

Virginia Woolf and Aristophanes

Virginia Woolf's complex and continuous engagement with Greek tragedy over the course of her writings, especially Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Electra*, has been well documented by both modernist and classical scholars (Marcus 1977; Fowler 1999; Dalgarno 2001; Prins 2017; Worman 2019; McClure 2025). Much less attention has been paid to her interest in the plays of Aristophanes, which she read alongside Greek tragedy during two key moments in her literary development, at the beginning of her Greek studies and in preparation for her essay, "On Not Knowing Greek" (1925). This paper explores the ways Woolf encountered Aristophanes, from reading the *Frogs* in the original to productions in the theater, as recounted in her letters and diaries. It then demonstrates how she adapted the animal choruses of comedy to structure and lyricize her modernist fiction.

Woolf first became acquainted with Aristophanes when she attended the Cambridge production of the *Birds* performed in Greek in 1903 (*L* 1.107). The following summer she suffered an acute mental breakdown during which she heard birds "singing Greek choruses" in the azalea bushes outside her windows, no doubt inspired by the Cambridge play (*MOB* 136, 162). By 1909, she was reading the Greek text of Aristophanes' *Frogs* independently, using Bickley Rogers' edition (1902), among other classical texts, as indicated by the reading notes in her "Greek Notebook" (Koulouris 2019: 14 n. 26). She perceived in the play "an immense vitality—ideas springing up, on all sides—some beauty in the choruses—& a rude, boisterous kind of joking" (GN74, Koulouris 2019: 69). The notebook also contains a summary of Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, a text to which she returned in 1920 (*L* 2.446). She attended and reviewed a production of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* at the Little Theatre in London in 1910, describing it as "interesting, and amusing, and irritating" (McNeillie 1986: 87). By early 1924, among the texts she consulted in preparation for "On Not Knowing Greek" was Aristophanes' *Birds*, probably in translation (*D* 2.292).

Woolf believed that the novel evolved from Greek drama and that retaining the chorus was essential to structuring modernist fiction, “Always in imaginative literature, where characters speak for themselves and the author has no part, the need of that voice is making itself felt” (*CR* 1.46). Although she certainly had the tragic chorus in mind, the boisterous, nonsense sounds of Aristophanes’ animal choruses also influenced this view, from the noisy song of frogs, *Brekekekex koax koax* (*Ar. Ran.* 209-10), to the chattering of birds, *Torotorotorotorotix/kikkabau kikkabau* (*Ar. Av.* 260-61). Indeed, bird cries permeate many of Woolf’s novels. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1923), Septimus Smith, traumatized by the war, hallucinates that he hears sparrows singing “in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words” (*MD* 26). In *The Waves* (1931), Woolf’s most experimental and fully choral novel, italicized choral interludes featuring bird cries over the course of a single day, from dusk to dawn, separate the chapters and mark the passage of time. Woolf’s final novel, *The Years* (1937), similarly brims with the sounds of birds: the discordant chatter and fluttering of sparrows (*TY* 3, 89, 219, 237, 347); the call and response of nightingales (*TY* 56, 134); and the liquid cry of the owl (*TY* 212). The novel culminates with a chorus of children who deliver a dissonant and vaguely Greek-sounding song, “There was something horrible in the noise they made. It was so shrill, so discordant, so meaningless” (*TY* 430). Rather than communicating meaning, however, their song ruptures it, confronting the listeners with the limits of language, with the impersonal and unintelligible sounds of childhood and nature. As a structuring device, the chorus as reimagined by Woolf conveys the fragmentation, uncertainty, and tragedy of modernity, yet it also offers the solace of comedy, in the form of the cyclical movement of time and the omnipresent, life-affirming refrain of birds, “Take two coos, Taffy, take two coos,” crooning in the summer dawn (*TY* 433).

Works Cited

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