

From *Il Ritratto* to *Blazing Saddles*: Renaissance and Modern Echoes of Ancient Comic  
Metatheater

In *The Early Bird Dood [sic] It!*, Tex Avery's 1942 animated short, the titular bird and the worm he's chasing see a poster advertising the very cartoon they're in. The bird says, "I hear hear [sic] that's a pretty funny cartoon." To which the worm replies, "Well I hope it's funnier than this one!" This moment demonstrates well the distinction between what the bird knows (that cartoons exist—itsself an explicit metatheatrical reference) and what the worm does (that he and the bird are in fact characters within a cartoon and that it's called *The Early Bird Dood It!*—a clear sign of the bird's more strongly metatheatrical self-awareness). Furthermore, that difference in self-awareness and the resulting difference in metatheatrical language is clearly mapped onto a power differential between the predatory Early Bird and his annelid prey.

Avery's animated short recapitulates the same patterns of metatheatrical language seen in ancient Greek and Roman comedy, wherein low-status characters employ metatheatrical commentary (and more overtly metatheatrical commentary at that) with greater frequency than do characters with higher status (reference removed for anonymity's sake). This dynamic, a remnant of Greco-Roman comedy's concern with power and status (derived from the Classical and Hellenistic Athens and Republican Rome's overall societal concern with status), also appears in the descendants of Greco-Roman comedy from Italian *commedia erudita* and *commedia dell'arte* (e.g. Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena's *La Calandra* and Flaminio Scala's scenario for *Il Ritratto*, respectively) through English Tudor comedy (e.g., Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrez*), and into modern radio, film, and television comedies (e.g., NBC's radio

comedy *Fibber McGee and Molly*, *The Early Bird Dood It!*, Mel Brooks' film *Blazing Saddles*, and the recent NBC sitcom *Community*).

This paper briefly presents the pattern of low-status metatheatrical commentary in four representative comedies from the four comic poets whose work has survived intact until the modern day: Aristophanes' *Peace*, Menander's *Epitrepontes*, Plautus' *Pseudolus*, and Terence's *Andria*. I then demonstrate parallel material from two widely differing eras in the reception of Greek and Roman Comedy, specifically focusing on Flaminio Scala's 1611 scenario for the *commedia dell'arte* entitled *Il Ritratto (The Portrait)* and on *Blazing Saddles*, Mel Brooks' 1974 parody of the Western film genre. Attention to the patterns of metatheatrical language in post-classical comedies from multiple eras, cultures, and genres thus reveals that comedy operates the same way throughout the centuries. Such consistency also suggests that—no matter the time or the genre—comedy performs similar work for its society, using such metatheater to render the low-status characters more appealing to the audience.