

Married... with *Paidēs*: Women and Children in the Comic Audience

“Look how naturally decent she is [the comedy]: first of all, she hasn’t come with any dangling leather stitched to her, red at the tip and thick, to make the children laugh...” (*Clouds* 539). In his revision of *Clouds*, Aristophanes’ parabasis is an airing of grievances over the play’s first loss in 423 BCE. Aristophanes takes his opponents to task for lifting his plots and exploiting easy gags to make the audience laugh. The passage quoted above prompts some questions. Many scholars today still argue that there were no women, and likely no children, in the theater during the performance of comedy. There is some evidence outside of comedy itself that could be (and frequently is) brought to bear on the question, including sources like Aristotle’s commentary on comedy and moral harm to children at *Politics* 7.1336b1-36. In this passage Aristotle proposes laws that would prevent young children, especially those not yet old enough to drink strong wine with company, from attending the comedies. This, of course, suggests that children *were* present for comedies in his time, which in turn implies that women were present, unless we are to imagine that women were more impressionable than children, and Athenian fathers suddenly accepted the full burden of solo-parenting at a busy festival at which they hoped to watch the action on the stage.

But while this appeal to Aristotle (et al) does provide invaluable context and raw information, it may be illuminating to narrow our view to focus solely on the comic evidence about the audience. This allows us to focus our attention on what the poets thought of their own audience, rather than on our idea of the audience, the image of which we have constructed from a variety of sources. To limit our examination to only the texts of Aristophanes could simplify matters, since they exist in a more or less complete state. However, by including fragments of

other Old Comedy in our discussion, we may be able to create a more complete picture of the “comic audience,” rather than simply “the audience of Aristophanes.”

I have two closely related goals in this paper: first, to determine what strictly comic evidence tells us about the audience at a typical performance of comedy in classical Athens. The second goal is to briefly consider what the composition of the audience tells us about comedy and humor. If the audience at the theater is more diverse than just the body of citizen men, then it is safe to assume that the humor is more diverse as well. How would the presence of women and children in the audience change the way we think about, for instance, Aristophanes’ many jokes about domestic abuse? Surely those jokes would get different reactions from an audience of only men and an audience of men, women, and children. To try and find some answers, we will have cause to resort to modern ideas about humor theory—especially Benign Violation Theory (McGraw and Warren).

Selected Bibliography

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