Aristophanes and His Importance To Theater and History

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Playwright Aristophanes gained popularity by satirizing 5th century BCE Athenians in his various plays. He was a well-known comedic playwright who developed his own style of satire and utilized it as a way to address social, cultural, and political issues in his modern day Athens.

In the late 5th and early 4th centuries, Athens was characterized mainly by its relationship with Sparta. As the 5th century drew to a close, tension between Athens and Sparta grew. In 431 BC, the Peloponnesian War finally erupted between Sparta and Athens, caused mainly by “fear of Athenian power at Sparta.”1 The war ended in 404 BC, with Sparta leaving victorious. As far as the citizens, Athens during this time was close to its “Zenith of power in the Greek world, during an era of cultural and political life.”2 Another aspect of this time period was the “cultural revolution,”3 which was characterized by extreme developments of the visual, dramatic, and literary arts. “The plays of Athens were performed in front of thousands of citizens…with a great deal riding on these performances”3 for the playwrights. “Victory translated into political influence and support.”3

Aristophanes was one of these celebrated Athenian playwrights, known for his comedies. He wrote specifically “old comedies, which were performed in the same context as tragedies.”2 The Athenian community received Aristophanes’ plays well, as they won first place in multiple Dionysia festivals. Aristophanes was the first playwright to create a “distinctive trait out of a type of humor in which relies on destabilizing shifts between tragedy and comedy.”2 Additionally, he was one of the first playwrights to give so much detail to the scripts and scenes of his plays.These traits of Aristophanes’ design were later picked up by other Athenian playwrights, as well as those in later western culture.

One of Aristophanes’ most well-known plays was called “The Clouds,” and featured the historical Socrates as the main source of satire. This play featured Strepsiades, an old man looking to get out of debt by seeking a way to talk his way out of it. He went to Socrates to learn how to make “the weaker argument win a debate with its immoral claims.”25 This one aspect is an example of the underlying issue Aristophanes has with modern Athens that he was trying to convey in the play. He was trying to highlight the issue with Sophism and its tendency to teach citizens to speak creatively in an effort to immorally win arguments. This issue was only thinly veiled in the above excerpt from the play.

Another one of Arisophanes’ most well-known plays was called “Women at The Thesmophoria.” This play featured a man spying on a women’s only festival on behalf of Euripides, a real life tragic playwright, who is portrayed as distrusting of the women at the festival. This play, slightly contrastingly with “The Clouds,” is decidedly not with a political agenda, focusing more on the comedic aspects of life.3-91 Euripides is the subject of Aristophanes’ satire in this play, as it is seen as the women of Athens seeking their revenge for his horrible portrayal of them in his tragic plays. The cultural issue that Aristophanes may have been trying to convey is the issue of how women in Athens were treated in plays, which was addressed very directly.

The reason that either of these plays are important historically is that they provide insight into the culture and social aspects of Athenian life during this time. “The Clouds” revealed thoughts that Athenian citizens held about Sophists, and “Women at The Thesmophoria” revealed how women were viewed socially during the time period. Both of the main topics of satire in the plays, Sophacles and Euripedes, seem to have been chosen for the reason that they were easily identifiable with the traits that Aristophanes was trying to highlight with his satire.

To conclude, Aristophanes plays became popular for their satirical aspects that provided detailed commentary on Athenian life during the 5th and 4th centuries. They are still of historical importance because of the insight they provide into the cultural, political, and social life of Athens during the time period.

Bibliography

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