

Good Doctor, Bad Doctor: Aristophanes as a Comic Healer

In the parabasis of Aristophanes' *Wasps* (lines 1037-47) the chorus describes the effect of Aristophanes' comedy on the city: he "turned his hands to the chills and fevers which strangled your fathers by night and choked your grandfathers." In the same passage he is also called a "purifier to keep ill away from this land." This is one of several episodes in which Aristophanes formulates a medical persona for himself. In this paper I will ask how Aristophanes presents himself as a doctor, and to what effect, by examining passages from *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, and the fragmentary *Heroes* alongside selections from the Hippocratic corpus. In the Hippocratic corpus I will look at the kind of language 'genuine' doctors use to describe the role of a medical professional, especially when contrasted with the behavior of rival practitioners referred to in the Hippocratic corpus as "magicians and purifiers and beggar priests and imposters, all those who pretend to be excessively pious and to know more than they do" (*On the Sacred Disease*, 1.4). From this I will conclude that Aristophanes presents himself not as a doctor trying to cure the city, but as an imposter who seeks to benefit only himself with no real intention of treating the city's maladies.

Throughout I will develop and add nuance to an argument made by Jacques Jouanna (1999) in which he examines metaphorical uses of medical language in the realms of literary criticism and politics. He concludes that, although Aristophanes presents himself as a healer of literary and political diseases, his medical model is closer to the purifiers mocked by Hippocrates in *On the Sacred Disease* than to Hippocrates himself. The problem with this argument is that Jouanna is operating under the assumption that Aristophanes' self-presentation as a medical figure makes a serious claim to cure the city. Much other scholarship on medical language in Aristophanes (e.g. Gil and Rodriguez Alfageme 1972; Rodriguez Alfageme 1995; Willi 2003,

51-95; Byl 2006) also makes this assumption because it is interested in the medical or linguistic angle rather than comic poetics. But even literary treatments, such as Telò's recent monograph *Aristophanes and the Cloak of Comedy* (2016, 86-7), maintain that in *Wasps* Aristophanes presents his comedy as a remedy to act against the comedy of his rivals which has corrupted the audience.

Gil and Rodriguez Alfageme and Jouanna all argue that Dicaeopolis (a character Aristophanes asks his audience to consider as a version of himself) is presented as a kind of doctor at the end of the *Acharnians* where his private peace is described as a healing salve (line 1029). I will argue, however, that Dicaeopolis does not use the salve to cure anyone of anything except where it benefits the program of comedy. This stands in direct contrast to the instructions of the Hippocratic corpus which urge doctors to help whenever and however they can (e.g. *Epidemics* 1.11; *Precepts* 6). In *Acharnians* Dicaeopolis is presented as a selfish doctor who is able to cure but chooses not to. In *Wasps* Aristophanes goes further and presents himself as a failed doctor. A key strategy in the medical rhetoric of the Hippocratic texts and those of the Asclepian sanctuaries is proof of efficacy. But, as Rosen has shown in a forthcoming article, this is not always easy, and thus the strategy becomes proving the inefficacy of one's rivals. In *Wasps*, however, Aristophanes tells us that "to cure the ancient sickness, ingrained in the city is a difficult task for an awesome intelligence beyond the scope of comedy" (lines 650-1).

This re-evaluation of medical language in Aristophanes contributes to the ongoing debates about the 'purpose' of Aristophanic comedy. If Aristophanes does not use the medical metaphor seriously, what exactly is he doing?

Bibliography

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