

## The Lost Power of Aristophanes: An analysis of Ancient Greek and Modern Italian Misuse of Aristophanes

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### Abstract

As demonstrated with the play *Knights*, the Athenian citizens seemed to have a mixed reception of Aristophanes. They gave him the first prize in the Laenian, but they voted to renew the politician Cleon, Aristophanes' enemy and the antagonist in the *Knights*, in his role of general. This paper will compare Aristophane's reception in his home country and in modern Italy. More than 2400 years later, this time in Italy, his political commentaries were not absorbed, and they were left behind as part of the play, rather than as advice to be pondered by the public. The most modern example of this inability to absorb the play's meaning is in the performance of *Frogs* in 2002, where the author's modernization of the play was censured for its attack against then prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and other right-wing politicians. The 2002 rendition of the Athenian play proved annoying enough for the right-wing party, the first receiver of the play, to threaten the cutting of funds, or the removal from theaters altogether. However, this action did not upset the director at first, and the audience did not consider it invasive or depriving. This paper will compare Aristophane's reception in his home country and in modern Italy. In conclusion it seems that the two periods are more similar than what it seems, and that Aristophanes' messages are more often understood and attacked only by those in power, while the wider audience does not listen to them.

### 1. Introduction

After the rise of Fascism in Italy in 1922, with the March on Rome Mussolini decided to bring back the much-desired Roman Empire. Alongside the plans of territorial conquests, the Fascist party also bolstered the study and use of customs that were perceived as proper to the ancient Romans.<sup>1</sup> The new Government completely reformed the educational system and decided to promote a rediscovery of classical theater, promoting INDA,<sup>2</sup> the National Institute of Ancient Drama, which had been founded in 1914 to bring back to the stage performances of ancient Greek and Roman plays.

The first performances during Fascist rule were Euripides' *Bacchae* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, both performed in 1922. The next one was supposed to be Aristophanes' *Knights* in 1924, but the organizers decided to play Sophocles' *Antigone* and Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* instead.<sup>3</sup> The special guest of the year was going to be then Prime Minister Benito Mussolini, leader of the Fascist party. The reason behind this change was that the organizers feared that Mussolini could have been connected with the populist antagonist of the play, Paphlagon. After that only one more comedy of Aristophanes was performed until the 1950s, and it was *Clouds* in 1927.

This is not the first time that Aristophanes' comedy was considered troubling by the people in power. At the beginning of his career, the author took a strong stance against the politicians of his time and the war raging in Greece. This caused him to be prosecuted in court, allegedly twice, but both times he managed to come out clean. Because of this similar treatment, this paper confronts the reception of Aristophanes' work both in Italy and Ancient Greece, in order to explore the similarities and differences between the understanding of Aristophanes in Athens as well as in 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy.

### 2. The Development Of Theatre In Greece

The first time that comedy was part of the Great Dionysia, the most famous theatrical festival in honor of Dionysus, was somewhere between 487 and 485 BCE. Later in the same century, in the 440s, the Lenaia, focused purely on comedy, became another such festival. One of the most famous authors of this period was Aristophanes, who performed many of

his plays at this second event, starting at the beginning of the 420s and ending with his death in 385 BCE. Around the end of his career, comedy transitioned from its old period into the so-called middle period, whose themes dominated comedic performances until around 320 BCE when New Comedy is considered to begin.<sup>4</sup> Old Comedy and Aristophanes focused mostly on the commentary and satirization of contemporary social issues and public figures, analyzing them and usually attacking the behaviors and values of the subject in front of the city and its guests. This was not without consequence, and Aristophanes' feud with Cleon up until the death of the latter is an example of this. Starting early in his career, Aristophanes attacked Cleon for his behavior, his character and his upbringing in multiple plays, both those we have and the ones we have lost. In exchange Cleon took Aristophanes to court twice, once on the accusation of shaming him and the city in front of the allies, and the second one under the accusation that Aristophanes was not an Athenian citizen as he claimed to be.<sup>5</sup> Alongside these themes, this age of comedy is also characterized by referencing and utilizing styles more proper to epic and tragedy, a style called paratragedy, and the strong presence of the chorus as an instrument of meta-theatre. In particular in the parabasis of some plays it is possible to see how Aristophanes meant some of his characters to represent current topics and individuals, breaking what today we call the "Fourth Wall".<sup>6</sup>

Alongside the development of Old Comedy Athens was developing the navy and democracy. This led the city to establish the Delian league and to head an imperialist thalassocracy, laying the foundation for the Peloponnesian War. Aristophanes worked mostly during the war, and then later after Athens' defeat. In 431 B.C.E. the tension that Athens and its allies bottled up against Sparta and the Peloponnesian league finally exploded and war engulfed Greece. The decade went with ups and downs for both sides, and Athens adopted imperialistic tactics against allied and neutral cities to deter them from joining the opposite side; Cleon was one of the strongest supporters of this aggressive diplomacy in the democratic assembly. This politician was an upstart in politics who descended from a family of tanners. Famous is the almost massacre of Mytilene in 427 B.C.E., when the assembly decided to kill only 1000 prominent citizens in the end. An important point in the clash was the battle of Pylos and Sphacteria in 425 B.C.E. In this peninsula of the Peloponnesus, the Athenians under the command of Demosthenes managed to establish a fort and fend off the Spartan siege, while at the same time capturing 300 Spartiates that were on the island of Sphacteria.<sup>7</sup> This was a resounding victory all over Greece, because it broke the myth of the inviolability of the Peloponnesus and of the invincibility of the Spartan army. In Athens the victory and honors were claimed by Cleon, who had arrived toward the end of the siege, and not by Demosthenes, the original leader of the Athenian army.<sup>8</sup> Another turning point in the war were the two years 422-421, when Sparta and Athens grew tired of the conflict and started looking for peace. At the same time Cleon was killed at the battle of Amphipolis and, with the death of one of the loudest war hawks in the assembly, Nicias could push forth a vote for the homonymous peace in 421 B.C.E.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Development Of Theatre In Italy

The relation between Greek Theater and the Italian people is relatively short. As professor Martina Treu shows in her article "The History of Ancient Drama in Italy", timid attempts to bring classical theatre to the stage were made at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and then in the second part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Both times the themes and styles were created by noble scholars in order to fit with the tastes and expectations of the upper class and other small, similarly elitist, circles. The discussion and reception of theater was therefore in the hands of a selected few; as Treu herself says: "for centuries, ancient dramas were read, translated, and studied but very seldom performed".<sup>10</sup> The reason for the gap between the two attempts was the creation of opera in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Florence, which did not help the diffusion of classical theatre, because both producers and the public preferred to look at and enjoyed more the lighter subjects put on the stage by opera.<sup>11</sup> This shaped the type of reception Italians have of classical theatre, one based on the magniloquence and decadence which are usually the stereotypes of the noble class. At the same time the set is modernized, mingling contemporary settings in which the audience lived with elements which are thought to represent classical elements and characteristics.<sup>12</sup> This scenic style has remained up to these days, in both tragedy and comedy. However, lately, it seems that a change in the perception of comedy has happened in the past decades. In fact, from the second part of the last century authors tried to mix modern with classical while attempting some form of social and political commentary. Similarly, playwrights and directors such as Marco Martinelli have turned Aristophanes into a new experiment in the last 20 years, attempting to bring Aristophanes to the younger generations. With the help of the youths, both Italians and immigrants, workshops and performances have been made that bring Aristophanes up to date over modern issues, such as poverty, the migrant crisis, and the fight against the Mafia and other similar criminal organizations.<sup>13</sup>

Any time in the past that theatre has been used to advance social issues or as a mean of political commentaries, the plays tended to become extremely controversial, and the people in power, both secular and religious, have tried to shut it down. Three famous examples of such events were: the first time comedy was proposed at INDA, in 1924, year in which *The Knights* was cancelled because Mussolini was the special guest in attendance; in 1957, when the archbishop of Benevento excommunicated all those who went to see *The Women in the Parliament*, or *Ecclesiazousae*, performed in Benevento; and the last case in 2002, where *The Frogs* was "censored" because it used as props the images of four prominent Italian right-wing politicians on panels.<sup>14</sup> This last time was very particular because, after the director decided to remove the panels, he himself stated to various major newspapers that they were not important, but later he recanted and attacked the

government for their act of censorship.<sup>15</sup> The research has determined two conflicting lines of thought among scholars in Italy. On one hand, some researchers think that these new attempts, springing from involving youth with issues of modern Italy, are a sign of change and a seed of hope for the future of Aristophanes' presence in Italy. On the other some scholars think that Italy is not yet ready for this author and decry the strong censorship and the attitude of the Italians toward the classics. To use the words of professor Schironi to sum up this position, in a rather depressing tone: "And the Italian term 'commedia politica' cannot be translated as English 'political comedy'. A much more accurate translation would perhaps be 'comic politics'".<sup>16</sup> Dr Schironi's position is the foundation on which most scholars build their arguments, both positive and negative ones. The author identifies four reasons for such situation: first, Italy lacked a unitary government until the second part of the nineteenth century. Second is the cultural conception of the past inherent to being Italian. The third is the school curriculum, built during the fascist era and barely changed since then. Finally, the fourth factor is the heavy involvement of the state in many artistic productions, and in INDA in particular.

Let's consider these claims more in depth: First, the fact that we are a relatively modern country, founded in 1861 after the unification of the peninsula under the house of Savoia. In less than a hundred years Italians have suffered two world wars, twenty years of fascist dictatorship, a civil war between fascists and a democratic-communist coalition, the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Republic. At the same time after the rise of the Republic ample areas of Italy fell under the control of the communist party, and the situation got so tense that in Italy the '70s are commonly referred as "the lead years", because of the quantity of bullets shot even in public. To complicate the political situation, the southern regions were and are under the influence of the Mafia and other criminal organizations, and monarchic sentiment is still strong down there. Italy has become such a mosaic of opinions that a common proverb among the Italians is: "When there are three Italians in a café, there are at least four opinions in the room". Schironi identifies this lack of an established political debate and unity as the cause for the lack of political engagement, and the reason for which Aristophanes' voice cannot act as a strong social commentary, but just as a comedy. According to the author, Italy lacks the political tradition that other countries have, such as English parliamentarism, or French republicanism. Because of this it is probable that Italians lack a frame of reference in which they can talk and debate the ideas that Aristophanes brings forth. The only way they have to receive Aristophanes comes then not through the political lenses, but through the only other perspective they have toward the past: as the rightful retainers of what is classic. This implies that the material is therefore not active, but it has crystallized as a relic of times which are no more, as the next paragraph illustrates.

Italian cultural past is the second element of our attitude. Even today, Italians feel that they are the descendants of the Romans and Greeks who settled and unified the country for the first-time thousands of years ago, and whose conquest has expanded the borders from Scotland to the pyramids, and from Spain to the Euphrates river. This sense of descent fills Italian society, from scientific research, where a genetic make-up to prove the "Latinity" of these people has been going at a European level since at least 2013,<sup>17</sup> to cultural traditions; the Italian anthem clearly states that Italy has picked up Scipio's helmet and it has captured Victory, the slave of Roma.<sup>18</sup> This sense of descent and ownership led Renaissance scholars to rediscover the classics, but Schironi argues that it is because of this that Italians have crystallized their beliefs concerning the classical age, and any updating of them is wrong. As she writes "Updating' the classics in Italy is often a synonym for their betrayal. Classics *is* tradition".<sup>19</sup> From this paper author's own experience in Middle school and in High school, where Latin was a core subject of my major,<sup>20</sup> the professors valued a more literal translation respectful of the style and the words of the ancient authors rather than updating it to fit within a modern Italian translation. This attitude pervades the classrooms in Italy, which then helps in promoting the same values to the next generation. This is repeated in every generation, especially because of the lack of any other discourse that utilizes these authors and this past as evidenced above.

Both of these reasons interact with the third one: the school curriculum. Revolutionized in 1923 by Giovanni Gentile, a philosopher who worked under the Fascists regime, it has kept the same characteristics since then. If a student decides to go to high school in order to attend a *università* later, they will have to study Latin for at least two years, and almost every *liceo* has some years of Latin in its curriculum. From Schironi's article:<sup>21</sup>

"Thus, classic culture has always been supported and sustained by the government, and embodied in the state school system. This has led to a link between Classics and the conserving of tradition, if not actually between Classics and political conservatism. While the Italian academics to whom the classical world appeals are generally left-leaning, the spectators who enjoy classical drama in theatres are often more conservative. The Italian audience normally goes to a performance of a classical play with certain expectations, because they often happen to know the play. Thus they do not like it when the text is changed or updated. And this, I would suggest, plays an important role in the choices of directors like Ronconi."<sup>22</sup>

This attitude takes away from the ability of the author to change and play with the play. The lack of political discourse in Italy and the deeply rooted beliefs concerning the past mean that if a classical source is not portrayed as befitting the "City of Marble" that Augustus left us, then its interpretation is wrong, and it is much riskier to put on stage.

Last, but not least, just like the school curriculum, INDA is a state institution funded by the government. This means that the festival of Syracuse, the biggest venue where classical plays are displayed, can easily be controlled and regulated by the government, with all that this implies. The establishment has controlled productions since the beginning of INDA.

As mentioned earlier, in 1924 the Fascist coup led the organizers to switch from *Knights* to *Antigone* and *Seven against Thebes*. Dr. Treu shows in her article how for the first 50 years of the association only classical-sounding plays were performed, until the first author who attempted to shift this paradigm started writing, Pier Paolo Pasolini. Pasolini, alongside actor Vittorio Gassman and director Luciano Lusignani who both commissioned and used Pasolini's translations, was attacked by scholars and conservatives alike because of his choices to modernize the texts and to actualize the productions, to the point that some of his works were censored or outright prosecuted, like the 1968 novel and movie "Teorema", a modern interpretation of Euripides' *Bacchae*.<sup>23</sup> From these analyses of the Italian conditions and attitudes over the classics and theatre, one can see where the lack of hope that some scholars have come from. However, some of the new options and techniques highlighted by Dr. Treu will hopefully mitigate and bring change to the situation.

#### 4. The Greek Reception

From the beginning Aristophanes' *Knights* is full of references to contemporary events. Examples of this are the two slaves the spectators meet right at the beginning, who complain about the situation. They are Demosthenes and Nicias, two famous generals of the period.<sup>24</sup> While setting the scene the slaves refer to real events, such as at lines 54-57 the victory at Pylos won by Demosthenes and whose credit was taken by Cleon, here depicted as: "Why, just the other day I whipped up a Spartan cake at Pylos, and by some very dirty trick he outmaneuvered me, snatched the cake, and served himself-the one I'd whipped up."<sup>25</sup> This is again referenced at 355 and at 655 when the sausage seller and the antagonist, named Paphlagon, a fictional personification of Cleon, talk to the council. At 705 Cleon threatens to use the fame of that "cake" to win over Demos, his master. The political life of the polis is integral to the play, both in providing the setting, and in the development of the story. As someone familiar with basic Greek can understand, Demos is a talking name, and the character too is characterized in a very clear manner as a personification of the Athenian assembly. He dwells in the *Pnyx*, where the assembly used to meet and vote, and as described by Demosthenes, his slave, at lines 40-43, he is a "master with a farmer's temperament, a bean chews, prickly in the extremes, known as Mr. Demos of Pnyx Hill, a cranky, half-deaf little codger."<sup>26</sup> Later he is described again by the Sausage Seller at lines 752 and following: "When he's at home the old fellow's the shrewdest of men, but when he's sitting on that rock, he gapes like a chewer of dried figs!".<sup>27</sup>

Paphlagon too is described at the beginning at length, around 40 lines (43-80). Before the character is even named, he is identified by his profession, a *βυρσοδέψης* (a tanner), and it would be impossible for an Athenian spectator to miss the reference here to Cleon, himself one of the first traders to become a politician. His family trade was tanning, unlike his detractors Aristophanes and Thucydides who came from aristocratic backgrounds. After the reference Aristophanes spends almost every single line on giving Paphlagon/Cleon a bad reputation:

"Last market day he [Demos] bought a slave, Paphlagon, a tanner, an arch criminal, and a slanderer. He sized up the old man's character, this rawhide Paphlagon<sup>28</sup> did, so he crouched before the master and started flattering and fawning and toadying and swindling him with odd tidbits of waste leather, saying things like, 'Mr. Demos, do have your bath soon as you've tried only one case.' -'Here's something to nibble, wolf down, savor: a 3-obol piece.' -'Shall I serve you a snack?' And then Paphlagon swipes whatever any of the rest of us has prepared and presents it to the master... he shuts us out and won't allow anyone else to court the master... he tells outright lies about the household staff; then we get whippings and Paphlagon chases after the servants, shaking us down, shaking us up, demanding bribes, making threats... And we pay the price, because if we don't, the master will pound on us till we shit out eight times as much."<sup>29</sup>

The paragraph does not give any good quality to Paphlagon/Cleon, and instead it directly attacks the individual for his mischief both against Demos, and against his fellow slaves. Not only he is a liar, but also a thief and a slanderer. Later he is also presented as impious and treacherous against his owner. From this it is not hard to see why Cleon brought Aristophanes to court on the base of an accusation of illegal appropriation of Athenian citizenship.<sup>30</sup> As Sommerstein elucidates, the preliminary hearing did not go well for Aristophanes, and the penalty for his conviction was going to be being sold as a slave. To avoid going to full trial, the author decided to make a deal with his enemy: if Cleon the politician withdrew his accusation, Aristophanes would not attack him anymore; Cleon agreed, and the trial was avoided. In the play right after this, *Clouds*, the target of his attacks is the philosopher Socrates. However, in the play after *Cloud*, *Wasps*, the two main characters are named after him, one positively and one negatively. Cleon died soon after this play and Aristophanes attacks him one more time in *Peace*.<sup>31</sup>

Cleon's accusation denotes a deeper divide between theatre, the public, and the politician. On one hand it was evidenced how Cleon felt deeply attacked and brought a very heavy accusation against Aristophanes. However, the public did not feel in the same way. It seems that they were more forgetful than the politician, since they appointed him general one more time just weeks after the play. As David Kowalko Roselli points out:

“These politicians were flashpoints of ideological struggle. Their portrayal as merchants and craftsmen united them with the perceived supporters of the radical democracy; some may have affected lower class traits to appeal to the urban poor. Paphlagon, a comic version of Cleon, is thus surrounded by leather-sellers, honey-sellers and cheese-sellers, and as their patron he ‘feeds’ the people through prosecutions of the wealthy. Paphlagon’s/Cleon’s threats to make his opponents liable for military expenses (e.g., trierarchs) suggest a recognized form of class warfare by redistributing private wealth to the community. The lower classes become politicized with such men as leaders: an elite critic of Cleon is branded by the poor as a pro-Spartan tyrant for barring poor citizens from exercising the laws of the city (*Wasps* 463–70; cf. *Lys.* 620f.)...Nonetheless, the re-election of Cleon as general in the weeks following the performance of *Knights* and the *demos*’ continued reliance on like-minded leaders attest to their valued role among the ‘commoners’ beyond the theatre.”<sup>32</sup>

Rosselli proposes that the characterization meant to insult Cleon seems to make him the hero of the people. The lower classes, the *demos*, who are the majority, see the politician as their defender in the class warfare that later in the war became predominant in Athens.<sup>33</sup> Aristophanes, with his aristocratic origins and beliefs, was probably seen as anti-democratic and pro-Spartan outside the theatre. In the end it seems that, at least regarding the perception of Aristophanes’ message, the Athenian people and the prominent men of the city had a different reception. The former considered the dramatist to fit (and excel) for the most part on the stage. The people considered Aristophanes’ message to be limited to the theatre, and not to be thought over later. On the other hand, the political elite was scared that his messages were going to become the ideas of the crowd, that their behaviors were going to be revealed as populists and corrupt. Therefore, they tried to fight and silence him, as Cleon attempted to do with Aristophanes.

## 5. The Italian Reception

In Italy, as explained above, the return of Aristophanes in theatre was quite late. Opera dominated the stage, and whenever Greek mythology was utilized, the story was strongly modified.<sup>34</sup> The first attempts were done at the beginning of the first World War. As recounted above, while INDA was developing, the Fascists took over and completely overhauled any previous system in their propaganda system. At this time, some artists also tried to reject the return of classical theatre: an example of this are the members of the *Futurismo*, which opposed academic art in favor of a more modern style which reflected the fast evolution of society.<sup>35</sup> As said above, in 1924 the organizer of the INDA decided to switch the performance for that year’s festival from Aristophanes’ *Knights* to *Seven against Thebes* and *Antigone*. The reason for this was that Paphlagon, which depicts a populist demagogue who rises and then loses power, was too easily associated with the Dux, Benito Mussolini, at that time newly appointed prime minister of the Italian Kingdom by Vittorio Emanuele III. While pressures from the fascists’ party are not evidenced, most scholars agree that INDA was indirectly controlled by the party. After the performance of *Antigone*, selected in place of *Knights*, the play was not brought to theatres any other time until after the second World War. As Treu puts it, “this could be related to threat of censorship, but also to the pressure of the cultural establishment, which supported the Fascist regime and held the ‘monopoly’ on ancient texts”.<sup>36</sup> At that time directors not only risked being persecuted by the regime, similarly to what happened with Aristophanes and Cleon, but also to be estranged by the cultural elite, that was the primary consumer of these products since the early days of theatre in Italy, as evidenced above in the historical timeline. In part, then, the reaction was similar to the one seen in ancient Athens, where those in power are scared by the messages contained in the text. However differently from the Attic city, the audience is composed only of the upper classes, with their own view of what was ancient theatre. This different view created problems absent at the time of the Athenian dramatist. Another important difference between the fascist era and Athens was the absence of the masses, more represented in the Athenian audience, but not participating in these plays. In this way they were not influenced by the plot message, and they were not recipients of Aristophanes at all.

A different example of reception in Italy happened after the war, when the Republic was established and social-democracy was the dominant political theory. Treu notices how during the fifties INDA started to perform plays from Menander and the new comedians, alongside Roman authors like Plautus and Terentius.<sup>37</sup> In contrast to this Aristophanes was not really well received and the play *Women in the Assembly*, performed in 1957 in Benevento suffered heavy criticism.<sup>38</sup> This time the criticism was not from the government, but from church official. The archbishop of Benevento threatened to excommunicate anyone who attended the play, because it was considered too blasphemous and satirical. The performance happened anyway. Outside the stage some more fundamentalist individuals threw hot water on the people going to see the play, but the audience was not intimidated and kept attending the performance. Once again, the elite was scared, and it found Aristophanes problematic; this elite was not the secular one, but the religious leadership of the area, which still held a lot of power in Italy, especially in the southern part of the state. In contraposition to the 1924 performance of *Knights*, this time the public was divided. Some went to the theatre and, just like the Athenians, watched the play and went home, but others instead opposed the play altogether on the basis of the religious ban. The religious authorities’ behavior was not isolated to Italy during the decade, but it was repeated again in 1959. That year Karolos

Koun's *Birds* was performed nowhere else but Athens, the original place of display two thousand years before, and it was censored by the Orthodox metropolitan as blasphemous, the same grounds as the *Ecclesiazousae* in Italy.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, we reach the modern day, with the 2002 version of *Frogs* by Luca Ronconi. An account of what happened is reported by Schironi in her previously cited article. The play debuted Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May 2002. For this play the director kept a translation that was almost exactly faithful to the original, save some changes of material that was too embedded in Athenian culture to be understandable nowadays. However, he decided to modernize the setting, with the background looking like the suburbs of a modern city left in a state of decline, with wrecked cars everywhere. The author admitted that he wanted to mirror an image of the city of Syracuse, while Dionysus became a “proletarian god” and Heracles had “gone hippy”. At the very back four panels were inserted as part of the set depicting four of the most active politicians from the right wing: Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Gianfranco Fini, the then deputy Prime Minister, Umberto Bossi, the then leader of the Northern Lega, and Ignazio La Russa. The day before the debut, at an official dinner, Ronconi was approached by the minister for equal opportunity for women, Stefania Prestigiacomo, and one of Berlusconi's right-hand men and officials, Gianfranco Miccichè. Miccichè was the first to ask for the removal of the panels, stating “Public theatre shouldn't criticize the people who give it money”. Minister Prestigiacomo sided with Miccichè and the situation got to the point that the two preferred to leave, and as the accounts go the discussion ended there.<sup>40</sup> The reason for leaving the dinner was, from the words of Miccichè himself in a later interview: “When I said that the Greek author [Aristophanes] did not insult democratic politician but tyrants, he replied: ‘Tyrants and profiteers’. So I asked: ‘Do you mean Berlusconi is a profiteer?’ and he said ‘yes’. Without problems. Then I left the dinner and went away”.<sup>41</sup> The day later the debut happened, and the public really appreciated it. However, Ronconi had decided to remove the panels, and at the end of the play the *Coryphaeus*, the leader of the chorus, pointed out with her finger the empty spaces on the scene; these were the only signs of a fight between the director and the government. The day after Ronconi made a statement to the press in which he decried censorship by the government. The government answered officially in a communication by Berlusconi himself that stated: “Of course, that portrait of a tyrant with an Aristophanic flavor does not resemble me, but art has the right to choose -and miss- its targets.” Berlusconi also asked the director to put back on the panels.<sup>42</sup> At this point Ronconi decided not to put them back on, and when he was interviewed the day after, he replied

“Yes, of course, Berlusconi gave a civilized reply [...] I am not going to put the panels up again; let's put an end to it. Otherwise it would seem that first there was censorship, then an act of liberality from above. Let's not exaggerate. [...] It was a choice shared by every one of us in order to save the performance. Before any controversy, *Frogs* comes first, as does the right of the audience to follow Aristophanes. As a director and a man of theatre, I participated in an obligatory choice. Better to avoid surprises, protests, accusation, or who knows what.”<sup>43</sup>

Just as in ancient Athens, it seems that the people in power realized that the play was a not so veiled attack on the current political class, this time direct, not a perceived one such as in the previous two cases with the *Knights* and the *Assemblywomen*. And just like 2400 years ago, the government decided to accuse the director. Unlike then, when the accusation was public and brought to court, it happened behind closed doors at first, and then it was expressed in an exchange of lines between the politician and the director in a very civilized yet indirect manner. This time there was no direct accusation, but more silent threats about funding were made.

Ronconi believes that there are two reasons he decided not to put out again those panels: not because they were “unnecessary” but, as the director says: first it would have looked like the prime minister had come “to the rescue”, saving the arts from state censorship, an action which would have diminished the resonance of his panel with the rest of the play. Berlusconi would not have been seen anymore as one of the causes for the decadent city, but as the one who was attempting to bring it back together. And second, the government had already hinted on funding, and not only Berlusconi's henchman, but even a minister had attacked Ronconi. If the director wanted to display his version of the play again, or if he wanted to have a future in public theatre, he had to protect himself, and the play, from censorship again. A second layer of reception is provided by the people. Schironi points out at different times how the public did not feel outrage at the removal of the panels, and how their presence was not considered necessary.<sup>44</sup> This is because the modernized social commentary was the setting, now tampered with and not as effective as before. How so? If, as evidenced above, the focus of the public is already on the ancient past and in the truthfulness of the play to the Athenian original, then the absence of such strong visual supplements caused the political commentary not to be connected as strongly to the modern days, suggesting that these politicians the cause for the city in ruin. Rather than this, the public simply saw a modernized version of Hell, where the present world had gone to ruin because the place required the perversion of real life into evil and desperation. The devastation was caused not by human interaction, but by the innate nature of the setting, Hell. If the panels were present, this state of decadence would have been perceived less metaphorically, but more as caused by the right-wing politicians in power. Because of the detachment from the modern politicians, caused by the panels removal, the public left the theatre without thinking of what they saw, just like it happened in Athens with *Knights*. Once again, we see two different responses: one from the people in power, and one from the public. The former has been scared by the play and tried therefore to oppose its message. The latter instead doesn't understand that the story was not simply a performance, but also a message to be thought and digested after the audience left the theatre.

## 6. Conclusion

In the end it seems that the reception of theatre in Italy and in ancient Athens is similar. There are some variations due to the different cultural contexts, such as the relevance of in-text references or the social value of theatre as both a religious and a ludic experience in Greece, while in Italy it is mostly ludic. However, when it comes to political commentary the response is similar and twofold. On the one hand the people in power, who are the ones attacked in many of Aristophanes' plays, are the ones that receive the message the most, and respond to it negatively. In ancient times Cleon brought Aristophanes to court to silence him, while nowadays the government threatened the removal of funds to force Ronconi's hand and make him remove the parts offensive to the right-wing politicians. On the other hand, the people did not receive the message the directors wanted to pass. Cleon secured the re-election to generalship and seemed to support him in court, forcing Aristophanes to retract his positions against the general. Berlusconi and his other allies managed to corner Ronconi, proving that in modern day Italy the social commentary is not important enough to be put on display for the public. It seems that it doesn't matter the fact that 2400 hundred years passed between the two plays, but the answer to their messages is similar: a fearful assault by those in power, and a political disinterest by the people.

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## 8. Endnotes

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1 Schironi, F. "Aristophanes on the Italian stage." Pp.267 and 273.

2 Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico.

3 INDA's own journal, called Dioniso, started publishing in 1929, making it hard to find the official documents explaining the reasons for this change. However Dr. Martina Treu hypothesizes that the directors feared the public would associate Mussolini with the comic antagonist of the play, Paphlagon; this happened later when Carlo Emilio Gadda wrote the text *Eros e Priapo*, in 1944-45, but only published it in 1967.

4 Sommerstein, A. "The politics of Greek comedy", pp.292 and 301-302.

5 Sommerstein, A. "The politics of Greek comedy", p.295; and again: Sommerstein, A. "Harassing the Satirist: The Alleged Attempts to Prosecute Aristophanes", pp.148-152 and 260-264. As the author writes: "The scholiast's stameno of interest is of a rather different kind; it is that Cleon 'also indicated [Aristophanes] for *xenia* [the crime of falsely pretending to be an Athenian citizen] and brought him to trial' this must refer to separate proceeding taken on a separate occasion", p.149. As illustrated before in this article, Aristophanes had already been accused for a different crime for his play *Babylonians*. Now he is accused a second time because he had not stopped satirizing Cleon.

6 Sommerstein, A. "The politics of Greek comedy", p.292.

7 Westlake, H. "The Naval Battle at Pylos and Its consequences", pp. 211-217; also: Thucydedes as an account of these events in his "History of the Peloponnesian Wars", book 4.

8 McGregor, M. "Kleon, Nikias, and the Trebling of the Tribute", pp.151-156.

9 Thucydidies, Book 4.

10 Treu, M. "The History of Ancient Drama in Modern Italy", p.222.

11 Treu, p.223.

12 Treu, p.223.

13 Treu, p.231.

14 Treu, M. "The History of Ancient Drama in Modern Italy", pp.226-227; and: Schironi, F. "Aristophanes on the Italian Stage", p.268.

15 Schironi, p.268.

16 Schironi, p.274.

17 Hay, M. "Genetic History of the Italians".

18 As Goffredo Mameli wrote the "Canto degli Italiani" the Italian national anthem in 1847. The first stanza goes: "Fratelli d'Italia/L'Italia s'è desta/Dell'elmo di Scipio/S'è cinta la testa/Dov'è la Vittoria!/?/Le porga la chioma/Ché schiava di Roma/ Iddio la creò." In English, from my personal translation: "Brothers of Italy/Italy has awaken/She bound her head/With Scipio's helmet/Where is Victory (referencing to the Greek Goddess Nike)!/? Let her give her hair (a reference of an ancient custom in which the victors would pick up the conquered prisoners by their hair)/ Because as slave of Rome/ She was made by God". In the stanza Italy and Rome are identified as the same, in a unity both spacial, taking the city for the full state, and temporal, from the Roman Republic to the new Italy. Another reference to the Roman past is in the third and fourth verse, in which Italy wears Scipio's helmet, the same Scipio who conquered and destroy the great roman enemy: Carthage. Figuratively Italy is wearing the thing that made Rome great and in the same way it is picking up its mantle.

19 Schironi, p.273.

20 For how high school works in Italy, a student picks a "major" in high school. These are broad fields of studies that however denote the areas a student wants to specialize once they pick a university. Some of these majors are directed toward the job market directly after high school, but any major directed toward going to a university, as later repeated in the third of Schironi's characteristics, requires for the first two years of school to teach Latin. Two majors in particular, the *Scientifico* or scientific and the *Classico* or classical, requires all five years of Latin, divided in two of grammar plus three of literature. The *Classico* is the only one that also teaches the Greek language, once again in the format of two+three explained with the Latin curriculum. Some middle schools also offer Latin as an after-school program for eight graders, in order to get them ready for high school if they decide to attend university-oriented *Liceii*.

21 Schironi, p.273.

22 Luca Ronconi, the director of the censured 2002 version of Aristophanes *Frogs*.

23 Treu, pp.227-228.

24 While they are not directly named in the play, there are references throughout the play to these two characters that have led commentators to make the connection. The quote shown here demonstrates how the first slave was with Cleon at Pylos, and how he led the troop to victory without recognition. This fits with the historical accounts we have about Demosthenes, allowing us to identify the character with the person.

25 Ar. *Kn*, 54-57.

26 Ar. *Kn*, 40-43.

27 Ar. *Kn*, 752-755.

28 In Greek, βύρσοπαφλαγών, a composite name comprising βύρσα, skin or bag, and παφλαγών the name of the character.

29 Ar. *Kn*, 43-70.

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30 Sommerstein, Alan, “The Politics of Greek Comedy”, p.294; this was the second time such an event happened, as the same article evidences there was another case a few years before after the first presentation of the now lost play *Babylonians*.

31 Sommerstein, A, “The Politics of Greek Comedy”, p.296.

32 David Kawalko Roselli, “Social Class”, from “The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy” by Revermann, M.

33 An oligarchic coup happened in 411 B.C.E., and later, once the war is over, the Spartans supported the infamous Thirty Tyrants in 404 B.C.E. This regime did not last long -only a year- but they tried to greatly reduce freedom in Athens. Moreover, they executed enemies indiscriminately. All these fears, a philo-Spartan tyranny who reduced the rights of citizens and executed with impunity are present in the quote above; as Roselli says, Cleon became one of the personifications of the Athenian democracy against the Spartans.

34 Michael Ewan’s article: “Greek Drama in Opera” presents the interactions of opera and Greek theatre/mythology. The first opera based on Greek mythology was done after half a century from the invention of this new art medium. Throughout the history of opera in Europe Ewan denotes that the Greek myths were altered, to fit with the taste of the time, and the setting was changed. For example, in Tommaso Traetta’s Antigone, based on Sophocles play, the heroine does not die in the end, but she marries her beloved Haemon. In two other libretti by Benedetto Pasqualigo and Gaetano Roccaforte, Antigone is grown up and has an adolescent daughter, who is the center of the plot. In the end it seems safe to say that Opera did not concern itself with transposing Greek theatre, but it simply utilized known stories from the Greek and roman period to readapt to current taste.

35 Treu, M. “The History of Ancient Drama in Modern Italy”, p.225.

36 Treu, p.225.

37 Treu, p.226.

38 Treu, p.227.

39 Treu, p.227.

40 Schironi, F. “Aristophanes on the Italian stage.” Pp.268-269.

41 Schironi, p.274; all translation from Italian in the article are by Schironi herself, unless otherwise stated.

42 Schironi, p.269.

43 Schironi, p.269.

44 Schironi, pp.268,270,273, and 274.