.\(^{58}\) Dullin himself was likely inspired by the 1923 *Lysistrata* created by the Musical Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, a Soviet production that cast the experience of the October Revolution as ‘People’s Theatre’.\(^{59}\) For his Russian *Lysistrata*, director Nemirovich-Danchenko had adopted the debate form and role of the modern revolutionary rally or mass meeting: two choruses acted to oppose the women’s revolution to the old men’s reactionism; they embodied the envisioned model of the new Soviet theatre.\(^{60}\) The production became a resounding success and left a profound impact also in the United States (see above).\(^{61}\)

Koun’s 1959 opening performance of *Birds* became a *succès de scandale*: its anti-clerical tenor was exacerbated by the firebrand translation of Vasiles Rotas, who attacked the Greek conservatives and their ties to US


\(^{55}\) See further Betine van Zyl Smit (2007), who also discusses censorship scandals in South Africa.

\(^{56}\) For a (minimal) reference to the latter production, see Zawistowski (1937) 378 (his figure 3), 384.

\(^{57}\) On the relationship between Koun’s work and that of Dullin, see also Kotzamani (2007) 180f., 185, 187; (1997) 411.

\(^{58}\) See further Piana (2005) ch. 7.

\(^{59}\) On the Marxist underpinnings of the utopian model of the ‘People’s Theatre’, which quickly became canonical, see also Hall (2007a) 20.

\(^{60}\) Kotzamani (2005) 79, 105f.

\(^{61}\) See further Kotzamani (1997) ch. 3.
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imperialism. Over the years, appreciation for Koun’s Art Theater (Theatro Technes) grew to the extent that his Birds now stands as perhaps the single most influential production of Aristophanes – a classic in its own right. The shocking premiere made the long-standing confrontation between the academic, and typically nationalist, approach and the modernist treatment of Aristophanic performance come to a head, resulting in a debate about art’s autonomy in the face of a paternalistic and authoritarian government. Aristophanes was, of course, not new to censorship, whether of a religious-moral or political strain. Many were the instances, too, in which aesthetic choices and questions had become issues with political ramifications. Koun’s Birds captured the socio-political limbo of frail optimism of Cold War Greece. Kotzamani concludes her insightful analysis of the show on a more pessimistic note, stressing the powerlessness of the ordinary birds (for the Greek people) when faced with the tyrannical tendencies that overtake the protagonist Peisetaerus: ‘The production’s mournful ending conveys a pessimistic message about the capacity of a new progressive state to hold against the adversity of threatening powers.’

The 1959 premiere met with severe political retaliation initiated by Konstantinos Tsatsos and Konstantinos Karamanles. The outright ban drove Koun also to uphold Aristophanes as a model for a risky blend of ideological avant-garde and folk theatre aesthetics, which he then applied to his productions of innovative native and foreign plays of mainly the 1960s and 1970s. For decades, Koun’s Birds was emblematic of village and folk traditions (including the rural festival and the Karaghiozes shadow theatre); now, half a century later, it is an icon of nostalgia for a Greece of simpler times.

Greek cartoonist Niarchos predicted that Koun’s anti-clerical and anti-government production of Birds would determine Aristophanes’ modern Greek reception (Figure 23.1). Niarchos’ cartoon, reprinted on the front cover of a 1999 special issue of the satirical journal To Pontiki (The Mouse), incorporates a billboard or poster that announces Birds as a work by the ‘duo Aristophanes and Tsatsos’. Tsatsos walks up to ‘co-author’ Aristophanes to affirm that he, too, now owns rights to the play. Ancient and modern reception merge in an incongruous ownership of work and image.

With Koun’s Birds of leftist hue, Aristophanes entered into, and captured, the symbolic economy of Greek popular dissidence and resilience, which helped to define the ideology of the Left throughout the twentieth century (while the rift between Left and Right widened), and which continues to exert a populist appeal on Greek society. ‘Aristophanes the leftist’

63 For a detailed analysis of the scandal, its political context, and the immediate outcry, and also for more cartoons, see Van Steen (2007) and (2000) ch. 4.
or Aristero-phanes, ‘the one who reveals himself as leftist’, in the words of journalist Voula Damianakou, effectively pre-empted any subsequent reactionary appropriation of his plays.\textsuperscript{64} Of course, popular transgression and

\textsuperscript{64} Damianakou is quoted by Van Steen (2000) 131, 185.
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folksy disobedience are more interesting to study than conservative movements, and they find inexhaustible wellsprings among the multi-faceted people. However, the late twentieth-century Aristophanes who has been mostly dissident, often remains entrapped in processes of stagnation and effacement of genuine socio-political criticism. While Menander was passed over, Aristophanes’ comedy became an ideal, and self-perpetuating, platform for revisionism. Far more often than not, Aristophanes’ plays have championed the underprivileged and/or minorities, whether those were the poor, the silenced, women, non-whites or gays. The historical dramatist likely did not have the same agendas, but his humour was spirited and versatile enough to allow for new and different levels of signification. In the right hands, Aristophanes’ plays stay fresh. While the study of the ancient poet will remain the bailiwick of the classicist, credit is due to the circles of actors, directors, translators, cartoonists, illustrators and all those who have championed the important innovations, but who also need to ponder the value of provocative ‘newness’, or rapid modernization for modernization’s sake.

Further reading

Book-length and dissertation-length studies of the reception of Aristophanes and Menander appear to be a (belated) early twenty-first-century phenomenon, which bodes well for the methodic study of the reception of Old through New Comedy in future decades. Beyond the few pages of Hardwick (2003) 64–7, such recent works include: Day (2001); Hall and Wrigley (2007); Holtermann (2004); Kotzamani (various recent publications on the – perhaps universally – most popular play, Lysistrata); Maurogene (2007); Piana (2005); Van Steen (2000) and (2002); and Walsh (2008). Hall and Wrigley’s volume explores the relationship between performance history (histories) and select texts of Aristophanes, their translations and adaptations. Its many contributions shed ample light on the reception of Aristophanes’ ‘distant quest’ plays (Hall (2007) 3). Lowe (2008) has provided an extensive and up-to-date bibliography on the subject of Greek and Roman comedy at large. I also wish to acknowledge the very important research that young Greek scholars have conducted on Aristophanes and Menander, and that has gone unnoticed in English-language academia for far too long. Kaite Diamantakou-Agathou (2007a) and (2007b), for example, has analyzed the topic of Wealth as a recurring vehicle of Aristophanes’ revival. See also the special issue of a leading Greek newspaper, He Kathemerine, entitled Aristophanes: Diachronic and Current (13 June 2004).

For recent studies on reception (theory), theatre and classics, see the volume of essays, Classics and the Uses of Reception, edited by Charles