

Aristophanes's Openings as Cold Opens

A fair amount of recent scholarship on Aristophanes has focused on humor, jokes, and parody (e.g., Ruffell 2011, Farmer 2017, Jendza 2020, Swallow and Hall 2020, Scott 2024). This paper presents a new way of explaining how an Aristophanic comedy's *humor* interfaces with its *structure*. In this paper, I suggest that Aristophanes frequently employs a comic technique familiar from modern sitcoms (*Parks and Recreation*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*)—the cold open. The nature of the cold open, I submit, leads Aristophanes to employ different kinds of humor in his openings than later in his comedies.

A cold open is a narrative technique in which a television show jumps straight into the storyline before the opening title sequence or theme song. (Traditionally, the order of these was reversed.) The goal of a cold open in comedies is to immediately grab the audience's interest and make them laugh. Cold opens offer a particular challenge for making comedy—by definition, the audience is coming in cold, without any context. Therefore, cold opens need to use (1) humor that doesn't require context—e.g., stereotype, obscenity, sexuality, puns, silly costumes, physical comedy—or (2) humor whose context the audience already has through basic cultural knowledge—e.g., pop culture references or parodies of clearly-identifiable targets such as politicians or celebrities. Given the goal to make the audience immediately laugh without needing to provide context, many cold opens, especially in sitcoms, are narratively disconnected from the main storyline of the episode (example: the “I Want It That Way” cold open of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (S5E17) where Jake Peralta gets the criminal lineup in the police station to harmonize to a popular Backstreet Boys song). So, comic cold opens tend to have three features: (1) they

precede a hard break; (2) they are intended to get an immediate laugh; and (3) they are often narratively disconnected from the rest of the plot.

I submit that we should consider many Aristophanic openings to be cold opens. Even though Aristophanic comedies do not have an opening title sequence, there is often a functional equivalent—a hard break after which the cold open ceases and the main storyline commences. In *Wasps* (422 BCE), lines 1–53 are the cold open, and in line 54, Xanthias says, “All right then, it’s time I let the audience in on the plot.” He goes on to metatheatrically explain the sort of plot to expect (nothing terribly grand, nor jokes swiped from Megara, just “a simple plot with a point”), and he soon reveals that the plot will concern Philocleon being addicted to jury duty. While this plotline is unique, back in the cold open, the humor is highly stereotypical (two slaves complaining about their master and falling asleep; silly symbolic dreams) and full of puns (*aspis* “shield, asp”, 17; *dēmos* “people” ~ *dēmós* “fat”, 39–40) and obvious parodies of famous politicians (Cleonymus, Cleon, Theorus, and Alcibiades). In *Peace* (421 BCE), lines 1–49 are the cold open, and line 50 moves on to the main storyline (“and I’m going to explain the plot”). The humor in *Peace*’s cold open is also stereotypical and obscene (two slaves kneading dung cakes to feed to the dung beetle) and it includes a basic setup and punchline joke (what divinity is it from? not Aphrodite, nor the Graces, but “Zeus of the Thunder Crap”, 42) that pivots to an attack on the now-dead politician Cleon (“Cleon shamelessly eats loose shit”, 48). By the time of *Frogs* (405 BCE), this trend of cold opens, I argue, had gone on long enough to have become customary. Xanthias begins with “Shall I make one of the usual cracks, master, that the audience always laugh at?” (1–2), and I argue here that Aristophanes is commenting not just on the presence of easy, low-brow humor in comedy, but on the tendency for comedians—himself included—to use such stereotypical, obscene, no-context-required humor in their *openings*. Even though

Aristophanes decries such comic triteness, he still makes Xanthias shift his baggage around, Dionysus wear a silly Heracles disguise, and both discuss farting, shitting, and puking. Even if all the comedians are doing it, Aristophanes still needs to get the audience involved and make them laugh, and there's no better way to do it than the cold open.

References

Farmer, M. 2017. *Tragedy on the Comic Stage*. Oxford.

Jendza, C. 2020. *Paracomedy: Appropriations of Comedy in Greek Tragedy*. Oxford.

Ruffell, I.A. 2011. *Politics and Anti-Realism in Athenian Old Comedy*. Oxford.

Scott, N. 2024. *Jokes in Greek Comedy: From Puns to Poetics*. Bloomsbury.

Swallow, P. and E. Hall (eds.). 2020. *Aristophanic Humour: Theory and Practice*. Bloomsbury.