

Aristophanes the Actor?

The idea that Aristophanes acted in his own plays has been accepted and rejected a number of times since it was first proposed over a century ago. Neither side, however, has offered an argument based on full examination of the evidence. This paper seeks to fill that gap and ultimately rejects the theory.

The idea first arose as a possible explanation of several puzzling passages in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (377-82, 497-508, 515-6), in which Dicaeopolis seems to speak directly for the poet. Modern critics, accustomed to hearing the poet's voice only from the chorus in the parabasis, have sometimes solved the problem by speculating that Aristophanes himself played the part of Dicaeopolis. If so, then it is not so much that a character (instead of a chorus) speaks on behalf of Aristophanes, but that the poet-actor occasionally breaks character to speak for himself; such a scenario also seems plausible because of comedy's penchant for metatheater. This possibility was discussed by Merry 1887 (p. 8 and *ad* 377) and Starkie 1909 (*ad* 377), argued at greater length by Bailey 1936, and re-proposed by Sutton 1988 (who also suggests that Aristophanes played the part of the Sausage-seller in *Knights*). However, as Olson 1990 points out, the theory has failed to gain general acceptance and is usually ignored in scholarship on Aristophanes' early career (but see Slater 1989); at the same time, critics rarely give specific reasons for rejecting the idea, and their relative disinterest cannot in itself be a satisfactory rebuttal.

This paper demonstrates *why* neither Aristophanes nor any other comic poet in that period could have acted in his own plays. Since there have been a number of successful attempts to explain how Dicaeopolis' statements can be integrated into the action of *Acharnians* without

imagining that Aristophanes himself appeared onstage (e.g. Bowie 1982, Foley 1988), I turn instead to matters of theater history and procedure at the Lenaea.

I begin by considering how actors were assigned to playwrights prior to the festival. According to Hesychius, it was done by lot, though this evidence alone does not allow us to say whether the allotment was already in place in the fifth century. I argue that it was by examining two other points: a) comic mockery of actors and b) statements in both comedy and tragedy about dramatic collaboration. Fifth-century comedy regularly mocks tragic actors but avoids mentioning comic actors altogether; this suggests that the allotment was in place, since it would be unwise for comic poets to mock comic actors who might someday be assigned to act in their plays. And if the actors were assigned by lot, it would also be unwise for a comic poet to enter the histrionic competition, since he would risk being assigned to a poet other than himself. Again, passages like *Andromache* 476-7 and *Clouds* 553-4 (with Eupolis fr. 89) show that collaboration between poets was a current topic of discussion, but no mention is ever made of collaboration between a poet and a poet-actor; furthermore, the result of poetic collaboration (according to these passages) is invariably negative.

Other important evidence includes the second hypothesis to *Knights* and the Aristophanic *Vita*. The first, which claims that Aristophanes καθήσσι τῶν Ἰππέων δρᾶμα δι' αὐτοῦ, probably refers to him as producer rather than actor (Haigh 1968: 228 n. 4); the second, which states that δι' ἑαυτοῦ ὁ Ἀριστοφάνης ὑπεκρίνατο αὐτοῦ τὸ πρόσωπον μίλτω χρίσας (cf. Σ *Knights* 230), is not a reliable source, as the writer seems to have misread the hypothesis and proceeds to confuse the chronology of *Knights* and *Acharnians*. Additionally, there is no evidence that any other poet of this period who is said to have acted (e.g. Crates, Pherecrates) did so *while* writing plays; it seems rather that acting could be an early stage of a career in theater, preceding and entirely

separate from composition and production. If Aristophanes ever acted, then, it was on behalf of other poets before his own career even began.

Works_Cited

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