

**ANCIENT CLASSICS
FOR ENGLISH READERS.
ARISTOPHANES**

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Ancient Classics for English Readers. Aristophanes by W. Lucas Collins

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EDITED BY THE

REV. W. LUCAS COLLINS, M.A.

ARISTOPHANES

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ARISTOPHANES

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BY THE

REV. W. LUCAS COLLINS, M.A.

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ARISTOPHANES.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION.

It has been observed already,* in speaking of these "ancient" classical authors, that some of them, in their tone and spirit, have much more in common with modern literature than with their great predecessors who wrote in the same language, and whose volumes stand ranged upon the same shelves. This may be remarked with especial truth of these Comedies of Aristophanes. A national comedy which has any pretension at all to literary merit—which is anything more than mere coarse buffoonery—must, in its very nature, be of later growth than epic or lyric poetry, tragedy, or historic narrative. It assumes a fuller intellectual life, a higher civilisation, and a keener taste in the people who demand it and appreciate it. And Athenian comedy, as we have it repre-

* Introd. to 'Cicero' (A. C.)

sented in the plays of Aristophanes, implies all these in a very high degree on the part of the audience to whom it was presented. It flourished in those glorious days of Athens which not long preceded her political decline,—when the faculties of her citizens were strung to full pitch, when there was much wealth and much leisure, when the arts were highly cultivated and education widely spread, and the refinements and the vices which follow such a state of things presented an ample field for the play of wit and fancy, the *badinage* of the humorist, or the more trenchant weapons of satire.

But although this Athenian comedy is, in one sense, so very modern in its spirit, we must not place it in comparison with that which we call comedy now. It was something quite different from that form of drama which, with its elaborate and artistic plot, its lively incidents, and brilliant dialogue, has taken possession under the same name of the modern stage. It is difficult to compare it to any one form of modern literature, dramatic or other. It perhaps most resembled what we now call burlesque; but it had also very much in it of broad farce and comic opera, and something also (in the hits at the fashions and follies of the day with which it abounded) of the modern pantomime. But it was something more, and more important to the Athenian public, than any or all of these could have been. Almost always more or less political, and sometimes intensely personal, and always with some purpose more or less important underlying its wildest vagaries and coarsest buffooneries, it

supplied the place of the political journal, the literary review, the popular caricature, and the party pamphlet, of our own times. It combined the attractions and the influence of all these; for its grotesque masks and elaborate "spectacle" addressed the eye as strongly as the author's keenest witticisms did the ear of his audience. Some weak resemblance of it might have been found, in modern times, in that curious outdoor drama, the *Policinella* of the Neapolitans: something of the same wild buffoonery overlying the same caustic satire on the prominent events and persons of the day, and even something of the same popular influence.* The comic dramatist who produced his annual budget of lampoon and parody has also been compared, not inaptly, to the "*Terræ Filius*" of our universities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; that curious shadow of the old pagan saturnalia, when once in the year some clever and reckless graduate claimed prescriptive right to launch the shafts of his wit against proctors, doctors, heads of houses, and dignities in general—too often without much more regard to decency than his Athenian prototype. The Paris '*Charivari*' and the London '*Punch*,' in their best days, had perhaps more of the tone of Aristophanes about them than any other modern literary production; for Rabelais, who resembled the Athenian dramatist

* "Here, in his native tongue and among his own countrymen, *Punch* is a person of real power: he dresses up and retails all the drolleries of the day; he is the channel and sometimes the source of the passing opinions; he could gain a mob, or keep the whole kingdom in good humour."—Forsyth's *Italy*, ii. 35.

in many of his worst characteristics as well as his best, can scarcely be called modern, and has few readers. The 'Age' and the 'Satirist' newspapers, to those who remember them during their brief day of existence, may well represent Athenian comedy in its worst and most repulsive features—its scurrilous personalities and disregard of decency.

It may be remembered by the readers of these volumes that the dramatic representations at Athens took place only at the Dionysia, or Great Festivals of Bacchus, which were held three times a-year, and that each play was brought out by its author in competition for the prize of tragedy or comedy which was then awarded to the successful exhibitors by the public voice, and which was the object of intense ambition.* This will in some degree account for the character of Attic comedy. It was an appeal to the audience,—not only to their appreciation of wit and humour, but also to their sympathies, social and political, their passions, and their prejudices. Therefore it was so often bitterly personal and so hotly political. The public demand was always for something "sensational" in these respects, and the authors took care to comply with it. And therefore, also, we find introduced so frequently confidential appeals to the audience themselves, not only in those addresses (called the *parabasis*) in which the author is allowed to speak in his own proper person through the mouth of the Chorus, but also on the part of the individual characters during the action of the play. They enlist the spectators

* See 'Æschylus' (A. C.), chap. i.