Between *Knights*, *Clouds*, and *Wasps*:
Narrative Dynamics and Comic Strategies in Aristophanic Comedy

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Abstract

Aristophanes' comedies *Knights*, *Clouds*, and *Wasps* form a cohesive triad, marked by structural and conceptual correspondences that reveal a deliberate compositional strategy. This study reconstructs the narrative and dramaturgical techniques through which Aristophanes represents the crisis of *paideia* and of democratic institutions, with particular attention to the construction of the protagonist, the dissonance of the endings, and a structural use of dramatic irony, which has not yet received systematic attention by scholarship. The comparative analysis seeks to highlight a progressive undermining of traditional comic resolution mechanisms, thereby contributing to a more precise understanding of Aristophanes' poetics in his early creative period.

Project Outline

In the first phase of his comic production, Aristophanes develops a triptych of plays that, while autonomous in dramaturgical structure and thematic approach, echo one another in their polemical tension and formal coherence. *Knights*, *Clouds*, and *Wasps*, composed within a relatively short time span, constitute three convergent responses to the crisis of Athenian democracy, its educational frameworks, and its participatory ideology. This is testified by numerous lexical, conceptual, and compositional parallels. *Knights* stages a direct satire of Cleonian demagogy; *Wasps* elaborates, with greater ambiguity, a reflection on the degradation of judicial power as internalized by the citizens; *Clouds* unmasks the decline of sophistic education and rhetoric, exposing their disintegrating effects both on the family and on civic life. In all three plays, Aristophanes' critique focuses on the erosion of the instruments of value transmission within the *polis*, dramatizing, through comedy, the city's incapacity to regenerate itself.

A particularly significant aspect lies in the different configuration of the dramatic outcome and the protagonist's role. In *Knights*, the final reversal is sudden and paradoxical: at the climax of the action, power passes from the vulgar sausage-seller to the personified Demos, initially depicted as passive but ultimately restored to a utopian centrality in the closing scene. In *Clouds*, by contrast, the openly negative ending is

foreshadowed from the earliest scenes: the Chorus, through a structural use of dramatic irony, directs the audience toward Strepsiades' downfall, subverting generic expectations. In both cases, the dissonant closure destabilizes the conventions of the comic happy ending, prompting a retrospective reinterpretation of the entire plot.

Similarly, *Knights* and *Wasps* present two divergent forms of critique of a corrupted democratic model: in the former, Demos is manipulated by an external and grotesque power (Paphlagon/Cleon); in the latter, populist ideology is so deeply internalized that it obstructs any rational reform, as exemplified by the failure of Bdelycleon's educational project.

Despite the vast scholarship devoted to Aristophanes, there is surprisingly no study that places these three contemporary comedies in direct relation from both a compositional and ideological perspective. This project aims to fill this gap through a systematic comparison that reveals, in comic variation, a progressive questioning of traditional mechanisms of resolution, thereby bringing to light a dissonant feature of Aristophanes' early poetics.

History of Scholarship

Although situated within the vast bibliography on Aristophanes, the present survey concentrates on four critical axes that are directly relevant to the methodological orientation of the project: the dramatic architecture of Aristophanic comedy; the application of narratology to ancient theatre; the role of dramatic irony; and the construction of the protagonist in relation to dramatic outcomes.

Regarding general studies on the structure and internal organization of *archaia*, the seminal contribution of Zieliński (1885) remains foundational. It laid the basis for subsequent systematizations by Gelzer (1970), Zimmermann (1987, 1996, 2006), and Sifakis (1992), culminating in the updated synthesis of Storey and Allan (2014), who define the genre through the formula "the comedy of the great idea." Along these lines, Landfester (1977) focused on the development of comic action. Particularly influential is Newiger's (1987) view that the canonical sections of Old Comedy (parodos, agon, parabasis, episodes, exodos) should not be regarded merely as ritual or formal elements, but as structures functionally integrated into the dramatic construction. He shows how Aristophanes employs these "traditional forms" strategically to sustain, modulate, or subvert the unfolding of the plot, thereby shaping the overall meaning of the comedy. Similarly, Treu (1999) highlights the role of the Chorus and its interaction with the protagonist as a decisive nexus for the ideological significance and comic force of the drama.

A major methodological contribution derives from classical narratology, primarily de Jong (2014), who has extended Genette's narratological categories to Greek literature. Her work makes it possible to investigate focalization mechanisms, informational misalignments, and the interplay between internal and

external perspectives. Although her attention has focused primarily on tragedy and epic, these categories prove applicable, and remain largely underexploited, in the analysis of Aristophanic comedy.

As for dramatic irony, which constitutes a central element of the present study, there is an almost total absence of research dedicated to Old Comedy. With the exception of a recent article by Zimmermann (2022), which mentions the phenomenon in a broader context, dramatic irony in Aristophanes (understood as the gap between the audience's awareness and that of the characters) has not yet been the subject of a specific investigation.

In terms of the comic protagonist, Whitman's framework (1964) remains fundamental, enriched more recently by Grilli (2021), who has systematized the models of the Aristophanic hero across the different phases of his production. Regarding dramatic endings, Marta Di Bari's monograph (2013) has opened a valuable perspective by comparing the closing scenes of comedies such as *Knights* and *Clouds*, suggesting a poetics of fracture rather than of reconciliation. In this direction, we may also include Henderson's observations (2003), according to whom the ending of *Wasps* is among the darkest and most disenchanted in Aristophanes' *corpus*, and Cassio's study (1985), which emphasized the destabilizing nature of comic reversals in *Knights*. More recent contributions by Napolitano (2015) and Ceccarelli (2020) complete this line of interpretation.

In the comparison between *Clouds* and *Wasps*, critics have often recognized a fundamental thematic affinity, beginning with Whitman (1964), who jointly analysed the two plays in his chapter on generational conflict. Similar observations are found in Bowie (1993, 102: "*Clouds* is structurally similar to *Wasps*") and in Jedrkiewicz (2006, 61), who emphasizes their common thematic framework. However, with few exceptions, scholars have paid little attention to the possibility that the two comedies may share more than a generic resemblance. In contrast to this dominant line, the contributions of Hubbard (1991), Sonnino (2005), who closely linked *Wasps* and the *First Clouds*, Telò (2010), and Morosi (2017) stand out, the latter highlighting the centrality of the father-son relationship as the pivot of both plots. For *Wasps*, this perspective has been further developed by Elena Fabbro (2013), who demonstrated how the familial and pedagogical dimensions interact closely with the political-ideological component.

This interest in generational themes connects to a broader critical line, already present in the works of Forrest (1975), Reckford (1976), Handley (1993), Strauss (1993), and Sutton (1993), the latter analysing the generation gap in Aristophanes with particular reference to *Clouds*.

Although less frequently examined, the comparison between Wasps and Knights remains equally promising, as shown by the studies of Jedrkiewicz (2006), Fabbro (2018), and Ceccarelli (2020), which highlight ideological ambiguity and the critique of corruption within democratic institutions.

Objectives and Methodology:

The proposed research aims to reconstruct the network of narrative, thematic, and ideological correspondences between *Knights*, *Clouds*, and *Wasps*. By transcending the isolated study of individual motifs, it offers an integrated reading in order to grasp the underlying dramaturgical design of the three comedies. The objective is to provide an interpretative framework that highlights their overall coherence. It brings to light the formal strategies and rhetorical devices through which Aristophanes increasingly develops an ambiguous and problematic representation of the educational and institutional crisis of fifth-century Athens.

The investigation will be organized into four main axes:

1) Narrative mechanisms and the articulation of conflict: identification of recurrent patterns and their variations in the development of the plot and *dénouement*. Particular attention is paid to how the three comedies establish the initial conflict and unfold its resolution, also in relation to genre conventions.

2) The structural function of dramatic irony: the research will develop a yet unexplored analysis of the use of dramatic irony as an internal driving force of comic dynamics. The study will highlight the techniques by which Aristophanes constructs, through foreshadowing, explicit anticipations, and alterations in dramatic architecture, a gap between the knowledge of the characters and that of the audience.

3) The construction of the protagonist and familial dynamics: through the analysis of generational relationships and the motif of final palingenesis, the project will show how these dimensions, constantly intertwined in the comedies under consideration, contribute to shaping the status of the comic character. In *Knights*, a rejuvenated Demos is restored to an active role in the polis; in *Wasps*, Philocleon's transformation assumes parodic and destabilizing features; in *Clouds*, conversely, the very failure of Strepsiades' rejuvenation project, his attempt to relinquish paternal authority in order to be supported by his son, emerges as one of the drama's central problems.

4) Towards a poetics of fracture: building on the findings of points 1–3, the study will assess the extent to which Aristophanes develops a non-conciliatory model of comedy, characterized by ambiguous epilogues, paradoxical reversals, and a rupture of the comic pact with the audience. The three plays appear to converge, each in a distinct yet complementary manner, towards a model that undermines the traditional harmonious resolution of the comic ending.

The research adopts a multidisciplinary approach integrating the tools of classical philology with narratology, reception theory, and dramaturgical analysis. A close reading of the texts takes into account major textual, linguistic, historical and cultural issues. This philological examination is complemented, on the theoretical level, by narratology, with particular reference to Gérard Genette's models and their

application to Greek literature, as developed by I. J. F. de Jong. In parallel, perspectives from reception theory are employed to assess how narrative construction and dramatic irony serve to guide or disorient the audience, fostering its critical participation. In this regard, the project draws on Jurij Lotman's observations on the relationship between literary text and audience composition, as well as the notion of the "audience within the audience" elaborated by Giuseppe Mastromarco.

Thus, the project seeks to explore the relationship between narrative construction and ideological implications, considering the dual dimension of the recipient: as an implicit addressee shaped by dramaturgical strategies, and as a historically situated subject. The ultimate goal is to restore to Aristophanic comedy the complexity of a highly self-conscious narrative system, capable of modulating comic effect through refined structural strategies and of orchestrating a critical dialogue with its audience through plot, irony, and the management of knowledge.

Project Structure and Timeline

The project will extend over three years, following a gradual progression that begins with the definition of the theoretical framework and close textual analysis, and culminates in a comparative synthesis and the final drafting of the dissertation. The main phases are structured as follows:

First Year – Preliminary Analysis and Theoretical Framework

During the first year, the aim is to establish the theoretical and bibliographical foundations of the research. At the outset, particular attention will be devoted to the selection and organization of both general and specialized scholarship: narratological studies, recent contributions on Aristophanic poetics, and analyses and commentaries on each play. A comprehensive review of the main interpretive approaches will follow, focusing on the structure of Attic comedy, the mechanisms of dramatic irony, the construction of the protagonist's role, and the modes of audience engagement with comic texts.

On the basis of this survey, I will define the methodological framework, drawing especially on the narratological models of Gérard Genette and I. J. F. de Jong, while also integrating insights from reception theory. Alongside this, a systematic close reading of the three comedies will be undertaken, with a focus on passages crucial to dramatic development and on the role of canonical sections (agones, parabases, exodoi). The analysis, grounded in the original Greek texts, will be supported by constant engagement with both ancient and modern commentaries.

By the end of the first year, an analytical grid will be developed to guide the comparative reading of the three comedies according to the thematic strands identified. At the same time, a preliminary chapter structure for the dissertation will be outlined.

Second Year – Comparative Research and Interpretive Development

Building on the groundwork laid during the first year, a systematic comparative analysis of the three plays will be carried out. This phase will focus on four core thematic areas:

a) Narrative structure and dramatic rhythm;
b) Dramatic irony and the management of knowledge;
c) The configuration of the protagonist's role;
d) Political and ideological dimensions.

During this period, I plan a research stay at Philipps-Universität Marburg, building on the connections already established with the Department of Classical Philology following a post-graduate research traineeship. This stay will allow me to refine the methodological framework and engage with a broader scholarly community. It will also offer opportunities to present and discuss preliminary results in seminars and to enrich the overall interpretation through interdisciplinary and international dialogue.

Third Year – Synthesis, Revision, and Final Drafting

The third year will be devoted entirely to the final writing of the dissertation. The chapters drafted during the second year will be integrated into a coherent structure, accompanied by a general theoretical introduction and a concluding section. Throughout this process, the writing will be supported by ongoing consultation with the supervisor to ensure argumentative consistency, clarity of exposition, and methodological rigor.

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