

## Unifying Laughter: The Workings of Collective Identity in Greek Comedic Performance

As Peter Wilson neatly summarizes in the introduction for the anthology *The Greek Theatre and Festivals: Documentary Studies*, there have been many recent advances regarding the study of Greek drama, expanding from a philological focus to performance analysis, largely pioneered by Oliver Taplin, and an integration of the political and social contexts contemporary to the original production of a given work (Wilson: 2007). This newest focus embraces the idea that theater “was a sounding-board for the deepest and most intractable issues of Athenian political and social life” (Wilson: 2007: 2). But as both foundational works such as *Nothing to do with Dionysos?* and newer reflections as those in *Theorizing Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice* demonstrate, the focus has been primarily towards tragedy. I argue that each aspect of the comedic performance nurtures the others, going beyond the content of the works themselves, the festival, audience experience, and masked imagery preconditions participants to receptivity towards a collective.

Following this new trend, I endeavor to elucidate the cognitive and sociological factors at play during Greek Old and New comedic performances which foster an Athenian collective identity. As cognitive and sociological studies often gather their data by polling living subjects, I will compensate for this type of data by evaluating the textual and metatextual components of comedic performances, beginning with the influence of a festival atmosphere. As Oddone Longo notes, festivals, and specifically dramatic performances are “aimed at maintaining social identity and reinforcing the cohesion of the group” (Longo: 1990: 16). But still lacking from statements such as this is *how* that identity is enforced. I argue that the liminal space created by the festival atmosphere enhances collective identity by increasing receptivity and that the ideas proposed during a festival have the ability to be integrated throughout the year. Building from this

foundation, I then integrate the importance of the comedic genre itself and the use of masks, both of which further distance the genre and experience from normative society and extend receptivity. Most important to this work; however, is the final application of studies in personal and group identity to the works themselves as they demonstrate a knowledge of unifying Athenian ideals and history.

Aristophanes' *Acharnians* demonstrates an extensive awareness of aspects of Athenian identity, creating images and references suggesting patriotism and the possibility for a brighter Athenian future. For example, Dicaeopolis' confrontation with the Acharnian veterans acknowledges their sacrifice, and argues that the peace he strives for is not unpatriotic (Aristophanes: 1998: 178-185). The Acharnian chorus as a stand-in for the audience is convinced by Dicaeopolis' argument, implying that the true audience should be as well (Aristophanes: 1998: 1143-1149). Using such images works to create a commonly desirable Athens for audience members.

#### Works Cited

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