

The English-Speaking Aristophanes and the Languages of Class Snobbery 1650-1914

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Introduction

In previous chapters it has been seen that as early as the 1650s an Irishman could use Aristophanes to criticise English imperialism, while by the early 19th century the possibility was being explored in France of staging a topical adaptation of Aristophanes. In 1817, moreover, Eugene Scribe could base his vaudeville show *Les Comices d'Athènes* on *Ecclesiazusae*. Aristophanes became an important figure for German Romantics, including Hegel, after Friedrich von Schlegel had in 1794 published his fine essay on the aesthetic value of Greek comedy. There von Schlegel proposed that the Romantic ideals of Freedom and Joy (*Freiheit, Freude*) are integral to all art; since von Schlegel regarded comedy as containing them to the highest degree, for him it was the most democratic of all art forms. Aristophanic comedy made a fundamental contribution to his theory of a popular genre with emancipatory potential. One result of the philosophical interest in Aristophanes was that in the early decades of the 18th century, until the 1848 revolution, the German theatre itself felt the impact of the ancient comic writer: topical *Lustspiele* displayed interest in his plays, which provided a model for German poets longing for a political comedy, for example the remarkable satirical trilogy *Napoleon* by Friedrich Rückert (1815-18).

This international context illuminates the experiences undergone by Aristophanic comedy in England, and what became known as Britain consequent upon the 1707 Act of Union. This chapter traces some steps in the English-language reception of Aristophanes and his plays between the mid-17th century and 1914. The material has previously been so little researched that the major part of the exercise inevitably takes the form of excavation of evidence and narrative. It nevertheless

argues that the excitement associated with Aristophanes during the English Interregnum, Restoration, and briefly in the theatre of Henry Fielding, disappeared by the mid-18th century. Aristophanes became dissociated from live theatrical performances, a result of the paradox whereby he was at that time identified as a mouthpiece for inveterate political reactionaries, while simultaneously creating profound unease in *moral* conservatives. This uncomfortable situation pertained until the revived appreciation, in the late 19th century, of Aristophanes both as a socio-political vehicle and as a performable playwright.

The Aristophanes of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the English-speaking world, was a peculiar beast. His status as pillar of classical history and poetry was confirmed after Thomas Arnold read him at the age of forty and added him to the curriculum read at Rugby School; he also constituted a major cultural signpost, the presence of which everyone dealing with either ancient Greece or comedy felt obliged to acknowledge. On the other hand, as Jenkyns is correct in concluding, 'of all the great Greek writers Aristophanes had the least influence' on the 19th century.⁷ One reason was certainly that Aristophanic drama was suspected on account of its perceived obscenity. But the another reason was its almost uncontested possession by men who espoused traditional, even reactionary political opinions. Such men rarely participated in the professional theatre, and Aristophanes, several of whose plays were unavailable in English translation until well into the 19th century, was read by few outside the male, educated elite. He was seen as an establishment-minded 'right-wing' satirist for the whole period from Fielding to Matthew Arnold. This constituted a major difference between the reception of Aristophanes and that of Greek tragedy, which was often used both in performance and translation to articulate progressive causes, and to express criticism of those holding the reigns of power, from as early as the late 17th century.

With the exception of Christopher Wase's royalist translation of Sophocles' *Electra* (1649), Greek tragedy did not attract the loyal followers of the Caroline court. It was not until after the Restoration that Thomas Stanley, another ardent royalist, and the first translator of *Clouds* into English (1655), published his edition of Aeschylus (1663). In contrast with the tragedians, Aristophanes had therefore acquired aristocratic associations by the mid-17th century. His presence of course lurks behind Jonson's plays (see Steggle, this volume), but, in addition, the three English-speaking literary individuals drawn to Aristophanes in the mid-17th century were all sympathetic to the Stuart monarchy; their sensibilities were indeed anti-republican, but also morally liberal. Henry Burnell, the Irish translator of *Wealth*, has already been discussed by Wyles, but an even earlier translator of *Wealth* was the cavalier dramatist Thomas Randolph. Randolph styled himself one of the 'Sons of Ben' (Jonson), and became the man responsible for the earliest English-language version of any Aristophanic play. His *Ploutophthalmia Ploutogamia*, otherwise known as *A pleasant comedie: entitled Hey for honesty, down with knavery* was written in the early 1630s, and probably performed in a private venue. It is an adventurous transposition of *Wealth* to a setting in Caroline London, and welds the ancient plot to contemporary satire, the victims of which include dour, corrupt Roundheads, the Levellers, avaricious Anglican clerics, and the Pope himself. Several allusions display Randolph's familiarity with other Aristophanic plays, for example Plutus' remarks about utopian dreams of castles in the air.

Randolph's knowledge of *Wealth* informed some of the other comedies that he staged. His *Aristippus*, performed at Cambridge between 1625 and 1626, is inspired by *Clouds* as well as Plato's *Symposium* (a text which has always played an important role in drawing attention to the figure of Aristophanes), and involves a simple-minded youth attending an academy run by a fraudulent and bibulous philosopher. One of the demotic characters in his mildly moral comedy *The Drinking*

Academy (which involves an Aristophanic father-son conflict over money), believed to have been performed between 1626 and 1631, imitates *Wealth*; the play also contains a divine epiphany in the final act. Had Randolph survived to the Restoration, rather than dying young in 1635, the picture of Aristophanes in England would have looked fuller and different. It is in Randolph, moreover, that we first find an identification of Aristophanes with the defence of theatre art at the time when it began to come under pressure from the Puritan lobby. *Aristippus* opens with a personification of the Show herself being summoned from the underworld, since 'Shewes having beene long intermitted, and forbidden by authority for their abuses, [she] could not be raised but by conjuring'. In poems where he talks in coded terms about the Puritan assault on theatre, Randolph uses the poetic disguise of ancient bards such as Orpheus: in *The Song of Discord* he laments the silencing of the poets, reflecting that from now on his only 'quire' will be provided by 'a set of frogs' singing in discordant competition with their cantor.

In the years leading up to the closure of the theatres in 1642, Thomas Randolph's *Aristippus* was not the only theatrical performance to offer arguments in defence of its own medium. In 1633 James Shirley's extravagant masque *The Triumph of Peace*, performed against a set designed by Inigo Jones at Whitehall, presented a compliment to Charles I and his Queen, Henrietta Maria, by using personifications of Eirene and Eunomia in order to demonstrate the legal establishment's loyalty to the king. This was in the aftermath of William Prynne's assault on the theatre -- and Henrietta Maria's involvement with it -- in *Histriomastix* (1633). The masque mingled several features that Shirley (an accomplished Greek scholar) may have acquired from knowledge of Aristophanes, especially the elaborate bird costumes, and the divine epiphany of 'Irene, or Peace, in a flowery vesture like the spring...[and] Buskins of greene Taffata'. The association of Aristophanes with the defence of the theatre itself became explicit during the later years of the

Interregnum. This emerged in an entertainment produced by William Davenant, once a leading cavalier dramatist who had also been patronized by Henrietta Maria. As a result he had later found himself in the Tower of London. But after his release and marriage, in 1655, to an enterprising French widow, he began with her gingerly to test the boundaries of the proscription on stage performance by producing crypto-theatrical entertainments that were not labelled as such.

As early as May 1656, Davenant presented a performance neutrally entitled *The First Days Entertainment at Rutland-House*, which consisted of 'Declamations and Musick; after the manner of the Ancients'. The Rutland House venue was his own home in Aldersgate Street (near the modern Barbican). A prologue apologized for the 'narrow room', and those present were invited to regard it as a way 'to our Elyzian field, the *Opera*' (the first appearance in the English language of this crucial word to denote a fusion of drama, recitation and song). The figures of Aristophanes and Diogenes the Cynic declaimed respectively for and against the value of public entertainments by 'moral representations'. Persons representing a Parisian and a Londoner then delivered speeches, interspersed with appropriate music, on the merits of their respective capital cities. The entertainment carefully distinguished itself from a stage play, by making the declaimers remain seated, keeping to long speeches rather than dialogue, and abjuring either elaborate costumes or props. At the end there were songs 'relating to the Victor' (i.e. Oliver Cromwell). No official criticism resulted, and in the autumn Davenant staged *The Siege of Rhodes*, part 1, which is regarded as the first true English opera.

In the Rutland House *Opera*, Diogenes spoke first, criticising all forms of entertainment. Aristophanes followed with this lament:

This discontented Cynick
would turn all time into midnight,
and all learning into melancholy
Magick. He is so offended

at Mirth, as if he would
accuse even Nature her self to
want gravity, for bringing in
the Spring so merrily with the
Musick of Birds.

No attempt at impartiality is evident: Aristophanes not only refutes Diogenes point by point, but is given the more attractive and persuasive speech, for example when he describes the power of theatre to translate its audience, in imagination, to any site in the world -- a power which outrages Diogenes:

He is offended at Scenes in
the Opera, as at the useless Visions
of Imagination. Is it not
the safest and shortest way to
understanding, when you are
brought to see vast Seas and
Provinces, Fleets, Armies, and
Forts, without the hazards of
a Voyage, or pains of a long
March? Nor is that deception
where we are prepar'd and consent
to be deceiv'd. Nor is
there much loss in that deceit,
where we gain some variety of
experience by a short journey
of the sight. When he gives
you advice not to lay out time
in prospect of Woods and Meadows,
which you can never
possess, he may as well shut up
his own little Window (which
is the Bung-hole of his Tub)
and still remain in the dark,
because the light can only shew

him that which he can neither
purchase nor beg.

There is little engagement with the plays of Aristophanes, beyond a passage which defends artistic representation of ‘the shining heroes’ on the ground that they offer moral examples, which ‘encourage your endeavours for perfection’;²⁴ this section reiterates points first made in the history of literary criticism by Aeschylus in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* (e.g. 1039-41, 1053-6). But it was Aristophanes whom Davenant chose to defend *all* the performing arts at this crucial moment in their history: Aristophanes became the mouthpiece for the apologia of a royalist man of the theatre frustrated in both the political and the creative spheres.

Davenant went to France to join the soon-to-be-crowned Charles II in March 1660, and was rewarded upon the Restoration by receiving a patent allowing him to manage a new theatrical company at Dorset Gardens. In the Restoration theatre he was the dominant figure, renowned for innovations in scenic effects, for the training of actresses, and for heroic dramas with a royalist bias. Although it is important to remember the political appropriation of Aristophanes by Burnell and Randolph, it is memories of Davenant’s Aristophanes that lie behind the handful of Restoration comedies that 18th-century critics felt intuitively had been informed by Aristophanes. Two comedies by Edward Howard (who had in 1664 written one of the most anti-Cromwellian plays of the Restoration, *The Usurper*) echo Aristophanes. *The Women’s Conquest* (1669) portrays the Amazons’ subjugation of the men of Scythia, and in *The Six Days Adventure; or, the New Utopia* (1671), Howard dramatises a community in which constitutional power alternates between the sexes. When the women assume government, they create an egalitarian republic, endow themselves with the right to initiate courtship, and establish a court to regulate male love crimes. This is reminiscent of *Ecclesiastusae*, while the men’s stratagem of refusing the

women love inverts the plot of *Lysistrata*. But there may also be an echo of *Birds*, when the character Mr Peacock appears in a costume of feathers, which he claims he has ordered from the Indies, no other part of the world being sufficiently 'airy'.

The Six Days Adventure was one of several plays attacked in *The Rehearsal* (1671) by George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. This in turn was felt to have taken from another Aristophanic play, *Frogs*, its idea of examining contemporary tragedy through performed parody. Villiers was a libertarian aristocrat, who (despite a complicated political past) was a favourite of Charles II at the time he wrote *The Rehearsal*, having overseen the execution of no fewer than twenty republican conspirators in Yorkshire in 1663-4. *The Rehearsal* satirised John Dryden and what are presented as the sententious and pretentious tragedies of the Restoration. The play concerns a playwright named Bayes (in reference to Dryden, then Poet Laureate), who attempts to stage a play made up of excerpts of existing heroic dramas. Buckingham set out to puncture what he saw as Drydenesque bombast; most of the excerpts in the play-within-a-play are taken from his dramas, especially *The Conquest of Granada*, in the second preface to which Dryden had upbraided his fellow playwrights for staging immoral heroes and low sentiments: Buckingham's play, in a sense, is the old theatre biting Dryden back. Through *The Rehearsal*, *Frogs* came to inform distantly a whole category of 18th-century plays about the theatre, besides Richard Brinsley Sheridan's reworking of *The Rehearsal* for his play, *The Critic* (1779), where the target was the inflated self-importance of theatre criticism. An important example by Henry Fielding will be discussed in the next section.

Aristophanes and the Theatre under Walpole

Despite the underlying influence of Aristophanes on some Restoration comedy, the impossibility of staging his plays in anything like an authentic state in the British theatre before the late 19th century is underlined by the fate which befell the solitary

attempt, in 1716-17, to produce Terence's far less alien *Eunuchus* in English translation at Drury Lane; the production was a commercial disaster and did not survive the third night.²⁸ Aristophanes' association with the Stuart dramatists may partially explain his disappearance from comic culture after the Glorious Revolution until the 1720s. Yet by 1726, Jonathan Swift, in Ireland, was adopting imagery from Aristophanes' *Clouds* in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). In London, the Whig opposition against the influence of the first Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, was producing theatrical writers, such as John Gay, whose insouciant plays directed satire against the incumbents of the highest offices in the land. It is unsurprising, therefore, to find some scholars suspecting at least an implicit debt to Aristophanes in Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), especially in the tone taken by the chorus leader Matt of the Mint, and some of the lyrics sung by Jenny Diver, leader of the other 'chorus' of 'Women of the Town', who fuse imagery from the animal world with biting satire.³⁰

That the plays of Aristophanes were felt to give low-class characters an irreverent voice is confirmed by Lewis Theobald's unctuous dedication of his 1715 translation of *Plutus* to the then enormously powerful Duke of Argyll (a political maverick who, though loyal to the Hanoverian succession, behaved as if he were monarch of Scotland). Theobald apologised for the rudeness of the fifth-century slaves, which resulted from 'the Liberties allow'd to the Characters of their Slaves'. Theobald, a mild Tory, later plundered Aristophanes when writing a scene for working-class characters in *Orestes*, a musical comedy based on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. In Act III scene 3 Orestes' sailors consider their future on this remote shore. They are theatrical descendants of Trincul and Stephano in *The Tempest*, but the communist colony they design is informed by *Birds* and *Ecclesiazusae*, in addition to *Wealth*, which Theobald had translated.

Theobald's *Orestes*, moreover, followed the première of Henry Fielding's very different stage play of 1730, which had adapted *Frogs*. Fielding's version of *Frogs* is

supposedly a puppet-show entitled *The Pleasures of the Town*, which constituted a play-within-a-play in *The Author's Farce*, performed in the spring in the Little Theatre in the Haymarket. In fact, the cast list shows that the alleged puppet-show was performed throughout by live actors *pretending* to be puppets -- a conceit not untypical of Georgian popular theatre. The frame play *The Author's Farce* was extremely popular, being performed no fewer than forty-two times (an outstanding success in those days) between 1730 and its Drury Lane season in 1733-4; it was also possible to watch it at a booth erected in a fair in London-Spa Fields in the autumn of 1735. Although a light-hearted piece (in the Prologue it is stressed that 'The aim of Farce is but to make you laugh'), it reveals the difficulties facing Fielding. Italian opera, although ridiculed, was popular, Walpole's scrutiny of the stage was growing more oppressive, and as a result neither tragedy nor comedy seemed to be producing significant playwrights able to say anything substantial.

The hero of *The Author's Farce* is Mr Luckless, a failed tragedian, whose maudlin and pretentious verses provide much mirth in Act II scene 1, where they are subjected to quotation and bathetic comic analysis reminiscent of the contest in *Frogs*. Fielding is perhaps lamenting the poor education of many of his audience when the impecunious Luckless complains that to talk of money to a dramatic author is as useless as talking 'Latin or Greek to him'; but in the end Luckless' fortunes are saved by the silly farce which opens in Act III, and continues to the end, where the world of the farce and the real world fuse in a comic denouement. The embedded show, *The Pleasures of the Town*, stages a contest in Hades between different types of entertainment and literature (as represented by Don Tragedio, Sir Farcical Comic, Dr. Orator, Signior Opera, Monsieur Pantomime and Mrs Novel). The judge is the Goddess Nonsense. First there is a journey across the river Styx with Charon, the addition of a Bookseller and a Poet to the literary confusion, and the dance, inspired by Euripides' Muse in *Frogs*, of a black female castanet-player. Subsequently the

competitors strive to outdo each other in increasingly inane parodies of their own style and linguistic register. Perhaps the most distinctly Aristophanic item actually draws on another comedy, *Birds*: Dr. Orator sings a three-stanza lyric beginning ‘All men are birds by nature, sir’, of which the first two refrains sing of the owl’s ‘hooting, /Hooting, hooting’ (repeated three further times), and the raven’s ‘croaking, /Croaking, croaking. But a more subtle set of Aristophanic echoes is to be heard in Signior Opera’s air for an abandoned heroine, ‘Barbarous cruel man, / I’ll sing thus while I’m dying; I’m dying like a swan’; this includes extensive repetition and melisma in the phrase ‘on the *high - - - roads*’, which must have been suggested to Fielding by the details in the parody of Euripidean monody.⁴¹ According to the original cast list, Signior Opera was played by ‘Stopler’, a fine singer going by the name of either Charles or Michael Stoppelaer. He sang in Handel’s operas as well as comedy, and specialised in an elevated style of singing for comic purposes: one of his other roles was that of Cantato in the humorous *Bayes’ Opera*.

Fielding returned to Aristophanes when looking for a platform from which to deliver anti-Walpole Whig polemic. Despite being traumatised at Eton, Fielding had picked up considerable respect for ancient Greek literature, and in 1742 he published the translation of *Wealth* on which he had collaborated with William Young. In the preface Fielding developed his ideas about the possibility of a political comedy. Walpole had passed the Licensing Act in 1737 in order to curb political attacks on his premiership in the theatre, especially Fielding’s satires that were playing to packed houses at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket: these had included *Historical Register for the Year 1736* in March 1737, and in April *Eurydice Hiss’d* (whose katabatic theme probably drew on Aristophanes’ *Frogs*). Since Walpole could now refuse a licence to any but the most anodyne of comedies, the legislation put Fielding out of business and drove him into attacking Walpole by other means.

The preface to *Wealth* also gave Fielding a place in which to attack the genteel drama known as Sentimental Comedy and associated with Colley Cibber. This drama was compliant, middle-class, and consciously avoided controversial subject-matter: Fielding prescribes the reading of Jonson and Aristophanes as the antidote to its cloying mires. In the notes Fielding draws a parallel between Walpole and ancient demagogues who ‘make use of popular interest, and the character of patriotism, in order to betray one’s country’. The translation may have informed Fielding’s own unfinished comedy *Jupiter’s Descent on Earth*. But its real impact was more subterranean, since it was much studied by later comic writers and theorists, keeping just alive the possibility of an Aristophanic mode of social and political criticism even when such a concept was inimical to both the government and the stage.

Counter-Revolutionary Aristophanes

In the 1740s and 1750s, the actor and dramatist Samuel Foote encouraged the use of his soubriquet ‘the English Aristophanes’, but his claim to this title rested not on any identifiable debt to Aristophanes’ plays, either in specific allusion, institutional target, or subterranean adoption of plot, episode, or character. Instead, what seemed to make people regard Foote as ‘Aristophanic’ was his apolitical brand of satirical revue, involving *ad hominem* jokes and mimicry at the expense of what we would call ‘celebrities’. There is no notion of citizenship or public responsibility to be discovered underlying his comedies. Despite the lip-service Foote paid to Aristophanes’ contribution to ‘Greek virtue’, he saw no further than those passages in the ancient plays which adumbrated his own brand of personal (not political) satire’. But Walpole had effectively put a stop to political comedy on the London stage, and the dangerous *moral* reputation of Aristophanes was confirmed in the publication (1759) of the book that brought him to the widest audience so far. This was the English translation, by several individuals including Charlotte Lennox, of the Jesuit scholar Father Pierre Brumoy’s *Le théâtre des Grecs* (first edition: 1730). Volume III contains

a long 'Dissertation on Ancient Comedy'. Other materials are appended, including a competent version of *Frogs* (the first to appear in English) by the accomplished Hellenist Gregory Sharpe, and plot summaries of all Aristophanes' plays. The troubled reputation attaching to Aristophanes is conveyed by the opening section, 'reasons why Aristophanes may be reviewed without translating him entirely'; here Brumoy admits that he was doubtful about meddling with comedy at all, on account of Aristophanes' 'licentiousness', which struck him as 'exorbitant'. In his discussion of *Lysistrata* the reader discovers that Aristophanes had disgraced the noble freedom of his comic muse by a shocking depravity, and by the abominable pictures he had created, which would forever render him the horror and execration of every reader who has the least taste for modesty and sentiment.

Following the French revolution, however, the moral repugnance of Aristophanes was forgotten as the politically conservative Aristophanes emerged in Francis Wrangham's *Reform: a Farce, Modernised from Aristophanes* (1792). Wrangham later became a moderate Whig, and there has been some confusion about his political intentions at the time when, as an undergraduate, he penned this satirical text. The actual dialogue is short, and placed in the mouths of the revolutionary Tom Paine and John Bull, an archetypally commonsensical Englishman, who are identified in the Introduction as Chremylus and Plutus. Paine tries to persuade Bull to support his proposals for abolishing the monarchy and economic equality; Bull (a believer in ordinary decency, and a victim of both the decadent, over-paid monarchy and, grasping radicals) wins the argument. He counters with reminders that revolution causes suffering, that Paine has proved himself unpatriotic during his involvement with American revolutionaries, and that the French revolution was problematic. The satire presents an unmistakable case against what it presents as the specious appeal of Paine's reformist rhetoric.

By 1836 the counter-revolutionary Aristophanes had been promoted to protest against all the reforms instigated by the Liberal party, especially the Great Reform Act of 1832, which had massively extended the franchise. The reforms were celebrated in the same year in a play that was dependent, rather, upon Greek *Tragedy*, Thomas Talfourd's *Ion*; it is fascinating to compare the less flattering parallels with democratic Athens being perceived through the application of an Old Comic lens. The Aristophanic complaints against the reforms were expressed in the skilful, reactionary *The Possums of Aristophanes, Recently Recovered*, published in 1836 in the popular new Tory literary organ, *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*. The unnamed author is likely to be the effective founder of the magazine William Maginn, a brilliant classicist and parodist of Greek and Latin authors.

The Possums is presented as the newly rediscovered first version of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, which, it is claimed, featured a chorus of possums. This allows the author to introduce a supercilious note about what it calls a familiar North American 'negro' minstrel song, *Possum up a Gum-Tree*. The reader is informed that while Aristophanes had satirised a new school of philosophy in the revised *Clouds*, in *Possums* his target had been 'the new school of politics and legislation. He was, as every school-boy knows, an aristocrat; and the *Possums* breathe the very spirit of genuine Conservatism'. That in *The Possums* Aristophanes had prefiguratively targeted the classes newly franchised in 1832 is proposed when the audience is sneeringly told that the Pheidippides figure, 'Sophoswipos', spends his time at the Mechanics Institute. The equivalent of Socrates is Micromegalus, apparently a thinly disguised Earl Grey, Prime Minister between 1830 and 1834, who had presided over some of the most far-reaching reforms in British history: not only the Reform Act, but the Poor Law Amendment Act and the Abolition of Slavery in the Colonies. Grey/Micromegalus practises twirling in order the better to legislate:

My thoughts forsake the past, and learn to waltz
With notions yet unheard of. Then, new schemes
For public good arise. For public good
Is not like sluggish ponds, that stand all still,
And rot for want of motion: public good
Changes its aspect daily. So the laws
That guard it must change daily too.

Micromegalus requests that his chorus of Possums expound their ‘thoughts on policy’ and ‘legislative principles’, to which the Possums respond, unintelligibly, in blatant imitation of an Aristophanic animal chorus, ‘Ullaboo, ullaboo / Lillibu, lillibu, lillibullero’. (The *Lillibullero*, of course, was a popular song that since the Glorious Revolution had often been used to satirise the sentiments of Irish or other rebels against the British monarchy and government).

In the realm of scholarship and translation, too, Aristophanes remained the preserve of dyed-in-the-wool reactionaries. John Wood Warter, for example, the author of a translation of *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Wasps*, and *Birds* published in 1830, was a churchman whose austere conservative leanings — both moral *and* political — struck even his contemporaries. Moreover, the debate about how to translate Aristophanes was conducted not from opposite sides of the political fence, but by two gentlemen who represented different brands of conservatism, and it was published in the conservative press. One of them, Thomas Mitchell, was an academic whose editions of Aristophanes develop the indictment of Athenian democracy which he had found in William Mitford’s *History of Greece* (1784-1810). It was Mitford’s position on the Athenian constitution, especially his identification of the democracy with the

dangerous reforms suggested by contemporary radicals, that Mitchell's editions 'strongly perpetuated', as Turner has shown.

Mitchell's edition of *Frogs* (1839), with its notes in English, became a chief conduit through which Victorian men had access to that play at school and university. Its introduction stresses the problem presented to Athens by the demagogues, 'the real deformity daily developing itself'; in democratic Athens, 'the last knave was welcome as the first'; Cleophon was 'clearly not of true Attic origin...and perhaps not even speaking the language correctly', and it was the 'innate vices of the Athenian constitution' that enabled such a man to put himself in power (iv).⁶ In a note ostensibly dealing with the political views of Aeschylus, Mitchell takes the opportunity openly to inveigh against democracy as a political ideal and opinion; the volume, of course, was published just a few years after the great Reform Act of 1832, at a time when the Chartists' appeal for universal male suffrage had attracted the support of a prominent sector of the middle class. Thucydides, Xenophon, Aristophanes and Plato, says Mitchell, offer 'so complete a view of the effects of this form of government...in the two great questions of civil freedom and moral excellence, that it must be to sin with the eyes open, if any portion of the world allow men of small attainments, and not always the most upright principles, to precipitate it into such a form of government again'. Here Aristophanic commentary becomes a weapon in the war against advocates of universal suffrage.

The detailed comments Mitchell made offer more in this patrician vein. When Xanthias speaks up during the dialogue between Heracles and Dionysus (*Frogs* 82-3), 'the vanity of an indulged lacquey [*sic*] exhibits itself'. The same superior censure of the serving class emerges in Mitchell's remarks on the dialogue between Xanthias and the underworld slave. In particular, Mitchell takes exception to Xanthias' remark that masters can afford to be magnanimous, if all they do is *pinein* and *binein* (drink

and fornicate, *Frogs* 701-3); he proposes that the whole dialogue must itself be accompanied by the drinking of the slaves, on the dubious ground that the sort of remarks they make are rarely made except under the influence of alcohol:

And do our two lacqueys hold a *dry* colloquy? Forbid it every feast of Bacchus,
of which we ever heard! forbid it all the bonds which have tied lacqueyism
together, since the world of *man* and *master* began?

The text of *Frogs* is also used by Mitchell to inveigh against the socially corrupting aspects of Euripidean tragedy, which were often mere ‘vehicles of sophistry, philosophy, misogyny, democracy, and blasphemy’.

Yet throughout the nineteenth century, the man whose name was most likely to have been cited in association with Aristophanes was John Hookham Frere. His lively and readable verse translations towards the end of the 19th century helped the drive to stage Aristophanes; they were still being published in the Everyman series as late as 1945. The popularity of Frere’s translations resulted partly from what is still his impressive attempt to present them as performable playscripts, with elaborate stage directions extending even to descriptions of masks: that offering a performable text was his intention is clear from the title page of his *Birds*, which says that the translation is ‘Intended to convey some notion of its effect as an acted play’. But even more important were his keen wit and poet’s ear, above all his sense of rhythm, which make the translations satisfying to speak; indeed, as the first English author to write mock-heroic *ottava rima* in his 1817 poem *Whistlecraft*, he had already exerted a formative influence *as a poet* on a crucial text, Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819-1824), as well as Shelley’s translations of the *Homeric Hymns*.

The son of a high Tory magistrate and MP, Frere came from old-fashioned gentry stock. At Eton in the 1780s, he befriended the future Prime Minister, George

Canning, and was elected MP in 1796. In 1797 Frere joined the contributors to the influential *Anti-Jacobin*. It owed much of its fame to verses written by Canning and Frere, some of them parodies of poets who supported the opposition, such as *The Friend of Humanity and the Knife-Grinder*, which mocked Robert Southey's idealisation of the poor and those who supported the French Revolution. The time spent on this journal was crucial to the development of Frere's buoyant, sceptical, conservative comic sensibility. After succeeding his friend Canning as Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign Office, he took up appointments in Lisbon and Madrid, but in 1808 a disastrous set of events curtailed his public career. In 1818 he moved to Malta permanently, and sought solace in translating Aristophanes and another poet inherently appealing to disgruntled conservatives -- Theognis.

His work on Aristophanes was already in progress when he wrote the canonical 19th-century critical discussion of the principles involved in translating Greek comedy, in a long review of Mitchell's translation. The essay argued persuasively against Mitchell's archaising imitations of Jacobean comic language in favour of up-to-date vernacular idioms which offered living correlatives to the styles adopted by individual characters in Aristophanes, and as such laid the foundations for all successful subsequent translations of ancient comedy. It was published in the self-consciously Tory periodical *Quarterly Review* for July 1820. Frere's own lively translations, which he had privately printed, were essentially complete by 1830. During the decade when he wrote them, he became depressed by news of radical agitation in Britain, and penned diatribes on the subject of Canadian insurgency, bemoaning 'that tendency to Democracy, which is said to be so lamentably prevalent in new settlements'. These views affected his translations of Aristophanes, in which he even objected to the canonisation of the assassination of the Peisistratids 'by the democratic fanaticism of the Athenians'. He also resents the right of poorer Athenians to serve on juries where they could become 'the arbiters of the lives and

fortunes of their subjects and fellow-citizens'. His unusual interpretation of *Frogs* sees the intelligent slave Xanthias as representing not the slaves freed at Arginusae (a politically liberal-minded interpretation he had found Brumoy's *Le Théâtre des Grecs*), but the exiled aristocrat Alcibiades, whose 'genius and abilities might have relieved' the Athenians; Frere thinks this would have been at only the relatively minor cost of submitting to a more dictatorial government!

Aristophanes as Conservative Victorian

Frere's translations helped to keep Aristophanes on the curriculum at both schools and universities throughout the Victorian period: Charles Bristed read all eleven comedies for the Cambridge tripos in the 1840s. The importance of Aristophanes to British male education is underlined by the enthusiasm of Alexander Forbes, a colonial administrator in India, for collaborating with Dalpatram Dahya-bhai on a translation of this particular author into Gujarati (see Vasunia, in the following chapter). Yet, despite the routine inclusion amongst the sculptures of the Grand Front of the new 1808 Covent Garden Theatre of the figure of Aristophanes alongside Menander, the Muse of Comedy, and Aeschylus, on only one occasion until the 1870s was Aristophanes in any danger of actually returning to the stage. The exception was an adaptation of *Birds* in 1846, penned by the most intuitively conservative writer of Victorian burlesque, James Robinson Planché.

Planché's pro-establishment mentality is underlined by his appointment in 1854 to no less a ceremonial office than Rouge Croix poursuivant at the College of Arms, which entailed accompanying Garter missions and appearing, in full regalia, on state occasions. But back in the 1840s Planché was a prominent playwright, who attempted to repeat the success of his classically-derived burlesque *The Golden Fleece* (1845) with an Easter entertainment at the Haymarket, based on an ancient Greek comedy. *The Birds of Aristophanes: A Dramatic Experiment in one Act, being*

an humble attempt to adapt the said 'Birds' to this climate, by giving them new names, new feathers, new songs, and new tales. Planché was inspired by the idiomatic verse forms he found in Frere's translation, first issued publicly in 1840. *Birds* may also have been chosen because of its famous bird-noises and low level of obscenity, and Planché may have been aware that Goethe had staged this play in late eighteenth-century Weimar (see above, 'Introduction'). Euelpides and Peisthetaerus appear in the updated personae of Jackanoxides and Tomostyleseron, 'Hellenized' forms of the proverbial Jack Noakes and Tom Styles. Planché subsequently complained that his intention had been to ascertain 'how far the theatrical public would be willing to receive a higher class of entertainment than the modern Extravaganza of the English stage.' In his memoirs he claimed that he had been trying to 'open a new stage-door by which the poet and the satirist could enter the theatre without the shackles imposed upon them by the laws of the regular drama'; he had contemplated no less an ambitious scheme than 'to lay the foundation for an Aristophanic drama, which the greatest minds would not consider it derogatory to contribute to'.

Yet *The Birds of Aristophanes* failed, despite the lofty motivations, the lavishness of the production and the excellence of the cast. The primary problem was that making comedy out of comedy was not the way of the early Victorians: the point of the laughter in burlesque, burletta and light opera was always that it parodically reworked an *elevated* prototype. But it is more significant that, although a romp, Planché's *Birds*, politically speaking, is a reactionary one. After the establishment of the new bird city, problems are created both by human immigrants and by some of the lower-class birds, who become restive and demanding. The rooks want a rookery because they 'can't afford to live in Peacock-square'; the sparrows are mutinous, and the geese demand a common on health grounds. Jackanoxides is unsympathetic, scornfully asking 'What can it signify what sparrows think', and pointing out that

geese are ‘always cackling for a commonwealth’. The King of the Birds tells Jackanoxides that he was misguided in trying to build a paradise for inferior creatures: why did he think it was rational to ‘stir inferior beings up to treason?/.../And make each goose believe itself a god?’ The play concludes with a regal epiphany of Jupiter, who rebukes all birds and men ‘Who discontented ever with their lot,/Sigh only to be something they are not’, and advises them to ‘fear the gods and trust the wise’. In the context of the far-reaching reforms of the previous decade, and the continuing agitation of the 1840s, the conclusion of this light-hearted adaptation of Aristophanes must have come over as an admonition against radical aspirations of any constitutional nature at all. Planché’s *Birds*, despite its aesthetic ambitions, perpetuated the reactionary tradition in which Aristophanes had found his exclusive home since the 1790s.

There were several similar conservative manifestations of interest in Aristophanes. When in 1850 Henry Longueville Mansel, a philosophy don at St. John’s College, Oxford, wrote a curmudgeonly satire protesting against Whig proposals to reform universities, he adopted Aristophanes’ *Clouds* as the vehicle for his diatribe against innovation. George Trevelyan may later have developed into a reform-minded Liberal politician, but little other than cliquey elitism is to be found in his comedy *The Cambridge Dionysia*, written at Cambridge in 1858 when he was an undergraduate. It involves Trevelyan falling asleep while reading the article ‘Dionysia’ in Smith’s *Antiquities*; this device introduces a play which takes place in the Old Court at Trinity College. An updated version of *Wasps*, full of in-group jokes and references to alcohol, it closes with the suggestion that a particular policeman be punished: a sense of the intellectual level can be gained from the last line: ‘Break his head, and shave his whiskers, and suspend him from the lamp’.

Aristophanes was still beloved of elitist Oxbridge youths articulating vendettas as late as 1894, when Oscar Wilde was attacked in the satirical drama

Aristophanes at Oxford. It was officially penned by 'Y.T.O', a troika of undergraduates led by Leopold Amery (who was to become a staunchly conservative politician and journalist), then preparing for Classical Mods. Their motivation is described in the 'Preface' as 'an honest dislike' for *Dorian Gray*, *Salome*, and 'the whole of the erotic, lack-a-daisical, opium-cigarette literature of the day'; there is what would now be called a homophobic innuendo in their claim that they have never seen Wilde himself except surrounded 'by a throng of admiring Adonises'. (By the middle of the next year, Wilde had been sentenced to two years' hard labour). An even more disreputable instance of Aristophanic imitation must be the novel *Simiocracy* (1884) by the Conservative MP Arthur Brookfield, the most politically incorrect fable of all time. It tells how the Liberal Party enfranchises orang-utans, and imports millions from Africa in order to retain power. *Simiocracy* fuses Aristophanic material (especially *Birds* and *Ecclesiazusae*) with the conventional contents of a genre invented in the 1860s, known as 'prehistoric fiction'.

The Old and the New

This chapter has shown how uniform became the long line of typical targets of 'Aristophanic' satire between Wrangham and the attacks on Oscar Wilde -- Tom Paine, republican ideals, democratic reforms, widening of the suffrage, constitutional change, social egalitarianism, university modernisation, avant-garde literary authors, enfranchisement of the imperial masses. Yet at the time Brookfield was penning *Simiocracy*, there appeared the first glimmerings since Fielding of a more popular, and also performable Aristophanes. Aristophanes was always perceived as funny enough: indeed, Lemprière's *Dictionary*, widely consulted in the 19th century, described Aristophanes as 'the greatest comic dramatist in world literature' on the criterion of his wit: 'by his side Molière seems dull and Shakespeare clownish'. But that humour was still suspected of succeeding at the expense of moral probity. The

sensibility of those creating the editions from which 19th-century English-speaking boys learned their Aristophanes can be gleaned from Mitchell's comment on *Frogs* 8, where he remarks that obscenities 'which an Englishman shrinks from uttering' came as easily to ancient Athenians as to 'a modern Frenchman'.

The crucial antidote was the emergence of the notion that Aristophanic humour, however bawdy, also possessed intellectual weight and moral or social utility. Few had agreed with Edward Lytton Bulwer when he had argued, during the reformist zeal of the 1830s, for the establishment of a political theatre modelled on that of classical Athens, in which Aristophanes' plays had fearlessly dramatised the specific issues of his day. It is true that John Ruskin, who took his own aesthetic angle on Aristophanes, was a rare defender of his picturesque qualities, which in the 1850s he had even placed on a par with those of Aeschylus. This defence, however, arose only 'at the cost of taking away the fun'. Most people failed to see that Aristophanes had anything serious to offer, except a satirical mouthpiece to political conservatives lamenting the encroachments of lower orders on their privileges.

A new chord was struck in 1869, with Matthew Arnold's essay 'On the Modern Element in Literature'. Arnold introduced the notion of Aristophanic comedy's claim to *veracity*, and he paid him the compliment of pairing him with Sophocles, his (and most mid-Victorians') favourite Greek tragedian. Aristophanes' distinction was to have regarded humanity 'from the true point of view on the comic side':

He too, like Sophocles, regards the human nature of his time in its fullest development; the boldest creations of a riotous imagination are in Aristophanes...based always upon the foundation of a serious thought: politics, education, social life, literature...

Arnold's contemporaries described his own public self-presentation as involving self-conscious playfulness, vivid comedy, personal abuse and even 'low buffoonery', and when Browning allowed Aristophanes to defend the social utility of his theatrical medium in *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875), he may have intended the ancient poet to represent Arnold.

Fundamentally based on Plato's *Symposium*, Browning's long poem describes Aristophanes turning up with his drunken *kōmos* after the first performance of *Thesmophoriazusae*; he and Browning's ancient Greek heroine (loosely modelled on his deceased wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but expressing many of his own views) deliver speeches in defence of Aristophanic comedy and Euripidean tragedy respectively. And it cannot be denied that the poem contains a vision, Arnoldian or not, of a perfect democratic comedy aimed at uncovering truth and nurturing virtue: an ancient Megarian comic actor is envisaged as travelling around on his actors' wagon, complaining that 'Skin-flint starves his labourers! / Clench-fist stows figs away, cheats government!' Moreover, Aristophanes claims that he can prove that comedy is 'coeval with the birth of freedom'. But throughout the poem, the portrayal of Aristophanic comedy is compromised by Aristophanes' (and Browning's) fear of the mob. The very popularity of Aristophanes, the broad social base from which his supporters derived, ultimately seem to repel Browning, who prefers the idea of a maligned, isolated Euripides, losing competitions as he produced tragedies dramatising timeless verities. For the core of his argument is that comedy must engage with the contingent and parochial and is therefore always at the mercy of political circumstance, whereas the universality and generality of tragedy can allow it to transcend the cultural impoverishment and petty tyrannies of its own day.

George Meredith disagreed. Meredith is the first English-speaking individual to produce a theory of comedy that is adequate to account for Aristophanes. His Aristophanes is underpinned by a sense of citizenship which is finally free of the

sexual conservatism that had hampered critics since the Puritans. Meredith's deservedly famous essay *On the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit* was first delivered as a lecture on February 1st 1877 at the London Institution. After lamenting the state of the contemporary comic stage, he asks:

But if the Comic idea prevailed with us, and we had an Aristophanes to barb and wing it...there would be a bright and positive, clear Hellenic perception of facts. The vapours of Unreason and Sentimentalism would be blown away before they were productive.

Like Arnold, Meredith regarded Aristophanic comedy as possessing the potential to reveal to any age the *truth* about itself. One way in which it could do this was by offering an education, even to the least educated or perceptive members of the public. Aristophanic comedy could rupture 'the link between dull people, consisting in the fraternal agreement that something is too clever for them'; this link is 'equivalent to a cement forming a concrete of dense cohesion, very desirable in the estimation of the statesman.' Meredith here comes close to saying that comedy, if it imitates Aristophanes, has a democratic potential because it protects the masses from the lies fed them by those in power. For Meredith, the Comic Spirit 'makes the future possible by...the revelation of division, conflict, forward-movement, potentiality'. It is the spirit born of humankind's united social intelligences.

Admirers of Meredith's sophisticated theoretical rehabilitation of The Comic tend these days to neglect his then-famous novels, dealing with class snobbery and sexual repression, behind which lies a momentum generated by his exploration of the history of comedy. The essay *On the Idea of Comedy*, indeed, was written in preparation for *The Egoist: a Comedy in Narrative* (1879). Now acknowledged as his masterpiece, the 'Prelude' to this novel articulates Meredith's idea of comedy as 'the

ultimate civilizer'. Like the German Romantics before him, Meredith regarded Comedy as a liberating force in society, but now society was to be defined in a much wider way that accommodated his dream of universal male and female suffrage. The first sentence of *The Egoist* reads, 'Comedy is a game played to throw reflections on social life', and with verbal brilliance the narrative draws on the traditions of stage comedy, especially Molière and Congreve, but simultaneously engages with intellectual issues such as evolution, imperialism, and women's liberation. Meredith's recent biographer has argued that this idiosyncratic fusion also explains the curious title of his subsequent novel *The Tragic Comedians* (1880); the central figures are caught up in a drama that turns into a tragedy, but the irrationality of their conduct makes them comical. It is the serious undertow of Aristophanic humour that consistently appealed to Meredith, who was also an advocate of sexual frankness and regarded as extremely harmful to women society's refusal to discuss the sexual needs and behaviours of both sexes.

By the early 1870s, signs of Aristophanes can also be felt in another venue of comic expression -- the opera librettos penned by W.S. Gilbert. It was on account of the consistent (if subterranean) dialogue with the Aristophanic tradition of theatre that Gilbert was claimed at the beginning of the twentieth century to have been 'The English Aristophanes'; certain aspects of his irony, parody, and excoriation of pretension do indeed suggest that their author had given Aristophanes' legacy a considerable amount of thought. In a classic study, Edith Hamilton juxtaposed several passages from Gilbert and Aristophanes in order to reveal their similarities, above all in the delineation of verbal nonsense and elevated style. Gilbert was an admirer of Planché, and echoes of *Birds* are to be heard already in *Thespis* (1871), the first work on which Gilbert collaborated with Arthur Sullivan: Thespis and his troupe of travelling actors take over Olympus from the immortals.

The famous song *I am the very model of a modern Major-General*, sung by the Gentleman-Officer Stanley in *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879), provides the following as evidence for his wide-ranging erudition:

I can tell undoubted Raphaels from Gerard Dows and Zoffanies,
I know the croaking chorus from the *Frogs* of Aristophanes.

But the Aristophanic chords sound loudest in *Princess Ida*, Gilbert's travesty of Tennyson's *The Princess*. In an earlier, less frolicsome 1870 version of the Tennyson poem, he had used music by Offenbach, but he rewrote the libretto as a comedy, *Princess Ida*, for Arthur Sullivan (Savoy Theatre, 1884). The intervening years had seen the publication of Benjamin Bickley's Rogers spritely translation *Lysistrata*, in diverse rhythms, under the contentious title of *The Revolt of the Women* (1878); this may have encouraged Gilbert to revisit *The Princess*. The influence of *Lysistrata* behind Gilbert's second portrayal of Tennyson's University for Women at Castle Adamant is palpable, especially in the humour when the women try to exert self-control in order to keep themselves away from men: the emancipated students are going to do without hem, 'If they can -- *if they can!*'. The very obscenity of the comic drama which underlies Gilbert's take on Tennyson's story is alluded to when Melissa asks 'what authors should she read / Who in Classics would proceed,' and Lady Psyche, Professor of Humanities, responds:

If you'd climb the Helicon
You should read Anacreon,
Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,
Likewise Aristophanes,
And the works of Juvenal:

These are worth attention, all;
But, if you will be advised,
You will get them Bowdlerized!

At exactly the same time as Browning, Meredith and Gilbert were turning their back on the hoary question of Aristophanes' licentiousness in order to focus attention on his social utility, Aristophanic comedy was enjoying its earliest known British performance in the English language. It was in the early 1870s that Professor Henry Charles Fleeming Jenkin directed a performance of *Frogs*, in Hookham Frere's translation. This Engineer and Renaissance man ran a private theatre in his Edinburgh home, which also performed works by the realist 19th-century dramatist Guillaume Augier, Racine, Shakespeare, and Greek tragedies; for these he used the translations of Lewis Campbell, Professor of Greek at St. Andrews and a key member of the company (along with the young Robert Louis Stevenson). *Frogs* seems to have been the first Greek play that they performed, and Fleeming Jenkin later recalled that it 'had been costumed by the professional costumier, with unforgettable results of comicality and indecorum'. The Edinburgh productions exerted an influence that extended to Oxford through Lewis Campbell's relationship with Benjamin Jowett, and they precipitated the new craze of the 1880s for the production of ancient Greek plays in ancient Greek. The passion for Aristophanes was confirmed by the spectacular production of *Birds* at Cambridge in 1883 (see further Wrigley, this volume). There is another vivid connection between the Edinburgh productions and the new craze for Greek plays: the programme to the 1883 *Birds* informs us that the parricide was played by Mr Austin Fleeming Jenkin of Trinity College, Cambridge, the eldest son of the very man responsible for the pioneering experiments with performing Greek drama in Edinburgh in the previous decade.

The revived interest in ancient comedy as drama owed much to the cultural presence of Frere's performable Georgian translations, the texts actually acted in Edinburgh, which also provided the 'cribs' used in connection with some of the Oxford and Cambridge productions. The particular choice of comedies is also significant. While in Germany the 'woman' plays *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae* were adapted for political purposes by the last decade of the 19th century, in Britain the male environment of the universities, the longstanding aversion in that environment to transvestite acting, and the perceived need to avoid obscene or political material, all contributed to an inevitable attraction towards Aristophanes' more intellectual comedies *Birds* and *Frogs*. An additional consideration was a fascination with spectacular animal choruses offering potential to costume designers.

As Fiona Macintosh has demonstrated, the Aristophanic undertow to George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1905), which engages with social controversies, reflects the impact made on its author by Gilbert Murray's translation of *Frogs* (1902): the moral hero Cusins becomes identified, through the Aristophanic undertext, with Euripides himself. Yet the revival of interest in Aristophanes traceable to the 1870s continued to run on its two separate tracks -- either as a presence lurking behind social critique expressed in other media and genres, such as Browning's dramatic monologues, Meredith's novels, and Shaw's new school of comic theatre, or in performance in the rather anodyne new tradition of academic performance. It was not to be until February 1914, when *Acharnians* was staged at Oxford with the encouragement of Professor Murray, that an academic Greek play was consciously felt to be political. *Acharnians* was promoted as an 'unmistakeable vindication of peace,' and the music reflected the current international situation; the chorus of Marathonomachs sang the jingoistic songs *The British Grenadiers* and *Rule Britannia*; the Athenian allies were melodically represented by *La Marseillaise*, and the Spartans by *Wacht am Rhein*. This was not just topicalisation; it was

topicalisation with at least a half-hearted agenda. Fifty-nine young men took part; it would be telling to discover how many were dead four years later.

Yet this chapter must conclude at the first moment when a British performance of a play by Aristophanes was involved in trying to effect social change, and that had been in 1910, four years prior to the Oxford *Acharnians*. The pivotal production was not a peace play, nor an academic favourite such as *Birds* or *Frogs*, but a London staging of the long invisible *Lysistrata*. There is not a great deal to be said about the history of this comedy in Britain, at least between the Restoration and its submerged presence in *Princess Ida*; its sexual content had kept it firmly away from the public eye to exert a closet fascination over generations of young male Greek scholars. Its prurient associations led directly to Aubrey Beardsley's privately printed version (1896), with its luxuriantly obscene drawings designed to appeal to a male homosexual audience. The comedy's notoriety meant that it would have been almost impossible to stage it before the arrival on the British scene of the suffragette movement. When Edwardian women at Oxbridge colleges braved Aristophanic waters, one respectable possibility was to imitate their menfolk by staging the intellectual comedy *Frogs* (so Somerville College, Oxford, in 1912). Another had been to adapt *Birds* as *The Bees*, the Girton College second-year entertainment in 1904; this featured two heroines named Peitheteira and Euelpide leaving Cambridge University because it refused to let them graduate officially, and founding the feminist Beebuzzborough College instead. But by 1910 the London theatregoing public had become accustomed to women of the theatre, who had long been prominent voices in support of female suffrage, performing in ancient Greek dramas that gave women shocking things to do and say: the scandalous production of *Medea* at the Savoy Theatre in 1907 was a particular case in point.

When Gertrude Kingston became the lessee of the Little Theatre in the Adelphi, London, she was no stranger to assertive ancient Greek heroines, having in

the 1880s performed as Penelope in the English-language version of G.C. Warr's *The Tale of Troy*, as Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (also in Warr's translation), and as Helen in the 1905 *Trojan Women* that Harley Granville Barker directed in Gilbert Murray's translation. In this performance she had notoriously peeled off her flame-and-gold *himation* in an attempt to seduce Menelaus, leaving the gleaming fabric 'coiled like a serpent across the stage'.¹²⁵ Her 1910 season at the Little was inspired by the Royal Court's introduction of highbrow drama to a commercial audience, and thus opened with Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, in which she played the title role. Kingston herself was as interested in the sartorial dimension of Aristophanes as the polemical: she later recalled that she had 'opened the Little Theatre with *Lysistrata* amid forty or fifty good-looking young women on the steps of the Acropolis in bright hues and gaudy gold and silver designs'; she had herself dressed in a much more sober grey *chitōn*. Here she was following the advice Edward Burne-Jones had given her when he designed the clothes for her performance as Penelope, suggesting that she accentuate her presence by the striking sobriety of her costume. As *Lysistrata*, however, the more mature Kingston did relieve her grey tunic with a sky-blue *himation* ornamented with golden stars.

The translator, however, saw the production as offering a purely political opportunity. Laurence Housman produced the script at great speed in the aftermath of a censorship scandal: his feminist play *Pains and Penalties*, about the divorce inflicted on Queen Caroline in 1820-1, was refused a licence and banned from public performance. Laurence, the militant brother of poet A. E. Housman, had helped found the Men's League for Woman's Suffrage in England in 1907. Like the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the Men's League engaged in protest strategies that included civil disobedience and hunger strikes. He saw *Lysistrata* as a 'play of feminist propaganda which offered lurid possibilities', and a vehicle for jokes about women's exclusion from the suffrage. These were appreciated by reviewers from

sympathetic quarters of the press. Six months later Kingston directed a scene from the play as part of a matinee organised at the Aldwych by the Actresses' Franchise League and the Women Writers Suffrage League; the performance was enhanced by 'carefully planned typical interruptions from the audience', similar to the audience participation which had enlivened the performances of Elizabeth Robins' suffragette drama *Votes for Women!*¹³³ The Women's Press published Housman's translation in 1911, and North American suffrage groups also performed it. The English-speaking Aristophanes, only lightly adapted, had finally rediscovered a voice of immediate relevance in what is surely his most appropriate context -- performance in live public theatre.