

Laughing Matters: Peace, Democracy and the Challenge of the Comic Narrative

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The Prevalence of the Rational Narrative

'The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy'.¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had already noted in 1944 that the meaning of the Enlightenment entailed, among other things, the expurgation of myth from the stories or narratives, explanatory and descriptive that we tell about the world.² According to their *Dialectic*, the Enlightenment was a moment of unique intensification of an existing human tendency, which set into action the elevation of the rational above all other perspectives.³ Where earlier epochs had been 'characterised by myth and superstition', the Enlightenment involved a journey from 'the mythical to the scientific, from the barbaric to the rational/democratic'.⁴ In social and political inquiry this journey has meant that certain kinds of practices are recognised as scientific and rational, often to the dismissal of others. The production of laughter by comic narratives, in particular, seems to have lost its prominence in the political sphere with the advent of modernity. This is especially true for International Relations (IR), where the gravity of the subject matter is said

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1998), 3.

2. The Enlightenment was defined by Immanuel Kant in 1789 as 'man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity' through a reliance on a person's own understanding. See his 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"', trans. H.B. Nisbet, in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54.

3. For a critical discussion, see James Schmidt, 'Genocide and Enlightenment: Horkheimer and Adorno Revisited', in *Enlightenment and Genocide: Contradictions of Modernity*, eds. James Kaye and Bo Stråth, (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2000).

4. Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 41-42.

to require the unrelenting exercise of the rational, lest world politics is condemned to remain the realm of ‘repetition and recurrence’.⁵

This article suggests that the predominant adherence to rational narratives in IR and political science discredits the comic as an equally pre-eminent perspective for political life. Predicated on an underlying belief in progress, this prevalence dismisses mythic and comic narratives as valid perspectives on social life and denigrates ‘more complex notions of reason’.⁶ Furthermore, it results in privileging positivist methods for the consideration of political and social concerns, where other approaches might be more suited to the task. As Adorno and Horkheimer lamented, ‘[t]o the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion; modern positivism writes it off as literature’.⁷

Participating anew in a long lineage of critique and supplementation of the rational, this article argues that political understanding cannot be ‘solely grounded in rationality’.⁸ It begins by outlining an influential narrative in world politics, namely, that of the ‘democratic peace’ hypothesis, a choice which both exemplifies the dominance of the rational and illustrates its impact on such fundamental political terms as ‘peace’ and ‘democracy’. This is juxtaposed with Aristophanes’ Attic comedy, and in particular his play *Peace*, as an example of a comic narrative and performance, which unsettles the hegemony of the rational in a number of ways.⁹ First, there is an intentional parallel here with Aristophanes’ satire of Socrates and Socratic rationality, where the *proper* name of Socrates denotes rationalism and optimism placed on knowledge. As Leo Strauss noted, Socrates ‘is the prototype of the rationalist’ whose disposition suggests that ‘the evils that belong to the best possible world can be rendered harmless by knowledge’.¹⁰ Indeed, Aristophanes’ Attic comedy might be regarded as a reaction to, and contestation of, the pathological development of rationality, of the instance when ‘the whole Greek thought throws itself at rationality’, which itself ‘betrays a state of emergency: one was in peril, one had only *one* choice: either to perish or—be

5. See Martin Wight, ‘Why is There no International Theory?’, in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, eds. Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966).

6. This confidence bestowed upon the linearity and the assured path of progress through processes of enlightenment, ‘sets reason as an absolute and allows rationality to spin out of control’. Perversely, then, the hope placed on rationality to deliver a ‘better’ future dissipates because ‘the process of enlightenment prevents the realization of its own ideals and is engaged in a process of self-destruction’. Karin Bauer, *Adorno’s Nietzschean Narratives: Critiques of Ideology, Readings of Wagner* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 25.

7. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.

8. *Ibid.*

9. I use the terms in combination because although originating in performance, today it is often read or taught as literature.

10. Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 7.

absurdly *rational*.¹¹ Thus, Aristophanes initiates an early instance of contestation of the rational through the comic medium.

Second, not only was rationality absurdly dominant with Socrates but, moreover, this excessive development of the rational led to the ‘monstrous *defectus* of any mystical disposition’.¹² The displacement of humour and myth from the didactic palette of society is indicative, therefore, of the loss of the educative and, therefore, *political* role of comedy in the affairs of the community. Hence, the present discussion of the comic narrative/performance participates in an existing tension between philosophy and comedy. And it is Aristophanes, ‘above all others, [that] presents an intense treatment of poetry and philosophy and their rival claims to political pre-eminence’.¹³ Hence, the *choice* of the comic poet as such is, in and of itself, significant because it points to comedy’s ability to bring to the fore ‘the limits of our logical concepts’ and provide the space, the *topos*, from which the hegemony of the rational narrative can be questioned and supplemented.¹⁴

Narrating the ‘Democratic Peace’

Democratic Peace theory illustrates the continued salience of rational narratives, especially in the American academy, despite several attempts to question its fundamental assumptions.¹⁵ The narrative of the so-called ‘democratic peace’ is rational in a broad sense, in that, it embodies a certain constellation of ideals about progress and rationality in its consideration of the phenomenon that ‘democracies do not fight each other’. It has sought to provide an explanation for this correlation, first evidenced in the infamous ‘Correlates of War’ (CoW) project, and, moreover, to give it theoretical coherence, as was the task, perhaps, of Michael Doyle’s Kantian expositions in the early 1980s.¹⁶ In so doing, the rational narrative of the

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘The Problem of Socrates’, in *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1968), 43. For example, in the play *The Clouds* Socrates is portrayed as a Sophist, and the ludicrous debate between Just Word and Unjust Word, where the Unjust Word wins by force of rhetoric, illustrates the poet’s scepticism at the Sophists and their novel educational ideals. Plato, however, shows Aristophanes to be sympathetic to Socrates. See Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 1-7.

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy/The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 88.

13. Peter Nichols, *Aristophanes’ Novel Forms: The Political Role of Drama* (London: Minerva Press, 1998), 20.

14. Jacques Derrida, ‘Deconstruction and the Other’, in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 112.

15. See, for example, Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘The Imperial Peace: Democracy, Force and Globalization’, *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 4 (1999): 403-34. This example is chosen not only because it exemplifies the transformation of ‘the Enlightenment’s operations into myth’, but also because it can be used to highlight a number of potential dangers about discourses of peace and democracy within world politics.

16. Michael W. Doyle, ‘Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 1’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (1983): 205-35; ‘Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 2’, *Philosophy and*

democratic peace claims to have a privileged access in explaining this particular world-political phenomenon and, more generally, in improving the international political system.¹⁷

Furthermore, the ideals of progress and rationality are embodied in how this narrative perceives and defends its own 'operations', which are often praised as 'scientific'. In other words, not only does the content of the democratic peace 'proposition' fall within a rational narrative about world political progress but its operations and discussions within liberal internationalism are regarded as both rational and scientific. This is exemplified in a claim often found in the burgeoning democratic peace literature, namely that its theorists have, at long last, gleaned the first law of IR. More than forty years after Martin Wight wrote that 'international theory' cannot even be said to exist in the discipline,¹⁸ 'the idea that democracies never fight against each other has become an axiom for many scholars'.¹⁹ The narrative of this 'zone of peace', however, also claims to be 'scientific' in other, more specific ways. First, it uses reason to establish a correlation between the form of government (democracy) and the achievement of non-war (peace). Second, it primarily makes use of rational choice theoretical models in order to provide statistical proof that Immanuel Kant's normative project for 'Perpetual Peace' has been realised between a number of states in the present international political system.²⁰ Third, it legitimates the teleological and progressivist understanding of the reasonable choice of rational governance; in other words, by establishing and insisting that this perceived correlation is indeed causation, it retrospectively provides credence to the more prophetic elements of Kant's 'Perpetual Peace'. Thus, it reads a 'quasi-universalist ethos of "democracies don't fight each other"' into the international relations of Western states and transforms the apocalyptic discussion on international law found in Kant's essay into 'historical fact'.²¹ It is in this meaning, one might suggest, that, as Horkheimer and Adorno noted in 1944, enlightenment turns its own operations into myth. Retrospective mythologisation of 'Perpetual Peace', in turn, legitimises the use of Reason and rationality.

However, more is at stake than the achievement of axiomatic construction about international politics. Tied to the hegemony of the rational narrative of the democratic peace is the Rationalist challenge to the Realist worldview, whose rejection of progressive politics has since 1979 been 'made scientific' through its reliance on structural analysis. As Bruce Russett explicitly states, '[t]o the degree

Public Affairs 12, no. 4 (1983): 323-53; and 'Liberalism and World Politics', *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (1986): 1151-69.

17. As noted also by John Macmillan, 'Democracies Don't Fight: A Case of the Wrong Research Agenda', *Review of International Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 275-99.

18. Wight, 'Why is There no International Theory?'

19. Edward G Mansfield and Jack Snyder, 'Democratization and War', *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995): 79.

20. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983).

21. Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 133.

we establish that peace between democracies is a fact, and are able to explain it theoretically, we build an alternative view of the world with great import for expectations and for policy'.²² Yet notwithstanding the union of rational *and* rationalist (liberal) narratives in the desire for an alternative theoretic construction, the absolutisation of Reason is besieged with uncertainty, both in terms of progress and enlightenment and in terms of the privileging of a certain kind of theorising, which Horkheimer had called 'traditional' and Robert W. Cox has called 'problem-solving'.²³

In the first instance, the narrative's rational credentials legislate, perhaps unwittingly, as to the appropriate (for statistical and problem-solving purposes) definitions and characteristics of both 'democracy' and 'peace'. Its thus-far unhindered trajectory causes, in other words, the reduction of its fundamental concepts to measurable and compliant categories. Such a reduction is ontologically suspicious and can be said to productively crowd out debates about peace and democracy which might be essential to the post-Cold War era.²⁴ Moreover, the imposition of causation upon this correlation evidenced in CoW, places unquestioning faith in the rationalisation of diverse political experiences for the 'practical' ends of a progressivist international politics. The expectation that peace and democracy, and indeed the political *itself*, are objectively measurable and comparable for all parts of the world alike without consideration of the particularities of context could arguably, in the vein of the *Dialectic*, lead to iterate processes of international securitisation, as many cautionary accounts of the democratic peace have already suggested.²⁵ With such trepidation in mind, the article turns to another type of narrative to reflect on the supplementation and challenge of the rational with the comic: might the humorous and the absurd enable the search for a place from which to seek the limits of the rational narrative, especially regarding fundamental concepts of politics?

Aristophanes' *Peace*: The Comic as the 'Scourge' of the Rational?

The prevalence of the rational narrative, which is the legacy of the Enlightenment, but also of the Socratic moment, is 'unsettled' by Aristophanic comedy. Aristophanes is widely accepted as 'the irreverent scourge of our beloved Socrates', whose comic narratives and performances exemplify the subversion of

22. *Ibid.*, 24.

23. See Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 188-243 and Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126-55.

24. In the sense intended by Jean Bethke Elshtain, as a concept whose problematic or question-worthy nature is naturalised. See for example, 'The Problem with Peace', in *Women, Militarism, and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory*, eds. Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990), 255-66.

25. Mansfield and Snyder, 'Democratization and War'.

rationality and the celebration of the absurd.²⁶ In addition to the production of laughter, even the very *form* of comedy diverges from rational inquiry. As scholars of the comic genre suggest, ‘narrative was less important than the nascent direct personal humour and gag-getting’; Aristophanes, especially, was well-known for his ‘foregrounding of the narrative element in a gag-filled medium’.²⁷

His plays are said to have lamented the reconfiguration of tragedy with the rise to prominence of Euripides, whose plays reflected Socratic influence all too well. From this perspective, Euripides had ‘applied the “aesthetic principle that to be beautiful everything must be conscious” which was parallel to the Socratic “to be good everything must be conscious”’.²⁸ In Nietzsche’s analysis, too, Euripidean tragedy appeared as the poetic manifestation of Socratic rationalism, what he called Apollonian ‘logical schematism’.²⁹ As opposed to this turn in Athenian drama, Aristophanes asserted the Dionysian experience as paramount and looked with suspicion upon tragedy’s turn towards the rational. Mocking tragedy, he suggested that comedy should be understood as ‘trygedy’, as related to the making of wine and the privileging of laughter, as the verb ‘trygo’ denotes.³⁰ Indeed, it is often the case that comedy is taken as the opposite of tragedy, which is highly regarded as a didactic mode of art and expression. Whereas tragedy is widely accepted as essential to the political process, the role of humour, satire and ridicule is often depreciated. As C.W. Marshall argues, ‘[s]omething substantial is lost when Comedy is defined ignobly and negatively to the supposedly nobler and more positive genre of Tragedy’.³¹

Indeed, Aristophanes’ comedies were always political in a direct sense. *Peace*, for example, was written and staged at the ‘Great Dionysia’ in 421 BC. The Peloponnesian wars had been going on for ten years. The leaders of both alliances Cleon (for Athens) and Brasidas (for Sparta) had undermined the brief 423 BC truce, and Aristophanes had used the comic medium to ridicule and criticise their actions in earlier plays. In 422 BC, however, in the battle of Amphipolis both leaders were killed in what was one of the Athenians’ worst defeats. Nicias assumed the leadership of Athens and Pleistoanax assumed power in Sparta, and both called upon all parties to negotiate.³² Aristophanes wrote *Peace* as a comedy whose intent was no longer to satirise Cleon’s warmongering, as did *The Knights*

26. Daniel W. Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1997), 11.

27. C.W. Marshall, ‘What’s So Funny about Ancient Comedy?’, *Social Identities* 7, no. 1 (2001): 15.

28. Nichols, *Aristophanes’ Novel Forms*, 16.

29. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 91.

30. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 139. It should be noted however, that this understanding of Euripides is contested by the view that certain Euripidean tragic plays moved closer to the function of comedy as we understand it today, in the sense that the tragic form imports elements of the ridiculous and the absurd.

31. Marshall, ‘What’s So Funny’, 13-14.

32. ‘Introduction’, in Aristophanes, *Peace [Eirene]*, Modern and Ancient Greek Edition (Athens, Greece: Ekdoseis Kaktos, 1992), 35-41 and Aristophanes, *Clouds, Wasps, Peace*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Edition, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 419-23.

for example, but to indicate his support for the peace negotiations and their auspicious ending.

Beetles, Gods, and Other Political Animals

The story line in *Peace* is set in the midst of war between the Athenians, the Spartans and their respective allies.³³ In the yard of the dwellings of an old peasant wine-grower, *Trygaeus*, two servants are busy with a much maligned and malodorous occupation. They are feeding cakes of donkey manure to a giant beetle and cursing their lot. This noxious beetle is also quite wilful: it can only consume excrement, preferably that of donkeys and is quite impatient in its demands for more 'nourishment', demands that must be fulfilled by the servants. All this attention paid to a despicable animal just because their master has been overcome by a 'novel kind of madness'. For some time now, Trygaeus looks to the heavens and 'rails at Zeus' asking the God why he harms the Greeks in this way.³⁴ The most extreme manifestation of this extraordinary form of madness is the recent purchase of this giant dung beetle, because, as Trygaeus explains, '[i]n Aesop's fables it's the only winged thing I could find that ever reached the gods' (129-130). Trygaeus hopes that he can ride on its back to Olympus, the residence of the gods, in order to ask Zeus to justify why he does not prohibit the Greeks from continuing the war: 'I'll indict him for betraying Greece to the Medes!' (107-108).³⁵

The servants are both shocked and disgusted by their master's incredible behaviour, which borders the sacrilegious with the direct addressing of the God and the apportioning of blame to him for the wars. They are basking in the certainty, however, that all this activity, as common sense would have it, is in vain. The audience knows, however, that as these words are uttered by the servants the impossible and the ridiculous might yet prevail. Through comic irony, the subsequent success of Trygaeus' scheme highlights that the goal is achieved via the coprological, the laughable, and the despicable; comedy 'edifies the viewer', that is, it 'point[s] him toward the truly admirable [sic] by using the low, the grotesque, obscene, and preposterous'.³⁶

Trygaeus embarks on his extraordinary journey after admonishing his servants, his daughters and the audience not to distract the beetle with their 'bodily functions':

33. Ibid., hereafter cited in the text with the *line numbers* of the Ancient Greek text. Although some translations are modified, I usually refer to Henderson's translation cited in note 32 or to an older translation found in [http://www.classics.mit.edu/Aristophanes/peace_pl.txt] (1 December 2001).

34. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 137.

35. Trygaeus' desire to sue Zeus is a critical reference to the Athenians disposition to seek 'court action' about things profane and sacred. On the significance of the beetle to the Greeks, see A.M. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

36. Nichols, *Aristophanes' Novel Forms*, 28.

(to his servant) You must speak auspiciously and make no foolish noise, but raise a cheer; and bid mankind be quiet, and wall off with fresh bricks the privies and alleyways, and lock up their arseholes (100-102).

(to the beetle) Eh! What are you doing? What are you doing? Where are you pointing those nostrils? Toward the alleyways? Hurl yourself bravely away from the ground, then spread your racing pinions and head straight to the halls of Zeus, averting your nose from poop and for once giving up foraging in your daily food (158-162).

(to the audience) As for all of you, for whose sake I'm performing these labors, stop farting and shitting for a period of three days; because if this thing picks up the scent while airborne, he'll toss me off head first (150-151). Man, Man in Pireaus, the one shitting in the whores' quarter: what are you doing? You'll get me killed, killed! Do cover it up, pile plenty dirt on top, and plant thyme over it, and pour on perfume...(164-169).

Trygeaus calls for the mechanic in charge of this contraption to keep an eye on its operation: his own dread at his tremendous undertaking is so great that he himself is likely, he fears, to 'provide food' for the beetle before too long. By directly addressing the mechanic and commanding the audience to emit no 'attractive' smells for the beetle in this way, Aristophanes shatters the dramatic illusion of the performance: the narrative reasserts itself, at this most absurd moment (remember, flight is about to become possible) as didactic and normative.

Trygeaus' ascendance to Mount Olympus is safely completed and he lands where no man had endeavoured to travel before. His elation soon turns sour, however, when he discovers that the summit appears to be devoid of the Olympian gods themselves. Hermes is the sole immortal resident but their initial encounter shows him to be quite rude and unwelcoming. He greets Trygeaus with a slew of insults, '[y]ou loathsome, insolent shameless scum, you utter scum, you scum of the earth! How did you get up here, you arch-scum? Have you got a name? Well, speak up!', insults which Trygeaus does not dream to contest (182-185). Rather, he clarifies his inadequacies by offering the correct insults to the god: 'Arch Scum, Trygeaus of the Athmonian deme, an accomplished vintager, no informer and no lover of litigation' (187-189). Eager to get on the good graces of Hermes, Trygeaus offers him some meat as a culinary form of bribe, which soon has the desired effect: 'Welcome, my poor fellow, how did you find your journey?' asks Hermes with a sudden change of heart (181-184).

Hermes explains that he is, indeed, the only god left, like a mere watchdog, to look after 'what remains of the furniture, the little pots and pans, the bits of chairs and tables, the odd wine jars...' (201-202). The gods have fled to 'the *kuttaros* of heaven, the highest point of its dome' and as far away as possible from the commotion of the humans fighting below.³⁷ Trygeaus' anxiousness about the

37. Bowie, *Aristophanes*, 142.

success of his undertaking increases as Hermes informs him that the Gods have allowed War (*Polemos*) to take up residence in Olympus and to punish the Greeks in any way he wishes. Hermes suggests that the gods felt that the Greeks deserved it because throughout the past years they had repeatedly opted for war and shunned peace. Since distrust and cunning had taken hold over the city states, no peace offering could ever be successful:

[b]ecause you all kept choosing war, though they [the gods] often tried to arrange a truce. If the Laconians achieved a small advantage, they'd say, "By the Twain Gods, now Johnny Attic is going to pay the piper!" And if you Atticonians, achieved some success of your own and the Laconians came asking for peace, at once you would say, "It's a trick by Athena!" "Yes, by Zeus! We mustn't listen to them, they'll be back if we hold on to Pylos" (211-219, brackets added).

Trygeaus cannot deny this, much as he had claimed a divine source for the continuation of the war and had so sacrilegiously accorded responsibility to Zeus at the outset of his adventure: indeed, he agrees, 'that's certainly our trademark way of talking' (220). Hermes declares that they are unlikely to see *Eirene* (Peace) again because she has been imprisoned in a dungeon by War. As for the fearsome War himself, he is momentarily occupied, as the audience can hear in the background, with devising an appropriate mode of punishment: he is manufacturing a mortar with which to ground the Greek city states into smithereens!

As War emerges, god and mortal take cover and observe him from a safe distance as he sets about wreaking havoc among the city-states. Brandishing a huge mortar, War selects a local speciality or a famed produce from each city, which he throws into the cauldron in order to grind it all up in the place of its city of origin. From Prasiae, an ally of Sparta, their well-known leeks, from Megara their abundant garlic and so on... It is obvious that, although claiming to act on behalf of all the Greeks regardless of their citizenship, motivated as he is by their common suffering, Trygeaus cannot help but be partial at the sight of their metaphorical destruction. Once the leeks from Prasiae go into the mortar, he turns to the audience from his hiding place and notes rather smugly 'this, gentlemen, isn't *our* problem yet; it's only so much worse for the Laconians...'. The inclusion of Megarian garlic he find rather frightening exclaiming, 'Good gracious, what loud and pungent *tears* he's thrown in for the Megarians!' (248-249).³⁸ And once War reaches for Attic honey, he laments its expense with plenty of his own tears: 'oh, I beseech you! Use some other honey; this kind is worth four obols; be careful, be careful of our Attic honey!' (253).

38. Trygeaus says 'tears' instead of garlic, because grinding garlic brings tears to the eyes.

The situation escalates when War sends *Kydoimos* (Tumult or Hubbub, the sound of battle), who is his assistant, to find a pestle for the mortar so that he can complete the annihilation.³⁹ *Kydoimos* timidly reports, however, that in the confusion of their recent move to Olympus, they forgot to bring along a pestle. Undeterred, War sends him in haste to fetch one from the Athenians, but he returns empty-handed: the Athenians have managed to lose 'their leather seller who ground Greece to powder' (270). *Kydoimos* is referring, of course, to Cleon, the deceased Athenian leader, who was a tanner by profession and under whose leadership the war efforts pressed ahead time after time.⁴⁰ *Kydoimos* is then dispatched to acquire a pestle from Sparta but yet again comes back unsuccessful: it seems that the Laconians have managed to lose their pestle too, because 'they lent it to some people to use at the Thracian front, who have lost it for them' (283-284).⁴¹ It seems, for all their inability to make peace, the rival city-states are all able to contribute to the postponement of their destruction at the hands of War. Furthermore, while an exasperated War exits the stage and sets about making his own pestle, *Trygeaus* might have a chance to dig out the dungeon, in which *Eirene* is buried and set her free. The comic medium's stretching of the parameters of the real offers a space in which to find a way out of the current predicament. The suggestion that the recovery of the goddess might lie in taking extra-ordinary steps, beyond the litigious attitude of the Athenians, illustrates that comedy can become involved not in the solution through customary political means, but, rather, in their, however momentary, transcendence.

Rescuing Peace

Trygeaus' task reinvents itself in mid-play: he realises that the Greeks' only hope may lie not in negotiating the war's cessation with the gods, but might, rather, require a change in the suspicious and belligerent attitude of the Greeks themselves, as well as a more active role in bringing about peace. In an act of political activism, he calls upon citizens of all city-states to assist him in releasing *Eirene* from War's dungeon, because it is only through this act of liberation that she can come to reside over the city. *Hermes*, however, is being obstructive: he contends that he has to alert *Zeus* that such an act is about to take place, or be struck down by the god, renouncing in this way his reputation for thievery and stealth.⁴² *Trygeaus* is forced to fabricate a story that the Moon and the Sun, deities worshiped by the barbarians, conspire against the Gods to betray Greece. Such a divine coup is unthinkable and provides the excuse for *Hermes* to accept some more bribes in order to turn a blind eye to this dangerous endeavour. *Trygeaus* cajoles the god to lend his support, promising that 'you will be loaded with benefits

39. Tumult also appears personified in Homer.

40. See also Aristophanes, *Peace*, 167, note 39 and *Clouds*, line 581.

41. Aristophanes is referring to Brasidas, who was sent north at the request of King Perdiccas of Macedon (Thucydides 4.79) and who perished at Amphipolis fighting Cleon.

42. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 144.

of every kind, and to start with, I offer you this cup for libations'; a bribe which Hermes wistfully accepts, seemingly resigned to his own character flaws: '[u]h oh, I've always had such a soft spot for gold plate!' (420-425). Aristophanes' constant reference to bribes is but a reminder that the highest offices are often held by the most corrupt and that deities are not immune from such corruption. This element in the *Peace*, moreover, is meant to parody, as some of his earlier plays had done, Cleon's desire to continue the war for pecuniary interests.

This act of transgression of the gods' wishes illustrates that, unlike *Diceopolis* in the *Acharnians*, Trygeaus 'is compelled to act against the gods although with the support of all the Greeks'. His disobedience, however, is not justified by a belief that the 'gods are not'—as did Socrates—but in a deliberate and direct challenge to the gods' power.⁴³ Trygeaus gathers a chorus of farmers, merchants, artisans, metics and blacksmiths, variously drawn from all the warring city states, and attempts to 'disinter' Eirene by opening up the pit. Yet, this crucial task too resonates with mistrust and suspicion between the chorus members, who despite their initial excitement and premature joy only too readily begin to accuse one another of laziness and incompetence. Trygeaus tries to encourage more 'team-work', by chastising the chorus: 'Hey, these men aren't pulling equally! Pitch in, there! How puffed up can you get? You Boeotians are only pretending. You'll be sorry for this!' and later on, '[a]nd these Argives have been no help either for quite some time; they just laugh at the hardships of the others, while they get their daily bread by taking pay from both sides' (475-477).⁴⁴ Hermes, who has assumed a supervisory role after his initial disagreement with this activist folly points out, however, that as might be expected 'But the Spartans, friend, are pulling manfully' (478). Trygeaus has to threaten the chorus with violence before he can get any results, which he does by cursing several groups in turn: '[y]ou are looking to get whacked, you Argives!' Hermes joins in taking the Megarians to task: '[m]en of Megara, why don't you go to hell? The goddess remembers you with hatred, for you were the first to daub her with your garlic. And to the Athenians I say: you are accomplishing nothing but litigation. If you really want to pull the goddess free, retreat a little seaward' (503-505).⁴⁵ Nevertheless, by eventually accusing everyone of some vice or other, Aristophanes recreates the collective and united outlook of a citizen wearied by all Greek dispositions alike.

After much ado, the citizens lift Eirene from her unworthy prison. With her emerge her companions *Theoria* (Holiday, or Festivity and Comprehension) and *Opora* (Cornucopia, or Fruitfulness), who are quite evidently *hetaerae* or

43. *Ibid.*, 146.

44. As Henderson explains, 'the Argives had profited from their neutrality and the imminent expiration of their own 30-year treaty with Sparta made a general peace unattractive to them', Aristophanes, *Clouds, Wasps, Peace*, 489, note 37.

45. Aristophanes is suggesting that the Athenians give up their ambition for a land empire and be satisfied with their supremacy at sea.

prostitutes.⁴⁶ Trygaeus and the Chorus welcome the goddess and give praise for the successful outcome of their adventure. Hermes suggests that as a prize for his endeavours Trygaeus should take Opora for his bride. Once they return to Athens a feast is thrown in the honour of the goddess and Trygaeus who has delivered them from war-making.

The Production of Laughter: Comedy as a Narrative of the Political

The production of laughter arising from the ironic achievement of peace in the eponymous play suggests that comedy as a narrative form served particular *socio-political* functions in the affairs of the polis. This section crucially attempts to delineate these functions and also to illuminate what the contemporary study of community and politics foregoes in its depreciation of the comic medium, not only as a perspective which is inclusive of the breadth of human experience and self-understanding, but as an essential element of the political.⁴⁷ This type of analysis is elliptical, however, because the vibrancy of comedy's context is irreparably lost, with only the most direct references remaining to guide readings of the play by contemporary audiences. The greatest difficulty, according to Marshall, is

understanding the importance of the Aristophanic parabasis, seeing its relevance to contemporary politics, and discerning what the playwright's motivations might have been creating pointed, personal, political humour. Academic studies tend to privilege either the comic or the political, but maintaining both actively in tension is challenging when *reading* a text.⁴⁸

Moreover, any analysis of comedy's political implications has to take into account that '[h]umour is both personal and immediate, and creates a bond between the performer and the audience. When the audience and the medium of delivery changes, the nature of the humour must change as well'.⁴⁹ It is possible, nevertheless, to outline and discuss three distinct, but interrelated, functions of the production of humour, while bearing in mind these concerns. First, comedy calls for the enlargement of the spectrum of politics with the introduction of festive, or Dionysian, elements alongside rational debate. Within this Dionysian outlook, moreover, one does not find only piety, but also its reverse, that is, irreverence towards the very institutions praised. Second, just as comedy is both pious and irreverent, it also sustains a Janus-faced, that is, critical but also community-

46. Although Henderson uses their translated names, I think using the Greek *Theoria* and *Opora* best retains their multiple meanings. See also James Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

47. See, for example, Simon Critchley, 'Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis', in *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), 217-38.

48. Marshall, 'What's So Funny?', 27 emphasis added.

49. *Ibid.*, 13. It is important to realise that the loss of context is affected not only by the change from performance to reading but more importantly by the saturation of humour in the age of television, 14.

enhancing relation with respect to the workings of the Athenian *demos*. Finally, comedy's focus beyond the rational discursive field of politics also highlights the limits of discourse itself, which is very pronounced in the understanding of peace and democracy in this particular Aristophanic play. This section discusses these functions in turn.

Dionysian Politics

The narrative of Attic Comedy has a heuristic impact on political understanding, expressed in its demand that the sacred ceremonies and festive activities of the *demos* be regarded as a primary preoccupation of the political.⁵⁰ Thus, comedy calls for the enlargement of political vision beyond the rational, and also often litigious, debates within the public sphere. Comedy's broader socio-political functions at the time of Aristophanes were to bring in the sacred and the social in order to deter the emerging, purely juridical conception of the polis. Comedy highlights, in other words, that the full range of social and spiritual activities are constitutive of political life. If one were to search for a metaphor for this heuristic contribution, one could argue that a Dionysian perspective is brought to bear on the polis and its activities, a perspective that *Peace*, in particular illustrates explicitly.

As was noted above, following the descent of Trygeaus and the chorus with Eirene, Opora, and Theoria, a feast is thrown, with sacrifices to Eirene, to celebrate the cessation of violence and to *install* Peace as a deity honoured by the city. Their former enemies join the Athenians in this feast and the goods of the earth are once again preferred to the spoils of war. It is in this regard that the play is commonly taken to be a celebration of peace and an end to the tragic wars.⁵¹ The protagonist is a member of the rural class who succeeds, through his desperate recourse to absurd tactics, in bringing about the cessation of violence where the more educated orators and strategists had failed. Indeed, Aristophanes' choice of comic hero in Trygeaus, but also of the chorus made up of the farmers, metics and artisans, is significant in establishing the view that the play prescribes the values of a 'rural democracy'.⁵²

Aristophanes' positive opinion of rural life is exemplified in Trygeaus' greeting of Eirene as she emerges from her imprisonment: '[m]y Lady, Bestower of grapes, how shall I express my greeting? Where can I get a ten-thousand-liter word to greet you with? I've got nothing that large of my own' (520-522). Rather than addressing her as the opposite of War, the patron of a peaceful *political* life, he focuses instead on how peace makes possible the thriving of the professions and

50. I hyphenate this term to recall that all things that have to do with the polis are *political* issues, although in the contemporary study of politics this broad understanding has been lost. See James F. Ward, *Heidegger's Political Thinking* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), xviii.

51. See, for example, Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, and Bowie, *Aristophanes*.

52. The subversive elements of folk humour and culture are analysed in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Irene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

occupations which are directly associated with the earth. Furthermore, Trygeaus is overjoyed to take fruitful Opora as his new wife at Hermes' suggestion, re-establishing the troublesome god as the protector of the household.⁵³ By consummating his union with Opora, Trygeaus is assured that the harvest will be plentiful and the peace will benefit those who toil the soil.

As a farmer citizen, furthermore, Trygeaus is seen to represent the common people's will and desires for peace. The common man's attachment to the earth indicates all that is good and worth preserving, which is signified by the praise given by Hermes and Trygeaus to the farming professions during the attempt to pull out Eirene from War's dungeon and the criticism voiced against the professions involved in the war effort: 'only those among them who generally hold the plough-tail show any zeal, while the armourers impede them in their efforts' (479-480).

While such instances, as cited above, tend to suggest that the play celebrates the values of a rural democracy, it also becomes apparent that such a view of the play 'overlooks the striking respects in which Trygeaus transcends the role of the farmer' in *Peace*, as had Diceopolis in *The Acharnians*.⁵⁴ The choice of a protagonist who is a *critical* citizen of Athens suggests the poet's admiration for critique as a political virtue. The fact that this active citizen, who is 'no lover of litigation', is also a cunning farmer emphasises that a multiplicity of perspectives is required in order to be 'far-seeing' in decisions about the future of the polis. Arguably, then, the play endorses the values of rural democracy as a *counterweight* to the urban life of the polis. However, far from dismissing the polis, in the *Peace* urban life is successfully brought into the narrative, made evident for example when the goddess' second companion, Theoria, whose name invokes religious festivity and comprehension, is returned to the city's Council or *Boulē*. Festivity and the observance of religious custom, along with rational debate, ought to be amongst the primary preoccupations of the polis and 'the sending of Theoria to an important section of the city, the Council, is a prelude to the installation of Peace in the city for all'.⁵⁵ The marriage of Trygeaus to Opora and the sexual delivery of Theoria to the Council both 'prefigure respectively the immanent aspects of private and public peace, or more accurately, peace in the country and peace in the city'.⁵⁶

Comedy's inclusivity, moreover, extends to the Athenian 'war party', city allies and former enemies. Not only is country life united with the parameters of city life, but this union is also extended to a trans-Hellenic audience. For example, while the Chorus recognises the honour a citizen such as Trygeaus brings to Athens specifically, the praise showered upon him is on behalf of the 'common man': 'next to the gods, we'll always consider you the best' (917). The installation of Eirene's statue in the city and the feast thrown in her honour situate peace in the *demos* and suggest an outlook which is inclusive of all citizens. A certain

53. Bowie, *Aristophanes*, 139.

54. Nichols, *Aristophanes' Novel Forms*, 73.

55. Bowie, *Aristophanes*, 146.

56. *Ibid.*

universality of the people is established when the Athenians who had supported the War, as well as their enemies, all join in the feast that exemplifies their common ways of celebration and desire to be rejoined. Peace is celebrated as a state of renewed Hellenic ties, signalling the recovery of relationships between a diverse body of citizens who had supported the war effort by failing to oppose its continuation or misleadingly aligning themselves with demagogues.⁵⁷

The feast and the preceding preparations for it embody comedy's relationship to Dionysos fully: the focus on *Opora* and *Theoria* illustrates the attention that the poet pays to the material and spiritual aspects of political life. The importance of Dionysos is most prevalent in these passages, seen in the wine-making metaphors to which Trygeaus resorts, such as 'ten-thousand-liter words' and 'Bestower of grapes'. The Chorus' praise for the service Trygeaus has provided to the very citizens who had ridiculed his desire to ascend to Olympus, is re-directed by him to the significance of vine-gathering and wine-making, as well as Dionysian festivity in general:

Chorus: a man like this one assures the happiness of all his fellow-citizens.

Trygeaus: When you are gathering your vintages you will prize me even better.

Chorus: Even now we plainly see, for you've become a savior for all mankind.

Trygeaus: (singing) Wait until you have drunk a cup of new wine, before you appraise my true merits (911-917).

In the *parabasis* the chorus utters not a word about its members and their role, as is customary in the genre, but 'deals solely with the poet himself, with the praise of his art and the blame of his rivals and of some tragic poets'.⁵⁸ This affirmation bestowed upon the comic poet, which replaces the *agon* found in other Aristophanic comedies, is a reminder that 'the authority of the author is the authority of a chorus...it is an existence that has found confirmation and support in a chorus'; similarly the 'expression of value becomes strong and powerful...only in the chorus of others'.⁵⁹

Aristophanes' emphasis on the Dionysian experience and its importance for the polis cannot be taken to merely highlight the positive outcome of the play. While the 'harmonious resolution' is easily the focus of the second part of the play, comedy's function is as much to transgress and disturb such 'positivity' as it is to articulate it. There is, therefore, a peculiar coexistence of piety and sacrilege intended to critique the prevalence of rationality in Athenian politics and the

57. With Aristophanic comedy, peace begins to be discussed in positive terms, signifying the increasing uncertainty surrounding 'war' as an honourable activity in the fourth century. I thank Jack Donnelly for this point.

58. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 152.

59. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, trans. Vadim Laipunov and Kenneth Brostrom (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 169.

inability of rational process to *literally* bring about Peace. Irreverence is initially shown in Trygeaus' welcoming remarks about the goddess and her venerable companions who although filled with praise and compliments, it might be more befitting to them as women rather as deities. '[w]hat a countenance you've got, dear goddess! And what an aroma, how delightful to my heart, utterly luscious, with its hints of demobilization and perfume!' he tells Eirene making evident his disdain for military activities (524-526).⁶⁰

The sexual nature of the union of Trygeaus and Opora, which is paralleled by the sexual deliverance of Theoria to the Council, is the foremost indication of comedy's insistence that the worship of Dionysos ought not to be restricted to the farmers and the rural population, but should be dispersed throughout the city. The following exchange occurs as Opora is being delivered to Trygeaus household:

Trygeaus: Hurry up, show this girl (pointing to Opora) into my house, clean out the bath, heat some water and prepare the marriage bed for her and me...meanwhile I am off to give this other girl (Theoria) *back* to the Council.

Servant: Say, should I give her something to eat?

Trygeaus: Nothing. She'll not want to eat bread or cake, when up there with the gods her tongue's been used to ambrosia.

Servant: Then we'll have to get something ready for her to put her tongue on down here too! (842-855).

The reunion of Theoria with the city and specifically with the Councillors who represent the political artifice of the polis brings forward comedy's reaffirmation of Dionysian politics. '[t]ell me, who is this woman?' asks Trygeaus' servant. Trygeaus explains that Theoria is well-known to them from an era when religious festivity and merriment was part and parcel of city life, before the war broke out. The servant is astonished: '[d]o you mean to say this is the Holiday (Theoria) we used to have when we'd had a few drinks and banged our way to Brauron?' (873-874).⁶¹ Trygeaus confirms, noting that 'I had greatest trouble to get hold of her' (875). But it is not only the servant who does not remember Theoria; the Councillors neither remember her nor do they offer to take her in. Her reintroduction, however, is crucial for the installation of peace, and Peace as a goddess, in the city. This whole sequence by which the Senate is reminded of their prior encounters with Theoria is a subtle argument that merriment and festivity is just as crucial for the city as is rational debate. 'Come, who wishes to take the

60. Aristophanes avails himself of this happy instance in order to bad-mouth the tragic poet Euripides. While praising Eirene as having 'the odour of sweet fruits, of festivals, of the Dionysia, of the harmony of flutes, of the tragic poets, of the verses of Sophocles, of the phrases of Euripides', Hermes intervenes to adamantly suggest that it is 'a foul calumny' because Peace 'detests that framer of subtleties and quibbles' (532-534).

61. Brauron refers to a sanctuary in East Africa 'where an initiation festival for maidens was held every four years', hence the sexual reference by the servant. See Aristophanes, *Clouds, Wasps, Peace*, 537, note 70.

charge of her?’ Trygeaus asks the audience. Only one Senator offers to take charge, but Trygeaus is weary of him, lest he ‘absorbs all her life-force’ (884). So he instructs her to take off her clothes: ‘Senate, Prytaneis, gaze upon Theoria and see what good times I’ve brought you. Hasten to lift her legs and begin your festival with a Liberation Feast (*Anarrhysis*)’ (889-890). He proceeds to liken their pleasures with her to Olympic games, making the reference to religious festivity explicit:

Now that you have her, you’re free to hold a fine sporting competition first thing tomorrow. You can wrestle her to the ground, stand her on all fours, lay her on her side, or stand before her with bent knees, or well-rubbed with oil you enter the lists of the games like young lads in the Pancratium, belabouring your foe with blows from your fist (*pygmaxia*)... (896-899).

Quite eager to recall this commitment to festivity, the Council happily receives Theoria. Trygeaus’ sharp tongue retorts at once: ‘you would not have been in such a hurry to introduce her to the Council, if I had brought her without any pecuniary benefit; you would have claimed you were on holiday as an excuse’ (905-909).

This delivery of Theoria to the Council suggests not only that prayers are always accompanied by pleasures, but that the Dionysian experience is crucial for the farming class and the Councillors alike. The return of religious festivity to the Council is not a purely pious incidence, either; rather, Theoria ‘will serve the enjoyment of the Council, or rather the enjoyment of each of its members’.⁶² Thus, the restoration of Theoria to the Council renders the space of law-making and political procedures as something more than the site of political contest where the citizens deliberate; presently, it is also the site of bodily gratification, with pleasure becoming wedded to rationality as its important counterweight.

Aristophanes’ comedy, and *Peace* in particular, attempted to expand the spectrum of the political to include the veneration of religious duty and the undertaking of festivities with the rational, interest-based politics of the demos. Such a piety is unambiguously part and parcel of a certain sacrilegious disposition towards the customary, however; a piety which coexists with, and is brought to the fore by, its very transgression.

Laughter as a Phenomenology of the Everyday

The desire of comedy as a genre for political pre-eminence is underlined by its critical function with respect to the polis. There are countless examples of comedy being acerbic towards both the sacred and the profane: comedy’s assembling of the Gods’ desertion of the Greeks at the hands of War, Hermes’ cowardice and desire for bribes, and finally, the most irreverent suggestion that prostitution is just as prevalent with the Gods.⁶³ The unsettling role of comedy becomes apparent once

62. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 154.

63. *Ibid.*, 153.

again; it serves 'to expose what only pretends to be admirable'.⁶⁴ This is best exemplified by the line accorded to Trygeaus' servant who declares with disdain upon his master's descent to Athens with Opora and Theoria: 'I would not give more than an obolus for the gods if they pimp girls as we mortals do' (848-849).

Even more prominent, however, is the critique of democratic politics. For example, Trygeaus does not appear too happy to have returned from Olympus to his city after his ordeal. Indeed, he makes no comment about his journey other than to complain about the pain in his legs caused by flight, and to admonish the audience once more as unworthy of his good graces and the dangers he has undergone for them all: '[h]ow small you were to be sure, when seen from heaven! You had all the appearance too of being great rascals; but seen close you look even worse' (821-823). Malcolm Heath argues that for comedy as a narrative form a 'derogatory view of the *demos* is a crucial premise of the main action of a play'.⁶⁵ Specifically, the poet's misgivings about the demagogic turn of Athenian democracy resonate throughout the play. As noted above, the Councillors are scolded for not paying enough attention to all matters equally and for seeking bribes, the Athenians are accused for being too litigious and ignorant of the requirements of religious piety, and the acceptance of Hermes' accusations about their lack of trust and war-mongering, all point to comedy's function as a 'watchdog' to the democratic process. The production of humour through the mocking of politicians and citizens is a form of 'checks' on the city's democratic politics.

In addition to its role as a supplement to the democratic process, comedy also serves a deeper and more critical function. As Michel Foucault argued, it is a genuine usage of 'free speech', of *parrhesia*, the kind of speech that comes out of duty and moral obligation and which risks the wrath of those in power in uttering its critical content.⁶⁶ Even in democracy, where by definition free speech is *expected*, it is not often found: 'not only do Athenians listen to the most depraved orators; they are unwilling to hear truly good speakers, for they deny them the possibility of being heard'.⁶⁷ This analysis relies partly on Isocrates' speech 'On the Peace', where the orator challenges the citizenry: 'you have formed the habit of driving all the orators from the platform except those who support your desires'.⁶⁸ It suggests that freedom of speech can only appear when in fact there is *no* democracy, because in democracy, the multitude of voices does not necessarily bring about the best arguments to be heard and decided upon. Rather, populist views prevail and a certain unwillingness to counter popular conceptions reduces

64. Nichols, *Aristophanes' Novel Forms*, 28.

65. Malcolm Heath, *Political Comedy in Aristophanes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1987), 22.

66. For a discussion of the characteristics of *parrhesia* and its changing meaning throughout the classical and Hellenistic periods, see Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001), 12-20.

67. *Ibid.*, 81.

68. Isocrates 'On the Peace', trans. George Norlin, § 113, in *Isocrates*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard and Heinemann, 1968).

parrhesia to submissive agreement with the majority.⁶⁹ Thus, the chatter or ‘idle talk’ of everyday life leads to a ‘levelling down’ of possibilities.⁷⁰ Indeed, the demos only *allows* freedom of speech, only accepts the utterance of the ‘unpopular’ viewpoint, by ‘comic poets’ and ‘reckless orators’.⁷¹ Comedy’s brutal honesty and production of political humour ‘has the ability, and is courageous enough, to oppose the *demos*’.⁷² Comedy’s opposition to populist opinion through the production of laughter truly sustains democracy. Therefore, one could suggest that ‘it is *by* insulting the *demos* that [Aristophanes] has done them good’.⁷³

Thus, comedy is the ‘censorship’ of the demos that speaks the critical voice, quieters down the ‘idle talk’ of the popular consensus, and ridicules the demagogues. Comedy here is a form of *critique* that must be read not as a rejection of politics but as a process of *estrangement* of the everyday, which reawakens the best conception of the polis. Far from a rejection, the production of laughter enables the comic poet to ridicule and criticise dominant institutions and their abuse by leaders and citizens alike in a pre-agreed forum. Therefore, the critique of democracy is not abstract, but embedded; the comic medium provokes laughter about *this* particular democratic context and with an eye towards its improvement.

Let us consider, for example, the function of critique with a scene after Eirene’s liberation. The unearthing of the goddess from War’s dungeon evolves unexpectedly: as soon as Eirene is ‘rescued’, she fails to offer praise and thanks to her saviours and surprisingly engages only in critique. The celebratory aspect of the play is delayed and in its place occurs a critical exchange between the goddess and the citizens, whose warmongering had brought about her exile. Once Hermes explains the reasons for her absence, Trygeaus addresses the goddess and asks why she is so silent. Hermes replies in her place, wondering how she could address the spectators: ‘[a]h, she won’t say anything in front of *this* audience; she’s still very angry with them about the treatment she got’ (658-659). Trygeaus, then, suggests that perhaps she would consent to speak to Hermes himself, as she is withholding speech towards the audience. Peace whispers in Hermes’ ear and he relates that after the events at Pylos she ‘came to you of her own accord, offering the city a basketful of treaties, and was voted down three time in the Assembly’ (665-668). Trygeaus admits all blame and begs her forgiveness, because the Athenians’ mind ‘was entirely absorbed in leather’ (669-670). She asks for a clarification only to have Aristophanes pronounce more directly the blame that he had throughout the campaigns attributed to Cleon, Athens’ last ruler. As to her question of who rules at present, the answer is *Hyperbolus*, an answer that makes Peace turn her head away in disgust. Hermes confers that ‘she is cross at them for choosing such a

69. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 83.

70. See the discussion of the anonymous perspective of ‘everyone’ and also the examination of ‘chatter’ or ‘idle talk’, in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), §27 and §35.

71. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 82.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Heath, *Political Comedy in Aristophanes*, 21.

sleazy champion' (683-684). Trygaeus apologises, claiming that there were few good men to choose from: 'the people seeing themselves without a leader, took him haphazard, just as a man, who is naked, springs upon the first cloak he sees' (685-687). But he is confident that the city will be 'more far-seeing in consequence' of this selection because 'he is a lamp-maker. So, whereas previously we groped in the dark at our problems, now we'll be planning everything by lamplight' (688-690).

By ridiculing the choice of an actual lamp-maker in a pun about Athenian blindness towards *good* leaders, comedy makes the critique easy to bear and opens up the space in which it might be later articulated in directly political ways. Aristophanic comedy allows the citizens, who as a collectivity are at the centre of comedy's 'corporate abuse', to begin to reflect on themselves critically and to encounter different possibilities.⁷⁴ Indeed, the recovery of possibility is an integral part of the process of rendering strange everyday practices, which comedy initiates.

Therefore, the task of comedy is not only to encourage self-improvement but also to bring about an awareness of the limits of democracy. In other words, comedy does not demand that the everyday be transcended, but rather that it be taken up anew. Simon Critchley argues, in this regard, that

the extraordinary thing about comedy is that it returns us to the very ordinariness of the ordinary, it returns us to the familiar by making it fantastic. Comedy might be said to provide us with an oblique phenomenology of the ordinary...Comedy is a paradoxical form of speech and action that lights up the everyday: estranged, indigent, distorted.⁷⁵

The critique of the popular view and the everyday life of the polis is balanced, however, with the utterance of this critique through the comic medium as a particular narrative form. Thus, the estrangement of the everyday brought about by comedy is mirrored by the community-creating function of laughter: 'the sardonic laughter that resounds within the ribs of the person moved by what they find funny can be a site of resistance'; such a resort to laughter, furthermore, 'lights up the comic feebleness of our embodiment'.⁷⁶ Laughter, therefore, 'in its solidaristic dimension has an ethical function insofar as the simple sharing of a joke recalls to us what is *shared* in our life-world practices'; in this regard, '[o]ne might begin to speak here of laughter as a minimal form of *sensus communis*'.⁷⁷ Thus, the production of laughter initiates a process of recovery of the citizens' best selves and their best understanding of themselves as a *demos*. The comic poet's function is to achieve a balancing act between 'criticisms of Athens' conduct in the war, of

74. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 333ff. See also, Louiza Odysseos, 'Radical Phenomenology, Ontology and International Political Theory', *Alternatives* 27, no. 2 (2002 forthcoming).

75. Critchley, 'Comedy and Finitude', 235-36.

76. *Ibid.*, 235.

77. *Ibid.*

her attitudes to peace negotiations and of her treatment of her allies, with a staging, which gives Athens as the city where Peace is actually situated', as a statue.⁷⁸

The Limits of Discourse

Finally, comedy's central political function in making apparent the limits of rational discourse is closely related to the above discussion. Eirene's striking refusal to address her saviours or to celebrate her own rescue, points to comedy's awareness of the limits of discourse. It is significant that upon her recovery, Eirene speaks only to Hermes, who acts as an interpreter, a godly *herme-neutist*. Of course, it is widely thought that the very term hermeneutics 'is related to the name of the god Hermes, the messenger of the gods'.⁷⁹ The comic poet, however, by conceiving the play and setting of the critique through his oblique or absurd references has the power of interpretation: to recall Plato, 'the poets are but the heralds of the Gods'.⁸⁰ Comedy, with its riddles and focus on the often absurd shenanigans of the actors, is a primary instance of the 'emergence of the "hermeneutical" problem that something *distant* has to be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome'.⁸¹

Furthermore, Eirene herself is neither spoken of nor directly praised once her installation in the city is underway: she appears only as a statue and the muses and Graces are thanked in her place. Once brought to preside over the city subsequent to her 'rescue', she does not speak at all: after her godly utterings to Hermes, she silently surveys the celebration in the form of a statue, her countenance indiscernible. When Eirene is mute and statuesque, the role of peace in the city is purely on the symbolic level. What exists is religious festivity, bodily enjoyment and a return to the highly contested, rhetorically-driven politics of the city. No new order is established that would banish *doxa* (opinion) from rational politics.⁸² Rather, Peace does not speak; there is merely a return to incessant political contest as to who should speak for and what to say on behalf of peace.

Finally, the muted peace is denied a content but remains to be determined within political discourse. While celebrated as a goddess and receiving sacrifice, peace remains infinitely undetermined in terms of a *logos*. This indeterminacy, however, is not indicative of a *lack* of discourse. It is, rather, an understanding of peace as 'bounded' and the silence of Peace, the goddess, betrays that the term can only be located and determined within political contest. While it may appear that this prohibits peace from being a transformative force, it also recognises that discourse is bounded within the community and its specific socio-political practices. In

78. Bowie, *Aristophanes*, 149.

79. Martin Heidegger, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 6.

80. Plato, *Ion*, line 534e.

81. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 22.

82. For a discussion of 'doxa' see April Flakne, "'No Longer and Not Yet": From *Doxa* to Judgment', *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 21, no. 2 (1999): 153-75.

Aristophanes' comic narrative there occurs a fundamental relegation of the term 'peace' to continuous political reconfiguration, and this weds it inextricably to 'democracy'. The two, intertwined, 'must have the structure of a promise; *'and thus the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now'*'.⁸³ Taken as a promise, as a deferral of definition and completion, the terms resist their essentialisation in the comic narrative and become decidable only within the historical constellation in which they are politically configured.

Contrary to the rational narratives of the democratic peace, which reduce them to salient categories, 'peace' and 'democracy' can only be thought of as radically undecidable. As such, they can be sensitive to particular contexts and local debates about what 'they' might come to mean. In this sense, the role of comedy highlights the limits of rational discourse, its generalisable claims about politics and its essentialisation of categories across time and place. Comedy as a radically embedded form of narrative is modest about the claims of its political functions: its exercise of critique is always internal to the city and it is dialogically constituted with the community from which it emerges. Moreover, it allows critical reflection to render the commonplace strange without the external imposition of unreflective categories.

Conclusion: The Challenge of the Comic Narrative

In Attic comedy, rational deliberation and humour vie with each other for political pre-eminence. Comedy's location in historically specific ritual practices, whose full meaning is difficult to establish in the present, prohibits the reduction of its content and form solely to the expression of instrumentalist political intent.⁸⁴ While the questioning of politics, 'making hay mercilessly with the faults of...democracy', lies amongst the chief preoccupations of comedy, there are other significant concerns of the comic form which accompany its political functions.⁸⁵ In addition to the comic poet's political intentions, 'it was comedy's job to make fun of the city, for a variety of reasons such as entertainment through extreme behaviour, control through mockery, avoiding divine envy at the splendour of the city's self-presentation, examining problems in a less sombre manner than tragedy...'⁸⁶ The potentially subversive function of Aristophanes' comic discourse, then, must be supplemented with other potential functions that it serves, not only in the sense of authorial intent but also in terms of audience receptions and result.

Comedy, then, *is* political but it is also much more.⁸⁷ Not only does its explicit political intent render it subversive, but also its internal structure as a narrative

83. Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 78.

84. Bowie's, *Aristophanes*, for example, provides the ritual and mythic background to each of the extant and complete plays.

85. *Ibid.*, 293.

86. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

87. In Bakhtin's language the 'carnavalesque', related as it is to the comic, is considered as a subversively open textual practice. Such a role, however, is not to be understood as 'exterior,

form supplements rational deliberation and reveals the importance of making use of the full spectrum of the human register in political and moral considerations. In this vein, Bowie argues that ‘comedy has its masks, flutes, half-human beings and the wine of the festival, whose Dionysiac combination serves to shake the viewer out of his normal condition, in order to let him see himself as he does not normally see himself’.⁸⁸ This additional consideration might be called the phenomenological function of the comic narrative, whereby it ‘lets something be seen (*phainesthai*)’.⁸⁹ in a ‘fundamental uncovering or unconcealing of entities’.⁹⁰ Therefore, comedy provides a moment of liberty through its suspension ‘of the many restraints normally in force...making lavish use of obscenity, pillorying the prominent, bringing on-stage things and people normally repressed’.⁹¹ Normality is never fully revoked, rather it is recreated in a richer and more inclusive manner through the illustration of the possibilities of the absurd.

The comic narrative and performance point to a hesitation to absolutely ground ‘the ideals of progress, autonomy and justice in rationality’.⁹² Taken as a practice fully embedded in the wider ritual and mythic content of a historically specific way of life, comedy serves both a subversive political function against the prevalence of the rational but also performs a heuristic function, indicating the pitfalls of the tyranny of the rational and highlighting the necessity of laughter. The mockery of reason, the success of the irrational, the achievement of the seemingly impossible, which is most obvious in *Peace* than in any of the other surviving plays, suggest that the comic is a perspective which is valid for human understanding, for the practice of critique and reconstitution of the possibilities of the everyday.

Aristophanic comedy as a genre in particular, allows a return to ‘the problem of drama as political education...before a change in thinking that relegated art to the private realm’.⁹³ In a number of plays such as *Acharnians* and *Peace*, ‘the hero is a “little man” who conceives a “big idea” to transform (almost) single-handed some global situation that he finds intolerable’. The emphasis on the mundane life of the hero is crucial for the effectiveness of the play because such a plain beginning counterbalances ‘the surrealist fantasy, inconsequentiality and suspension of normal causality’ which are the chief distinctions of the genre.⁹⁴ The big role of the little man, not only highlights the ability of everyone to act as a reformer, but also makes doubtful the accepted notion that it is the ability to *reason* that constitutes the most successful political attribute. Therefore, beyond the immediately didactic, comedy can participate in the search for the site from which the

mechanical method of defence against censorship’ but, as Bakhtin himself cautions, as ‘the inner content of these images’. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 269.

88. Bowie, *Aristophanes*, 17.

89. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 56.

90. Stephen Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time* (London: Routledge, 1996), 24.

91. Bowie, *Aristophanes*, 16.

92. Bauer, *Adorno's Nietzschean Narratives*, 25.

93. Nichols, *Aristophanes' Novel Forms*, 18.

94. All quotes in Paul Cartledge, *Aristophanes and His Theatre of the Absurd*, Fourth Edition, (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1999), 19.

hegemony of the rational can be questioned. As Nietzsche sought to show in this respect, the gravity of thought must be disturbed if the closure of thinking is to be avoided. It is befitting, therefore, to end with a quote from him:

You ought to learn the art of this-worldly comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends...Then perhaps, as laughers, you may some day dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil—metaphysics in front.⁹⁵

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95. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 26.