

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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## On the *Acharnians*

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*The Acharnians* is the earliest extant play of Aristophanes, only the names of his two previous works being known to us.<sup>1</sup> Aristophanes presented our play early in 425 BCE at the Athenian religious-dramatic festival called the Lenaea, as distinguished from the principal other such festival, the City Dionysia—a fact to which Aristophanes draws our attention in the course of the play itself (498–506 and 513). As for the date of the play’s performance, by 425 the Peloponnesian War was in its sixth year, as is noted by the lead character of the *Acharnians*, Dicaeopolis (890). And this fact is related to what we may call the obvious message of the play: Athens and Sparta should negotiate an end to the war now. Not only was the war started over what amount to trivialities, even allowing for comedic exaggeration or invention (513–39); but the war has also become a heavy burden on a great many Athenians and especially on those salt-of-the-earth rural folk who have had to give up so much in the name of Pericles’s war policy. For Pericles had decreed that the rural population should leave their homes and ancestral lands and come to live in the urban center of Athens, safely behind its all-important walls. They would thus abandon their crops to the depredations of the Spartans, but for so long as Athens controlled the seas with its dominant navy, the city could use the greater world as its supply house. Let the Spartans exhaust themselves by destroying the Athenians’

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<sup>1</sup> The two earlier plays are *Banqueters* and *Babylonians*. A catalog of Aristophanes’s plays (in alphabetical order) was found in a fourteenth-century manuscript and published by F. Novati: “Index fabularum Aristophanis ex codice Abrosiano L 39,” *Hermes* 14, no. 3 (1879): 461–65; see also Victor Coulon, introduction to *Aristophane*, vol. 1, ed. Victor Coulon and Hilaire van Daele (Paris: Les Belles Lettres/Budé, 1995), v. Translations throughout are my own and are based on the Greek text of this edition.

fields; they will gain no military advantage thereby. Yet, as Thucydides indicates so powerfully, Pericles's strategic policy brought great personal hardships to the rural Athenians.<sup>2</sup> The obvious message of the *Acharnians*, to say it again, is that peace is to be much preferred to war. War destroys life and with it all the very great goods, the delights, that life makes possible (consider 357)—a contention that Dicaeopolis demonstrates throughout with all the empirical evidence one could possibly wish for.

Now if it was Aristophanes's intention to encourage peace or even to bring peace about, by enticing his audience with a display of peacetime joys, it has to be said that he failed to realize that intention; the war was to grind on for some twenty-one more years. And this despite the fact that the play, awarded first prize among the comedies in competition, must be judged to have been a smashing success. What is a comic poet, who is also an advocate of peace, to do? Dicaeopolis, for his part, is disgusted by the war and hurt by it, for he is an old man (398, 1129–30, 1228) from the country and as such knows firsthand the hardships of Pericles's policy (71–72). As the play opens, he is alone in the Athenian democratic Assembly, waiting more or less idly for the presiding officers and his fellow citizens to arrive, late again as they always are. When his attempt to debate the case for peace by proper democratic means fails miserably, Dicaeopolis resorts to a most remarkable stratagem—a fantastical or miraculous and hence comedic one: he enlists a certain immortal, Amphitheus by name, to negotiate a private peace with Sparta for his sake, as well as for his spouse and children (132). And Dicaeopolis's quest for a private peace issues in success as swiftly as his attempt to bring about a political peace had issued in failure. The household of Dicaeopolis, then, and only it, is soon at peace with Sparta and her allies; it is a little pocket of calm in the greater maelstrom of the war.

There is a name for a lone citizen in wartime who brings about such a private peace with the enemy: traitor. We cannot be surprised, then, that Dicaeopolis is labeled just that early on in the play, by the chorus as it happens: "traitor to the fatherland" (290). The title of the play identifies the members of that chorus. They are men who hail from the rural Athenian deme or district of Acharnae, which is at once the largest of the demes<sup>3</sup> and most remote from Athens proper. But the Acharnians constituting the chorus are also very elderly ("ancient": 676) veterans of the Persian Wars; they are the storied and

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians* 2.13–14, 16–17.

<sup>3</sup> Thuc. 2.19.

justly honored men who fought at Marathon (181 and context; 696–97). These citizens, among the “greatest generation” of Athenians, are deeply conservative, patriotic, and—their age be damned—fiery still, if more in spirit, alas, than the flesh.<sup>4</sup> So great is their anger at Dicaeopolis, once they identify him as the traitor they seek, that they come very close indeed to stoning him. Such violence being impossible in comedy, it must be averted. It is averted in the event because Dicaeopolis proves to be an extraordinarily able speaker who brings all his skill to bear on his predicament.

Now Dicaeopolis’s attainment of his peace is much less impressive than is his defense of it—the peace is a done deal by line 178—for, to repeat, he parries the Acharnians’ charge of treason that would seem to have much going for it. We must ask, then, how Dicaeopolis manages that feat and so proves to the satisfaction of the entire Chorus that he is no traitor (1–718). Further, we will have to consider what use Dicaeopolis then makes of his peace, in what constitutes the second half of the play (719–end). And what, finally, would Aristophanes in his wisdom<sup>5</sup> have us learn from the play—apart, of course, from a still greater appreciation for the pleasures afforded by peace?

The two latter questions, of Dicaeopolis’s use of his peace and of Aristophanes’s intention, are more closely related than they might seem. For early on our hero says this:

And as for me, I myself know what I suffered at the hands of Cleon  
 On account of my comedy last year.  
 For dragging me into the courtroom,  
 He kept slandering me and slobbering his lies all over me  
 And matched the din of the Cycloborus [river] and drenched me, such  
 that I very nearly  
 Perished, mixed up in his nasty business. (377–82)

To say the least, we are surprised to learn that the young and urbane comic poet Aristophanes has thus donned the persona of “Dicaeopolis,” an old farmer from rural Athens. Accordingly, in watching and listening to Dicaeopolis as he defends and then uses his private peace, we are attending also to the deeds and words of Aristophanes himself. This strange fact also permits us to understand better the somewhat strange opening of the play, to which we may now turn.

<sup>4</sup> Consider, e.g., 180–84 and 321; compare 210–22 and 990–99.

<sup>5</sup> Consider, e.g., *Clouds* 522–26.

Like all the plays of Aristophanes, the *Acharnians* begins with a complaint or lament or moan. Dicaeopolis's very core, he tells us, has been stung by numberless pains and been delighted by so few pleasures that he can count them on one hand: four. In fact, such are Dicaeopolis's pains that they prove to crowd out the enumeration of his pleasures, since we learn of only two of them: the fine that the Athenian demagogue Cleon was made to pay to the knights, which probably occurred not in the real world but in Aristophanes's own comedy of the year before;<sup>6</sup> and the performance of a certain Dexitheus singing a Boeotian tune (14). In keeping with the fact that Dicaeopolis's stated pleasures are peculiarly connected with the things of the Muses—as are the first two of his stated pains (9–12 and 15–16)—we note that the tune from which Dicaeopolis gained so much pleasure hails from what is enemy territory, as the play frequently reminds us,<sup>7</sup> but this fact in no way prevented him from enjoying it. To this point it is altogether unclear why Dicaeopolis is in the Assembly at all, let alone with such unrivaled eagerness; only now (26) do we learn that his principal concern at the moment is not musical but political: “So now I’ve come, simply put, all ready / To cry out, to interrupt, to revile the orators / If somebody speaks of anything other than peace.” Inasmuch as Dicaeopolis the war-weary farmer is also Aristophanes the poet in disguise, we can expect that the political concerns of the one are somehow bound up with the “musical” concerns of the other. Aristophanes certainly gives the impression on occasion that being a bad musician or hack poet is as bad as being a corrupt politician or war-mongering general.<sup>8</sup>

Five rapid-fire scenes follow. The central one features the return from Sparta of Amphitheus the god, private treaty in hand, the travel expenses for his astonishingly quick trip having been paid for by Dicaeopolis himself. This central scene is immediately preceded by the arrival of Athenian ambassadors from Persia, who are returning after many years on the public payroll and are accompanied by “the King’s Eye”; it is immediately succeeded by the appearance of the Athenian Theorus, Cleon’s crony,<sup>9</sup> back from King Sitalkes of the Odrysians and accompanied by Odomantian mercenary soldiers. Dicaeopolis

<sup>6</sup> Regarding Cleon’s fine, Alan H. Sommerstein, *Acharnians* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1980) considers the possibility “that this reference, like those in [lines] 9–16, is to a recent theatrical event, perhaps an incident in Ar.’s *Babylonians*” (ad loc.). So also Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Consider 624, 721, 872 and context, 1020–23, and 1077.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to the opening scene, consider 836–58, where the Chorus mocks in equal measure a leading demagogue, a sycophant, a comic poet, and a satirical painter.

<sup>9</sup> See *Clouds* 399–400; *Wasps* 42 and context, 418–19, 599–600, and 1236–42.

clearly deplores Athens's dalliance with these barbarians in its foolhardy hope to gain their favor and therewith manpower and money or materiel. In fact, as Thucydides's narrative confirms, neither the Persian satraps nor barbarian mercenaries would help Athens much in the course of the war.<sup>10</sup>

When Amphitheus first appears, the herald of the Assembly asks him whether he is a human being, to which he replies: "No / But an immortal." The nonchalance of this exchange is striking. Athenians seem to take for granted the everyday presence of immortals walking among them. This goes together with the astonishing lack of respect accorded this peace-seeking emissary of the (other) gods (51–52): he is unceremoniously ejected from the Assembly. One could well receive the impression here that Athens is altogether impious, the stated wish of the gods for peace being no impediment whatever to the Athenians' continued pursuit of the war because it is not of the slightest interest to them. But this impression, while not without some warrant, must be balanced against what we witness in the last of these five scenes. There a vote for the pay of the Thracian (Odomantian) mercenary soldiers is at issue, a prospect that disgusts Dicaeopolis. Accordingly, in order to prevent the Assembly from approving it, Dicaeopolis must put a stop to the proceedings altogether. He does so by claiming that "a raindrop just fell on me," for this he interprets as "a sign from Zeus." And with that the Herald immediately announces the dissolution of the Assembly. Our first impression that the Athenians are doubtful at best of the gods and hence of such things as oracles and divine signs, is thus belied. It is not only the obviously pious Spartans, but the "sophisticated" Athenians, too, who are deeply pious and so are given to seeking out the guidance of divine auguries and the like—at least when doing so accords with their perceived interest or felt need.<sup>11</sup>

Enter now the Acharnians (204), hopping mad but slowed by age. Speaking in the name of "the city" (205) and calling upon "Father Zeus and Gods" (224), the Acharnians proclaim that the war will only increase for the damned traitor, as far as in them lies, "on account of my lands" that have been plundered and "my vines" that have been trampled. The concerns of the Acharnians are thus a mix of the patriotic (290) and the private. The Acharnians overhear

<sup>10</sup> Later in the war, for example, Athens's use of Thracian mercenaries resulted in what Thucydides regarded as a most lamentable episode of the war, the mercenaries' senseless slaughter of the entire town of Mycalessus, including a boys' school there (Thuc. 7.29–30).

<sup>11</sup> Consider, among the many examples that might be given, Thuc. 2.21.3 and 8.1.1. See also the Clouds' beautiful description as they float over the city of the whole of Athens at worship (*Clouds* 298–313) as well as *Knights* 61 and the use of oracles or prophecies in that play (997–1099).

and eventually interrupt Dicaeopolis as he is celebrating the Rural Dionysia,<sup>12</sup> together with his wife and daughter. And so we too witness the first of the uses to which our hero puts his private peace: he conducts a religious service in honor of Dionysus. Whatever arguments Dicaeopolis will use to sway the Acharnians, we can say this much already in his defense: he tried the democratic or political path to achieve peace for everyone, but was brusquely rebuffed; the gods, here represented by Amphytheus, clearly support peace in general<sup>13</sup> and Dicaeopolis's peace in particular; he is seeking peace, not just for himself, but for his whole family; and, to repeat, the first thing he does with it is conduct a religious ceremony. Dicaeopolis comes to sight here less as a model citizen, it is true, than as a pious family man, but this is to say that he is by no means narrowly selfish. We glimpse here the cluster of concerns that may pull us in different directions: the concern for the good of one's city, of one's family, and of oneself. And floating somewhere above these, so to speak, is the concern for the gods, who seem sometimes to support the city above all, but sometimes the family instead. In the play thus far the gods favor a political peace, to be sure, but, failing that, they also support a private peace "for me alone / And my kids and spouse" (130–32), as Dicaeopolis explains it to Amphytheus. ("For me alone" must here mean "for my family alone.") Still, even in the course of the Rural Dionysia, conducted in the bosom of the family, our hero gives pride of place in his joyful song to the male member, which he apostrophizes as a "comrade of Bacchus / Fellow reveler, night roamer / Adulterer, boy-lover" (263–65). As especially the last two epithets make plain, that member is at least as likely to look beyond the bounds of conjugal bliss—to frolicking with an errant servant girl, to give a third example (271–75)—as it is to remain happily within them. This is an early clue that even "dutiful family man" (let alone "model citizen") may not quite capture the essence of Dicaeopolis. Dicaeopolis's particular concern for Dionysus points us already or again in the direction of Aristophanes (consider *Clouds* 518–19).

Since it is impossible to convince by arguments those who refuse on principle even to listen to them, Dicaeopolis's first task in defending himself is to open the ears of the Acharnians. He gets off to what would seem to be a poor start by contending that the Acharnians ought to set aside the Spartans altogether and simply hear of the treaty itself. But how can the nobility (306–7) of a treaty be judged without recourse to the character of its signatories, who,

<sup>12</sup> "This festival (to be sharply distinguished from the springtime City Dionysia) was held in and by the individual local communities (demes) of Attica.... Since the outbreak of the war Dicaeopolis has not been able to celebrate it in *his own deme*" (Sommerstein, *Acharnians*, ad loc., emphasis original).

<sup>13</sup> Consider also *Peace* 211–12.

in the case of the Spartans, “abide by no altar or pledge or oath” according to the Acharnians? Dicaeopolis is thus compelled to contend that in fact the Spartans are not the cause of *all* the Athenians’ troubles—which only provokes the Acharnians further—and even that the Spartans are in some respects being treated unjustly. (Dicaeopolis does not go quite so far as to add what is nonetheless only too obvious: “by the Athenians.”) In response to the Acharnians’ still-firm refusal to listen and its accompanying threat of violence, Dicaeopolis resorts to a drastic measure; he threatens to kill the hostage he suddenly declares he has taken, to the dismay of the Acharnians: a basket full of Acharnian-made charcoal! The effect is remarkable:

But say *now* whatever seems best to you, and  
 In what way the Lacedaemonian is a friend to you.  
 Because this dear little charcoal basket here, I’ll never betray it!  
 (338–40)

The mix of patriotic and private motives we saw before in the Acharnians proves to be weighted rather more in favor of their private, and even private economic, interests. Their vaunted patriotism, then, is not all it is cracked up to be. In properly comic fashion, they proceed to disarm. Hence there will be no summary execution. This much, at least, Dicaeopolis has accomplished.

The Acharnians still demand a “trial” (364), however, and they eagerly accept or insist on Dicaeopolis’s proffered submission to them in the form of speaking with his head on a chopping block. The fear that Dicaeopolis here admits to is based on his knowledge of two things: “the characters of the country folk,” on one hand, who can be duped by some boaster’s speech in praise of them and the city, justified or not; and “the souls” of elders, on the other, cantankerous and biting. (Dicaeopolis’s opponents are *both* rural *and* old.) It is here that Dicaeopolis reveals himself to be Aristophanes and, with that revelation, he makes known his hard-won knowledge of how vulnerable his comedic take-downs of Cleon have made him: the old farmer is not the only one in hot water. In other words, the threat the Acharnians pose to Dicaeopolis in the world of the comedy is akin to the threat Cleon poses to Aristophanes in the real world. Yet the riskiness of speaking out as Aristophanes does cannot be traced entirely to Cleon and perhaps not even, in the present case at least, to Cleon at all. For we learn later that Cleon cannot now charge Aristophanes with slandering the city in front of foreigners, as he had done last year, since there are no foreigners at the Lenaea as distinguished from the City Dionysia (recall 498–506 and 513). Instead, as that same later statement contends, Aristophanes is “slandered by enemies,

among Athenians too-hasty-in-counsel”: Aristophanes has multiple enemies “among the Athenians.” Moreover, the slander at work against him is based on the thought that he is “making a comedy of our city and treating the demos with utter insolence [*kathubridzei*]” (630–31). Among Aristophanes’s fellow citizens, then, there are those who contend that he lacks proper respect for both the city and the demos.<sup>14</sup> A demagogue like Cleon is dangerous only because there is a demos ready to be led or misled by him.

So great is the riskiness of his venture still that Aristophanes-Dicaeopolis must resort to fostering in his audience an antidote to anger. If Aristophanes generally speaking makes use of laughter as just such an antidote to anger, or rather as a prophylactic against it, here Dicaeopolis feels compelled to make use of pity instead, which we may define as “a certain pain at what is manifestly bad...[befalling] someone who does not deserve it, which one might expect to suffer oneself...and this when it appears close at hand.”<sup>15</sup> The fostering of pity falls outside the purview of comedy because comedy cannot portray true suffering, let alone unjust suffering. As a result, Dicaeopolis is compelled to take over from Euripides the trappings of that great man’s tragic art and so win from his still-hostile audience a modicum of pity. Dicaeopolis the old farmer has a taste for Aeschylus (10); Dicaeopolis the young comic poet evidently prefers Euripides.<sup>16</sup> The whole of this scene spoofs a good many verses of Euripides, as is only to be expected, and it mocks the tragedian by having him suggest that his entire art (463–64) amounts to cheap or hackneyed devices—his usual cast of beggars and cripples—meant to jerk tears of pity from his audience. Yet Aristophanes also pays homage to Euripides here, as one poet-craftsman to another. For Euripides expresses no surprise at the news that Aristophanes-Dicaeopolis must address “the Chorus” at length (an event that takes place only on stage) or that he will be put to death if he speaks badly; Euripides asks only about which used stage costumes his visitor needs (consider 415–19). Euripides for his part affirms that Aristophanes-Dicaeopolis, with his “shrewd mind,” “contrive[s] subtle things” (445)—which is to say that Aristophanes has Euripides compliment...Aristophanes. Even more striking is Aristophanes-Dicaeopolis’s contention here, evidently based on lines from Euripides’s lost *Telephus*, that “I must seem to be a beggar today /

<sup>14</sup> According to Xenophon (or “the Old Oligarch”), it is possible in democratic Athens to mock individuals in the city—the rich, well-born, or powerful, or even some busybodies among the poor—but it is intolerable to make a comedy of the demos as such (*Regime of the Athenians* 2.18).

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric* 1384b13–16.

<sup>16</sup> On the complex question of the relation of Aeschylus to Euripides, or the significance of the choice between them, consider the *Frogs* as a whole together with *Clouds* 1366 and following.

To be who I am, but appear not to be.’” Certainly Aristophanes-Dicaeopolis is the kind of person who may pretend to be a beggar, or for that matter an old farmer, and so donning a false appearance is in its way also revealing of the man; he slips in and out of misleading disguises, even as he comically draws attention to the fact. Aristophanes-Dicaeopolis applies the quoted remark to the division he now draws between the spectators and the Chorus: “The spectators must know me as I am / But those in the Chorus, by contrast, must stand there like knuckleheads / So I may jeer at them with little phraselets” (440–44). The spectators—we are among them—know that Aristophanes-Dicaeopolis is putting on a disguise and a show, whereas the Chorus is to think of him as a pitiable beggar. The spectators, then, being in the know, are for that reason in a position to laugh at what is intended to soften the Chorus: Dicaeopolis decked out in rags. But then again, the Chorus of Acharnians has already seen and conversed with Dicaeopolis the farmer and knows that he is no beggar (238–40 and 280–392). More than that, just as Dicaeopolis is really Aristophanes, is not the Chorus really a collection of Athenian actors, as distinguished from elderly Acharnians, who know full well the identity of “Dicaeopolis,” who is neither a beggar nor even a farmer but (a stand-in for) the poet? We are reminded of the nature of the Chorus at the beginning of the parabasis, where it “strips,” refers to its own “anapests,” and sings the praises of “our producer” (Aristophanes) who “took charge of the comic choruses”: the Chorus emphatically identifies itself there as a chorus of actors (626–58; also 1150–72).<sup>17</sup> Who, then, is really in the know? Is it the great many in the audience who are “the spectators,” or is it the few in the Chorus? Aristophanes may call directly on “the spectators,” in this and in other plays, but the group so designated always proves to be a composite made up of disparate parts, the “clever” and the dull, the “wise” and the nonwise, or the “prudent” and the imprudent.<sup>18</sup> In the course of the *Acharnians*, the Chorus, addressing itself to the “city entire,” will call Dicaeopolis a “prudent man and super-wise” (971).

In any event, once equipped with almost all the accouterments he seeks from Euripides, Dicaeopolis steels his spirit and his heart (480, 483, 485) for the challenge ahead, and, true to the division he has just spoken of,

<sup>17</sup> Keith Sidwell raises the possibility that the “I” of the Chorus at 299–302 is referring, not, for example, to Aristophanes himself or to his next play the *Knights*, but rather to “its past self as a chorus of Cratinus or Eupolis,” that is, to itself qua chorus of actors (Sidwell, review of *Acharnians*, by S. Douglas Olson, *Classical Review* 54, no. 1 [2004]: 42).

<sup>18</sup> Compare, for example, the distinction between “O spectators” and “the wise,” on one hand, with “O wisest spectators,” on the other: *Clouds* 518–26 and 575; *Knights* 228 (“whoever is clever among the spectators”).

Dicaeopolis addresses himself first to the spectators (496–508), then to the Chorus (509–56). To the former he has recourse to his new disguise, by calling himself a beggar, which suggests that that disguise is indeed not intended solely for the Chorus. And beggar though he may be, he will nonetheless speak to the Athenian audience about Athens in the course of making or writing his “trygedy”—the Aristophanic coinage for “comedy.” This course of action Aristophanes-Dicaeopolis defends on the grounds of justice: “For when it comes to what’s just, trygedy too knows it. / And I’ll say terribly clever things, but just things as well / For now Cleon won’t slander me” (500–502). We might say, then, that Aristophanes the “trygedian” is as little a beggar as he is Dicaeopolis the farmer, but he most certainly is a teacher, and defender, of justice or the just cause. Now as Euripides knows well, some in the audience may be moved above all by the sight of “beggars” or by those who, not so very dissimilar to themselves, suffer unjustly. But others may be rather more moved by the defense of justice or by the depiction of a kind of moral uprightness, especially if that defense is presented as coming at some cost to the defender himself (377–82). Such moral uprightness is both pleasing to behold “in the opinion of the multitude” (consider 317) and compatible, as pity is not, with the pleasures specific to comedy: comedic cleverness and the defense of justice can go together not least in the merciless mockery of injustice. But this does not go far enough. For in the parabasis the Chorus will include among its high praises of Aristophanes the claim that he will “make a comedy of the just things” (655). Aristophanes mocks not only injustice or the unjust case, then, but justice or the just cause too; it is in part for this reason that Aristophanes’s comedy has been called “the total comedy.”<sup>19</sup> Not only do Cleon and Theorus come in for comedic skewering, then, but so do such democratically elected luminaries as Lamachus and Pericles—to say nothing of our hero and Aristophanes’s doppelganger: Dicaeopolis is a laughing and laugh-provoking hero. Above all, Aristophanes ridicules the unjust war, of course, but the just peace of Dicaeopolis proves to be more laughable still. We are entitled to wonder, then, whether even Aristophanes’s portrait of himself as a teacher of justice is something of a disguise or whether the core of Aristophanes transcends even his concern for justice. Certainly he takes the greatest pride in the fact (of which he must inform many in his audience) that the play on which he labored most is distinguished by its superlative wisdom (*Clouds* 518–26). This much is clear: Aristophanes is a surprisingly

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<sup>19</sup> Leo Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 109–11 and 117 as well as Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 312.

elusive character, playing peekaboo behind the mask of an old farmer, and a beggar, and a teacher of justice who teaches us by lampooning it.

Dicaeopolis turns next to address the Chorus as a chorus of elderly Acharnians once again. His lengthy argument unfolds in stages. He first “identifies” with the Acharnians: “I hate the Lacedaemonians intensely” (509).<sup>20</sup> May Poseidon bring down upon them a devastating earthquake!<sup>21</sup> Long gone now is his appeal to their being the victims of (Athenian) injustice. Moreover, Dicaeopolis’s hatred stems from the fact that, just like the Acharnians, he too has had his vines cut or trampled by the marauding Spartans (compare 512 with 232). In short, Dicaeopolis feels the Acharnians’ pain. (Being possessed of “vines” and hence land, Dicaeopolis can be no beggar.) Only now does he dare return to the question of the culpability for the war, and he proceeds to give an account of the origin of it that stresses the responsibility of “some”—but only some—of “our” men: “I don’t say the city, / Remember this, that I’m not saying the city” (515–16). Athens, then, is simply beyond reproach in the matter, as distinguished from a handful of rogues within it. This is less unpalatable to the Acharnians than was Dicaeopolis’s earlier treatment of the question inasmuch as the Acharnians have to this point understood themselves to be speaking in the name of precisely “the city” (205, 492) or “the fatherland” (290); to criticize some within the city for the sake of the city is simply a patriotic duty. As for Dicaeopolis’s account of the war’s cause, it contains at its noncomic core the contention that Pericles’s blockade of neighboring Megara, at once unnecessary and cruel, is largely responsible for the conflict (consider also *Peace* 603–15). The seriousness of that cause is confirmed later on, according to the logic of the comedian, by the long and wildly obscene episode involving a starving Megarian father attempting to sell his two starving daughters disguised as “piglets” (729–835). The outrageousness of the scene goes together with, in fact it permits, what amounts to a very tough criticism of the Megarian decree and hence of Pericles, *the* revered leader of the demos.<sup>22</sup> In refusing to pay any heed to the Lacedaemonians’ repeated requests to reverse that blockade, Dicaeopolis points out, “we” (538) made inevitable “the crashing of shields”: the Lacedaemonians only came to the assistance of a harassed ally. Dicaeopolis thus implies, if he does not quite say, that the city of Athens is largely culpable for the war. After all, what would “we” Athenians have done if some Spartan had confiscated so much as

<sup>20</sup> For a comparable rhetorical move, consider *Thesmophoriazusae* 466–70 and context.

<sup>21</sup> See Thuc. 1.101 for mention of a devastating earthquake that befell Sparta and its environs.

<sup>22</sup> Thuc. 1.139 and 2.65.

a puppy belonging to one of *our* subject cities? Aristophanes's answer is clear in his vivid and in its way beautiful description of the city exploding into activity in preparation for naval warfare (544–56).

The core of Dicaeopolis's criticism of the war is, to repeat, a criticism of Pericles. And this brings to light a crucial division within the heretofore united Chorus. For it turns out that "the Acharnians" include in their ranks members of the *demos*, the poor, who as such are much devoted to Pericles, and the wealthy, who as such are not devoted to Pericles.<sup>23</sup> In fact these latter now declare, in opposition to their fellow demesmen, that "all that he [Dicaeopolis] says / Is just, and in none of it does he lie." So deep now is the previously latent division within the Chorus that they begin to wrestle one another, which prompts the democratic half of the Chorus to call out for the assistance of Lamachus, a democratically elected (597) general. They do so in part on the grounds that Dicaeopolis, in criticizing a few within the city—some sycophants among the *demos* in addition to "Olympian" Pericles<sup>24</sup>—"for a long time now has been reviling our entire city": in speaking for Pericles and the *demos*, the half-Chorus thinks it is speaking for Athens entire. Soon, it is true, the Chorus, speaking once again as a united chorus because it has been won over to Dicaeopolis's side, will *blame* precisely "the city" (676). But by that point the Chorus has been taught that it has interests separate from and even in some tension with those of "the city," or it has been taught that "the city" is in fact a conglomeration of disparate factions, among them rich and poor and, of great import to the Chorus, old and young (for the latter, see 676–717).

But before any of that can happen, Dicaeopolis must bring over, not of course the rich, but the poor among the Chorus. This he does by lampooning at length the very man on whom the democratic half-Chorus depends, Lamachus. Soon shedding his persona of a beggar (compare 577–79 with 593), Dicaeopolis contends that he is simply a decent citizen, "not serious about office seeking," a "foot soldier" or ordinary grunt, in sharp contrast to Lamachus himself, "an officer-for-pay-and-hire" (*mistharchides*: 597). Moreover, it is the old men of modest means who grind it out in the trenches and on the front lines while the younger and fancified rich, men like Lamachus, earn their three obols a day far from the fighting or on cushy ambassadorial postings in exotic locales

<sup>23</sup> Consider in this regard the Chorus's later defense of the elderly Thucydides, the aristocratic opponent of Pericles, which defense is probably made possible by the fact that the members of the now-united Chorus remember less their political division than their shared decrepitude (702–17).

<sup>24</sup> Consider 519 and context, 540–42, and 559.

like Ecbatana.<sup>25</sup> Not so the modest among the Acharnians! Hence Dicaeopolis brings home to them that they are fighting less for “the fatherland” and more for the fat cats back home. This argument, together with the withering ridicule to which Lamachus is here subjected, proves sufficient to bring the demotic or democratic half-chorus around to Dicaeopolis: “The man is victorious with his words and persuades the demos / About the treaty” (626–27).

As his last words before the parabasis make clear, Dicaeopolis plans to use his new peace to set up a marketplace of his own, one open to the Peloponnesians, Megarians, and Boeotians—Athenian enemies all—but not to Lamachus (623–25). This use is surprising given Dicaeopolis’s early statements of his loathing for the town, with its cries to buy charcoal, vinegar, or oil, and given his longing for the country, which used to bring forth all things bounteously without such busy commerce (32–36). Perhaps Dicaeopolis’s forced stay in the city has opened his eyes to new opportunities; at any rate, he in effect brings the city’s marketplace with him to the countryside. But this is as much as to say that Dicaeopolis will soon turn to the business of profiting from his peace—and hence from everyone else’s war. Here we note that Dicaeopolis’s initial case for peace, stated in soliloquy, failed to mention the injustice of making the elderly fight on the front lines or the unfair burden the demos is made to bear in the war’s conduct: those arguments, to repeat, served the purpose of bringing the poor over to Dicaeopolis’s side (compare 32–39 with 595–614, esp. 599). The core of Dicaeopolis’s opposition to the war, like the peace he now enjoys, seems altogether private-spirited.

In the first two marketplace transactions, at the beginning of the play’s second part, Dicaeopolis certainly gets the better of the deals, not to say that he takes his sellers to the cleaners. The impoverished Megarian father sells his daughters for seasoned salt and some garlic (813–14), which were abundant in Megara before the war (759–63); and a Theban merchant gets for his rich array of goods (Copaic eels!) an irksome but useful Athenian sycophant, whom Dicaeopolis is only too glad to be rid of in any case (860–958). The appearances of a Megarian and then a Boeotian (Theban) lead us to expect that a Peloponnesian, that is, a Spartan, will appear next (recall 623–24). But evidently to portray Dicaeopolis’s profitable commerce with *the* enemy would have been a step too far even for Aristophanes, if not for the Chorus, which is now entirely antiwar (977–85), then for the audience in the theater. There are instead brief appearances by Lamachus’s messenger and a herald, the latter

<sup>25</sup> Lines 613 and context; recall the mention of Ecbatana at 64.

come to announce the Festival of the Pitchers. These characters serve to set up both the climactic battle, so to speak, between Lamachus and Dicaeopolis (1069–142) and Dicaeopolis’s victory celebration in the wake of the festival, which is at the same time Lamachus’s sorry decline or defeat (1174–end). That defeat includes not (as Lamachus pompously claims) wounds suffered at the hands of the enemy, but a sprained ankle and other minor indignities incurred while crossing an irrigation ditch (compare 1174–80 with 1190–94 and 1226).<sup>26</sup>

A pathetic Athenian farmer now appears (1018–36). The farmer has lost his only pair of oxen to marauding Boeotians—Dicaeopolis’s just-completed happy transaction with a Boeotian seems all the more questionable—and having ruined his eyes from crying over them, he seeks not to trade with his fellow farmer but to have him share a single drop of the peace libation. This Dicaeopolis flatly refuses: he is no public servant! Dicaeopolis’s distance from the city or his indifference to his fellow citizens could hardly be greater, and the comment of the Chorus here is surely not to be taken as praise: “The man has discovered / In the treaty something pleasant, and / It seems he’ll share it with no one” (1037–39). Or, as the Chorus had just noted, Dicaeopolis “serves *himself*” a fine meal (1015–16, emphasis added; consider also 969): even the Chorus gets none of the delicacies he is so zestfully preparing. Hence “Antimachus” (“Against Battle”) is not the only writer-poet who denies the Chorus a dinner at the Lenaea (1150–72). The selfishness of Dicaeopolis that is becoming ever more apparent as the play proceeds must be qualified somewhat, it is true, by the immediate sequel. For there Dicaeopolis does share with a newlywed bride one ladleful of the peace libation. This he agrees to do, not in exchange for the proffered meat from the wedding feast nor even for one thousand drachmas, but so that the bride might linger in the matrimonial bed with her groom, who would, with the proper application of the peace libation, be at peace and hence relieved of all military duty.

Lamachus’s earlier request to purchase thrushes from Dicaeopolis “for the Festival of the Pitchers,” together with an eel, makes plain that the great general thought that he, too, would be celebrating (959–68). He and we now learn, alas, of his assignment “to watch over the points of entry as it snows,” for it has been reported that “bandits”—from Boeotia— “will invade!” (1073–77). Aristophanes then juxtaposes Lamachus, as he somberly prepares for battle,

<sup>26</sup> Because Lamachus is said to receive his marching orders from “the generals” in Athens (1073–78), Sommerstein, *Acharnians* raises the possibility that Lamachus’s initial claim to be one of them (593) may be in anticipation of his election to that office that has not yet occurred, even if it soon will. If this is so—and Thucydides does not mention Lamachus until the summer of 425 (4.75) and hence after the Lenaea—it would add considerably to Lamachus’s boastfulness.

with Dicaeopolis as he joyously prepares for his feast and drinking contest. Each readies himself for his respective contest, the one the preserve of war and the warrior, the other of peace and the private individual at peace. Could the burdens of the one and the delights of the other be made more manifest than this? The Chorus sums up the matter well:

How dissimilar the paths you two are taking!  
 Drinking for the one, bedecked with a wreath,  
 But for you, freezing and standing on guard!  
 For him, going to bed  
 With a young maiden in her bloom  
 Getting his you-know-what rubbed! (1143–48)

Here we might note that Dicaeopolis becomes not only more selfish, or self-sufficient, as the play proceeds, but also less and less a married man; the fact of his married status is quietly forgotten by the play's end (1198 and following). As the curtain descends, so to speak, the sound of the Chorus's final song rings out: "Hurray Noble Victor!"



We may now return to what we called the obvious message of the *Acharnians*: the Athenians should negotiate an end to the Peloponnesian War because peace is much preferable to war. That message may have appeared to be less obvious or anodyne or even insipid to Aristophanes's audience than it may seem to us, for the simple reason that one was much more likely then than now to hear praise of war and of the qualities of body and soul needed to be a great warrior—an Achilles. Still, we have to concede that the obvious message of the play, so stated, is hardly arresting. And if we look for concrete advice from the play, we see at most that Aristophanes counsels rescinding the Megarian decree, apart of course from the general advice to be rid of demagogues like Cleon.<sup>27</sup> Yet, as Aristophanes himself shows, some Athenians are profiting from that blockade and so would be at least reluctant to give it up (515–22). In any case, now that the conflagration is roaring, will extinguishing the match that lit it do much good? Aristophanes also indicates that many Athenians in positions of power are profiting from the war in other ways, generals, demagogues, and ambassadors among them. What may be more, Aristophanes reports the king of Persia as thinking that Athens with its superior navy (and world-class comic poet) is in fact likely to win the war (647–52). Even if peace is to be preferred to war in general, spurning

<sup>27</sup> The *Acharnians* "offers very little in the way of concrete policy proposals" (S. Douglas Olson, *Aristophanes' Acharnians* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], xl ix).

the war at a time when it seems to promise victory would be foolish.<sup>28</sup> To put all of this in the terms of the play, Dicaeopolis's solution to the problem that is the war belongs in a comedy: it is manifestly impossible. The war goes on.

The puzzle of the import of the play is surely bound up with Dicaeopolis's "clever deed and great," as he calls it (128 and context). What really is the purpose of his private peace? First impressions aside, Dicaeopolis does not in fact simply retire to the country, there to enjoy family life and the worship of Dionysus. In fact he opens a market and so profits from his peace. As we have noted, Dicaeopolis becomes more and more selfish, or less and less a family man, never mind a citizen, as the play proceeds; the two young women who accompany him at the play's end do not include his wife. He prepares an elaborate meal and eats it himself; he chugs down wine at a peerless pace; our last image of him is as he leaves the stage, off to enjoy matrimonial pleasures without benefit of matrimony. Are we to think, then, that Aristophanes means to praise the largely (though not entirely) solitary pleasures, the hedonism, of Dicaeopolis? Are we to think that according to Aristophanes the proper response to public chaos is a withdrawal into an entirely private revelry?

That there are reminders here of the pleasures that peace makes possible is beyond dispute. But Aristophanes has something more in mind than making the case for a self-seeking hedonism. We have seen repeatedly that "Dicaeopolis" the farmer is also Aristophanes in costume, but we have so far ignored the still more obvious fact, which has been staring us in the face all along, that the name "Dicaeopolis" means "Just City."<sup>29</sup> Dicaeopolis also is or imitates a just city. Is it not the obligation of all cities and especially of just cities to be concerned with the common good, the good of all citizens, including the citizens' bodily security in the face of external threats; the provision of the necessities of mere life; and, beyond these, their material comfort or prosperity? Is it not the obligation of all cities but especially of just cities to be concerned with securing to the extent possible the good life for each and for all within their respective borders? Moreover, what is disconcerting or shocking in the actions of a lone individual becomes much less so in the case of an entire city or—making allowances for comic exaggeration—it becomes entirely respectable. The just city seeks stable peace when it can, for the benefit of its own citizens

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<sup>28</sup> Consider Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 69. Olson, *Acharnians*, xlix, comments on "what appears to be a suggestion in the parabasis that a recent Spartan offer...to make peace if the Athenians would restore the Aiginetans...be rejected (652–55)."

<sup>29</sup> So also, e.g., Jeffrey Henderson, *Aristophanes' Acharnians* (Newburyport: Focus Classical Library, 1992), 11 and Paul Ludwig, "A Portrait of the Artist in Politics: Justice and Self-Interest in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (2007): 479.

above all; it must make available, through markets and the force needed to secure them (consider 724–25 and 824–25), not only the necessities but also such delicacies as may bring a measure of delight to life. The just city makes a place for and helps protect the family—husband and wife and children (132, 889–91)—together with the worship of the gods. In other words, Dicaeopolis the remarkably selfish individual can also be understood as acting in the way that all individual cities, even or precisely all just cities, act or ought to act.

It is because Athens and Sparta wish to be just cities and understand themselves to be just that they have gone to war in the first place: whatever else they may seek in and through the war, they seek to right a perceived wrong, an injustice (consider 230–32 and 514–56). And Dicaeopolis’s actions, amusing as they are, do not render us hopeful that war will ever cease, even if all particular wars end eventually. For the clash of competing understandings of what justice demands, and the pursuit of “national interests” in a world of scarce goods, together make conflict inevitable.

One might well object here that, however much “Dicaeopolis” points us in a political direction, Aristophanes nonetheless also chose to present himself as an old farmer who is a zany pleasure-loving fellow and not an exemplary citizen or husband (or father). When we first glimpse the man, we remember, he is alone; when we last see him, he is no longer alone but neither is he returning to hearth and home. How are we finally to understand this guise?

Aristophanes’s initial claim to fame in the *Acharnians* is that his comedies say things both terrifically clever and just (497–501). In particular, Aristophanes to a distinguished degree can speak of—that is, criticize—“the city” while making a comedy of it or because he makes a comedy of it (499). Aristophanes ventures to do the very thing, then, that his Dicaeopolis had at one point denied doing: castigating, not some faction within the city, but the city as such, “our city” (recall 515–16 in the light of 498–99 and 631). When in the parabasis the Acharnians return to Aristophanes’s “making a comedy of our city,” they do not stress the just things he teaches—it is here the Chorus tells us that he will “make a comedy” of precisely “the just things”—but rather the good or advantageous things he brings about for the city. We could say, then, with Aristophanes, that he has both the just and the good on his side as allies (660–62). But his greater concern may be the good. For example, Aristophanes has helped inoculate the city against being “overly deceived by the speeches of foreigners,” with their attempts at subtle flattery that Aristophanes renders laughable (634). So great a poet is he, in fact, that the cities of the empire are positively eager to come to Athens to pay their compulsory

tax—so as “to see the poet who’s best” (644)! We already had occasion to note the king of Persia’s great admiration for Aristophanes; the king is also of the view that whichever city the poet lambastes more will be much better off for it. Aristophanes’s comedy improves even as it stings. “He affirms that he’ll teach you many good things, so you’ll be happy.../ teaching the things that are best” (656 and 658). Aristophanes does what he can, then, to improve his city with the means singularly at his disposal.

Still, it is difficult to deny that, in donning the disguise of Dicaeopolis, Aristophanes would seem to endorse the way of life, and the pleasures, of his remarkable farmer. We are forced to grant the point: Aristophanes does extol the goodness and even the supremacy of a certain pleasure-filled private life. But in comparison to at least some of Dicaeopolis’s pleasures, Aristophanes’s own are more social or public and even public-spirited. For those pleasures surely include thinking up “the most novel conceits” (*Wasps* 1044) and the “subtle things” (445) in his plays and then displaying them, to public acclaim and even thunderous applause. A great play is not fully what it is without being performed, which means that its potential is realized before a large and diverse crowd, as diverse, perhaps, as democracy itself. To write and all the more to present a play, at least when the playwright is as prominent as an Aristophanes, is a public act. Aristophanes takes countless liberties, of course, but he also takes seriously his public responsibilities: some lines he will not cross. There is a limited but nonetheless genuine common good between the intense private pleasures of Aristophanes, in the writing of his comedies and the display of the wisdom they contain, and the well-being of Athens; this is true even if Aristophanes obviously exaggerates the good he does or can do his city. He tries, at least, to make Athens better—less foolish in matters foreign and domestic, more immune to demagogic flattery and the manipulations of oracle mongers, less vindictive or “waspish.” If only very modest political improvement can be expected from the laughter he provokes, if Aristophanes cannot by himself bring an end to the war, we cannot fault him for trying or indeed for failing, just as Dicaeopolis had tried at the beginning of the play, with admittedly sorry results, to effect political improvement. Peace, then, is indeed to be preferred to war, but ultimately because it makes possible the enjoyment of essentially private pleasures. The pleasures enjoyed or anticipated by Dicaeopolis at the end of the play are a comic representation and hence in large part a distortion of Aristophanes’s genuine pleasures. In the case of Aristophanes, those pleasures go together with a benevolent and even beneficent concern for Athens and a genuine respect for its needs as a city, without which Aristophanes would be without the audience he needs.