

PLUTUS

by Aristophanes

Before examining "Plutus," a comedy dealing with the unjust distribution of wealth, let's take a look at its author.

We don't know much about Aristophanes, considered by many scholars to be the theater's finest author of comedies. He was born around 445 B.C.E. into a wealthy family, the son of Philippus. His family probably belonged to the class of Athenians known as "Knights," "the prosperous, generally conservative stratum of society between the rich aristocracy and the peasants and urban proletariat." In other words, rather like our own well-off professionals.

Something of his life may be gleaned from his plays. We know that he was bald, that his family had an interest in the island of Aegina, that he never staged his own plays, preferring to hand them over to a producer/director, and that he had a lifelong dislike for an Athenian leader named Kleon, whom he attacked in many of his plays.

His outlook is generally aristocratic, in opposition to the new democratic structure of his city-state. In all of his extant plays, there are direct or indirect references to the tragedies of Euripides. He makes fun of them, but seems to be drawn to some of the ideas expressed in them. So much so that the comic poet Cratinus coined a word to express the phenomenon: "Euripidaristophanization."

His comedies are a fascinating blend of lyricism, satire, and obscenity. It's not often that his plays are presented as written; many of them would cause a scandal if not abridged or censored.

Eleven of his fifty-plus comedies survive, all of them touching on events and ideas prevalent in Athens during his lifetime. Although he satirized Socrates in "The Clouds," he may very well have been involved with the intellectuals who were part of that philosophic circle. He figures in Plato's Symposium, in which he and Socrates out-drink all the other guests, ending the night-long party in conversation.

Scholars divide classical comedy into three periods: Old, Middle, and New. Most of Aristophanes' plays are classified as "Old Comedy." No other author's work from this period survives. Athenian comedies were written for performance and few were preserved.

Aristophanes won more first prizes than any other comic poet. He died shortly after the production of Plutus, somewhere around 385 B.C.E. He was survived by three sons - Philippos, Araros, and Nikostratos - all of whom followed in his profession.

Most of Aristophanes' comedies dealt with the ongoing (and ultimately, losing) war with Sparta. He ridicules Athenian generals and conjures up outlandish means of obtaining peace.

After Athens lost the war in 404 B.C.E., Aristophanes' plays lost some of their bite. He began to write comedies which deal, not so much with politics, as with the human condition. These include "Ecclesiazusae" (a satire in which the poet imagines that women have taken over the government and "Plutus."

Plutus

"Plutus" is strikingly different from all which preceded it. Some commentators consider it an example of a new genre, Middle Comedy, of which it is the only example. It was to be followed by New Comedy, exemplified by the humorous, romantic writing of Meander. Again, we have only one example of New Comedy, "The Diskolos," although fragments of others are being turned up in Egyptian cemeteries (Papyrus scrolls were used for wrapping mummies of ordinary citizens).

In "Plutus," Aristophanes does not attack an individual or specific situation, but rather offers a travesty of myth which can be widely understood. His premise is that good men are afflicted with poverty because Plutus (Wealth) is blind.

When his blindness is miraculously cured, the improvement this brings about obviously will be quickly undercut by human greed and ambition.

Because of its easily understood theme and action, "Plutus" was one of Aristophanes' most widely read plays.

Instead of written choral interludes between scenes, the text simply indicates a place for them. It shares this characteristic with New Comedy and may mark the beginning of such a tradition.

The Plot

The blind god Plutus is groping his way along an Athenian street, followed by Chremylus and his slave, Cario. When Cario asks why they are trailing this apparent beggar, his master informs him that the Oracle at Delphi told him to follow the first man he met if he wished to be wealthy.

When they finally accost Plutus, they learn his identity. Plutus pleads to be let go, claiming that, once men know who he is, they imprison him. Chremylus swears that he is not that sort of fellow and to prove it, he will find a means of curing the god's blindness so that he can give his wealth to deserving men.

A chorus of poor, but deserving men enter, excited by the prospect of finally receiving their just rewards in life. A shady character, Blepsidemus, discovers that Chremylus is newly rich and plots to be cut in on his friend's good fortune. He bids farewell to Lady Poverty, who is distressed to learn that she will be losing the company of honest men and will soon be served by formerly-rich scoundrels. In the Genesis Guild version, she sings of her unhappiness:

A goddess is usually golden;
A goddess is oftentimes rich
But I am attired in tatters;
Immortality can be a bitch
Philosophers pray to Athena;
Aphrodite attracts the love-sick
The circle of my admirers
Is bankrupt and derelict.
If you aspire to Olympus,
If you'd like to reside in the air;
Just remember to get it in writing
Or they'll stick you with folks on welfare.

At this point, the guild's version of the plot wanders off into a series of plots by various suspect persons and groups, out to secure the blessings of wealth by any means. These are portrayed in a variety of songs and routines of a vaudevillian nature.

As an example, here is a brief sketch that appears in the script when various unsavory types are making a pitch for money from Plutus. This one is a thinly-disguised Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense at the time.

The concluding song is to the tune of "My Way."

Crummy: Plutus, in the name of Athens' quest for world domination, I request a major grant for our Operation "Enduring Oil."

Plutus: You expect me to invest in war?

Crummy: Wel-I-I, that's your word. We don't think of it as war; more like
a very emphatic way to make people real peaceful.

Plutus: How much will it cost?

Crummy: Sorry. That's classified information.

Plutus: Classified? How will I know how much to give?

Crummy: I'll let you know later. We don't want the enemy to find out how much he's worth.

Plutus: Who is the enemy?

Crummy: We're working on that. Got a lot of options. My personal favorite is France.

Plutus: But war is a waste of money. How can you justify such an outrageous request for spilling blood?

Crummy: Well, it's not my blood. Besides, I have a radical, new approach to mankind's favorite sport.

And now, the press is here
And so I face a lot of questions.
Well, folks I'll say it clear:
My kind of war is not aggression.
I don't use many troops
I much prefer to use the flyway
With lots of planes and bombs
I do it my way.

Regrets? Don't make me laugh.
Just stop and use your senses.
I do what I want to do
And never count the consequences.
I plan a simple war
And get it done by Friday.
I never raise a sweat;
I do it my way.

Yes, there were times you'd criticize
And try to cut me down to size.
And when you caught me in a lie
I quickly blamed some other guy
But FOX TV came to my aid
And told it my way.

I know you all suspect
That there are marbles I am losing.
To think I could be wrong
Is really quite amusing.

Just see what I have done
And I may say, not in a shy way.
I'll conquer all the world
And do it my way.

I never had to fight a war;
I got exemptions by the score.
But, safe at home, I long to fight
With mobile armies, extra-lite.
The record shows
I dodged the blows
And did it my way.

Yes. It was my way.

At the play's conclusion, Plutus learns that, even with his sight restored and despite his determination to reward only the honest, his wealth will ultimately wind up in the hands of the unscrupulous.

In the Genesis Guild version, Plutus is presented with a medical bill for curing his blindness, one which will cost all the wealth he owns. Everyone on stage leaps into the air and goes into a "Mack Sennett" chase, the guild's customary close for Aristophanic comedy.

Aristophanes' surviving comedies:

The Acharnians
The Birds
The Clouds
Ecclesiazusae
The Frogs
The Knights
Lysistrata
Peace
Plutus
Thesmophoriazusae
The Wasps