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Appreciating Aristophanes Through Comparison

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Abstract

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Aristophanes has been one of the most influential comedians to ever bring laughter to an audience. His works have survived extinction and remained relevant because they are not only brilliantly written but also truly hilarious. Yet much of the humor Aristophanes' original audience would have experienced is lost due to the great social, political, and cultural distance between our modern society and classical Athens. This thesis proposes that employing a current comedic production in a comparison to the extant works of Aristophanes can fill in many of the gaps that exist in the minds and imaginations of Aristophanes' contemporary audience. The cartoon comedy, *South Park*, was chosen for this purpose and the introduction sets out to facilitate a scholarly comparison between these two comedies by introducing many of the broad similarities between them. Subsequent chapters then explore more specific points of Aristophanic humor that can be better understood through comparison to aspects of *South Park*.

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Introduction

The interpretation of classical civilization, whether drawn from physical artifacts or written works, will inevitably be presented through the lens of a modern perspective. When little concrete evidence exists for the study of an ancient culture, it becomes ever more tempting to fill in the gaps with speculation that suits a specific purpose or ideology. This dilemma of applying modern ideals to ancient evidence can manifest itself in both positive and negative ways. Without some relation between the modern audience and the people of the past, there would be less incentive for continued research and study. We are drawn to the examination of historical civilizations because we look for a sense of continuity in the history of humanity and for information that can be applied to our own lives. This can, however, lead to the fabrication of far too much as historians attempt to further our understanding of ancient societies.

Aristophanes and his works have been seen through the lenses of many cultures, times periods, and political leanings. This one comedic playwright provides us with such a dense amount of societal information about classical Athens and the Greek world through his plays that it is not surprising so many opinions arise regarding his writings. Physical artifacts often do not provide the deeper insight into public opinion and political unrest that the written word does. It is because of this concentrated amount of information that we encounter a major problem with the reading and study of Aristophanes' plays. As the text is translated into English and read as though it were a history textbook, we lose the perspective of the comic festival that was an Aristophanic play in ancient Athens. What was once funny is so removed from our modern minds that we do not understand the context or the reasons behind the jokes. If a joke must be

explained it is inherently less funny and this is very relevant to the study of Aristophanes. Even worse than this loss of humor is the possibility for misinterpreting the very intent with which Aristophanes creates his jokes and farcical themes. If, in this way, a joke is not understood in its original context, it may seem cruel or in bad taste to a modern audience. Additionally, the more we lose of the comedy, the more difficult it becomes to understand the implications of Aristophanes' political and cultural satire as well as the reaction his audience would have had to it. We must accept that a lens will always exist that each society will use to view Aristophanes. It is possible, however, to minimize the amount this lens changes or distorts information and to use this lens simply to appreciate the humor already existent in the plays of Aristophanes.

A simple comparison between Aristophanes and a modern comedy offers a rare opportunity in the realm of classical interpretation. A comparison offers us a chance to change significantly how we view Aristophanes while never straying far from the actual text. While it is the point of this comparison to study Aristophanes through a modern perspective, this lens exists only out of necessity to examine the complicated political and social humor rooted deeply in the culture from which it comes. Comparison with a modern analogue ideally will facilitate an appreciation of the comedy and performance of Aristophanes as well as show both to be masterfully crafted. In further illuminating the work for its inherent brilliance and daring social commentary, we can begin to appreciate its relevance in a more timeless way. Instead of working hard to understand the humor in a joke that seems distant to the contemporary mind, we will be able to see how such a joke could have made an audience laugh or think or question the existing political system in an innovative way. It will be easier to understand what Aristophanes wanted to

accomplish through his humor as well as what his audience took away from such biting social and political commentary.

The televised cartoon titled *South Park* will provide the crucial element of contemporary humor to this examination of Aristophanes. This particular selection may seem oddly specific when one considers the vast amount of comedic performances that are part of modern society. The task of selecting just one analogue with which to compare Aristophanes becomes even more difficult when we consider Paul Cartledge's assessment on the topic:

It is not really surprising therefore that no modern form of comedy or individual comic drama should come anywhere near to reproducing the inimitable cocktail that was an Aristophanic play. For if we were to translate its content, tone, style and atmosphere into recent or contemporary terms, it was something like burlesque (not, I hasten to add, in the American sense of striptease), broad farce, comic opera, circus, pantomime, variety, revue, music hall, television, and movie satire, the political cartoon, the political journal, the literary review, and the party pamphlet—all shaken and stirred into one very heady brew.¹

While this list of characteristics seems extensive, each seems to have at least some part in Aristophanes' plays. Along with the issue of satisfying all these requirements in order to find a useful modern day comparison, we must also consider another issue inherent in the plays of Aristophanes. His direct connection to his own time period and society make his humor even more difficult to study through comparison. Cartledge also mentions this

¹ Cartledge 1990: 73-75

issue stating, “Aristophanes’ peculiar brand of Old Comedy was too intimately and directly connected to the immediate political (in the broad sense) circumstances of its production to survive into a different political environment.”² It is both the issue of the considerable number of genres that exist in Aristophanes as well as the specificity of his humor that must be overcome in order to accomplish the goal of appreciating the social and political brilliance of Aristophanes’ works. *South Park* is certainly not perfect in every way for this task. It does, however, fulfill more requirements for comparison than most existing contemporary comedy. It is necessary then to fully introduce this comedy and in doing so argue for its relevance in the study of Aristophanes.

Background

South Park is an animated television series that has been televised since August of 1997. The show has completed fourteen seasons with two hundred and nine episodes in existence as of 2010. *South Park* is still being produced with plans for a fifteenth season in 2011. It is the creation of two individuals, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, who have consistently remained the primary figures in the show’s writing and production. The content of this show is not the product of collaborative efforts between a changing group of writers on a staff. As we can assume Aristophanes’ plays all contain only his views, we can be sure that *South Park* is consistent in its perspective due to the fact that there are only two faces behind the comedy. Parker and Stone also provide the voices of a majority of the male recurring characters in the series.³ Just as it is possible that Aristophanes himself appeared in his plays as certain characters, Parker and Stone are also noticeably present in all aspects of the production of *South Park*.

² Cartledge 1990: 72

³ www.southparkstudios.com

The show is constantly aware of its satirical nature and its heavy involvement with social, political, and popular issues. Similar to Aristophanes, however, it is not above making fun of itself for this. Every episode is preceded by a black screen containing the warning:

ALL CHARACTERS AND EVENTS IN THIS SHOW—EVEN THOSE
 BASED ON REAL PEOPLE – ARE ENTIRELY FICTIONAL. ALL
 CELEBRITY VOICES ARE IMPERSONATED... POORLY. THE
 FOLLOWING PROGRAM CONTAINS COARSE LANGUAGE AND
 DUE TO ITS CONTENT SHOULD NOT BE VIEWED BY ANYONE.⁴

As this warning suggests, *South Park* expects many to find its content offensive and vulgar. The ambiguous mention of real people and real events also highlights the fact that much of what *South Park* seeks to address is intimately tied into the current culture. We can see this introductory screen paralleling in many ways the common introductory jokes Aristophanes uses to “warm up” his audience. It is common for Aristophanes to provide us with slave characters reciting various vulgar jokes or puns and often including in this section of the play mention of some recognizable names. These introductions can seem strange as we read Aristophanes’ plays in print, but they serve to introduce the audience to the upcoming comedy of the play. Both *South Park* and Aristophanes attempt to take their viewers to a place that is both serious and whimsical, completely ridiculous and acutely critical.

Setting/Plot

Despite the fact that *South Park* is a series with a set of recurring characters and

⁴

www.southparkstudios.com

themes, each episode generally exists independent of any other as far as plot is concerned. Its setting, however, is almost always in large part a small mountain town called South Park located in Colorado. This provides an important parallel between Aristophanes and the show. For most of his plays Aristophanes uses Athens or the surrounding area for at least some of his setting. By consistently using the same average American town as its main “place,” *South Park* can comment on its own, much larger society (America), in a similar way that Aristophanes comments on Athens. The town of South Park is intentionally portrayed as mirroring mostly average middle class society, which can then take on any aspect of contemporary culture that the writers choose to target. The comedy arises from a wide variety of topics regarding the town, from representations of class and race to representations of police and government officials. The town serves as both a means of creating laughter as well as a topic to be critiqued by the humor in the show. This relationship between setting and humor seems very similar to Aristophanes’ use of Athens in his plays.

The show has many recurring characters but it centers, generally, around a group of four children: Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman. Each of these children has family, friends, and relationships with many other individuals in the society of the town. The plots of most episodes are facilitated by the standard familial or social relationships stemming from these four characters. For the purposes of this comparison, a detailed knowledge of these characters and their relationships is not necessary. It is, however, useful to know that the characters Stan and Kyle are usually employed as the voices of reason in the stories of *South Park*. Just as Aristophanes likes to use his chorus and his chorus leader to speak directly to the audience, Stan and Kyle often speak for the creators

of the show. *South Park* itself has developed its own kind of formal parabasis in which Stan or Kyle begins with the phrase, “you know, I learned something today,” and goes on to clarify or expound the “point” of that episode, addressing the audience directly as a chorus leader would.

There are certainly large differences between a television series and a set of plays with regard to settings and plots. Athens’ small size, relative to The United States, and specific political environment give Aristophanes a truly unique setting and point of reference that, in many ways, is very specific to classical Athens. *South Park* attempts to address contemporary culture in largely the same way that Aristophanes addresses his Athens. Where Aristophanes can use the entire city as his setting, *South Park* must effectively shrink American culture down to a representative sample and use this sample in the same way Aristophanes uses Athens.

Visual

The visual style of *South Park* drastically increases its ability to represent American society in a way similar to Aristophanes' portrayal of Athens. It is animated with a style that can be described as construction paper cutouts in stop-motion animation. The bright colors, simple shapes, and basic movement that this type of animation produces allow for a large amount of liberty to be taken with the notion of “reality.” Despite the many obvious differences between an animated television program and a real life performance, the ability for both *South Park* and Aristophanes to transport their respective audience to a place where the fantastic is possible and perfectly acceptable is remarkably similar. Just as in Aristophanes’ Athens, the town of South Park is subject to many events that are simply beyond the bounds of reality.

Animation allows *South Park* to create situations similar to many of Aristophanes' most fanciful happenings in his plays. The striking difference that we see between a live performance and an animated cartoon should be softened by the profound difference between the audiences of each. Contemporary culture simply does not take in live performance the same way that Aristophanes' audience did. The creation of a *Cloudcuckooland* is a much different task for comedic writers today than it was for Aristophanes. As far as the suspension of "reality" we cannot find a better substitute for Aristophanes' brilliant imagination than animation in today's culture. The simple animation of *South Park* also allows it to be produced incredibly fast. This makes it possible for the show to make references to very recent events that would still be fresh in the public mind. Just as Aristophanes frequently mentions newsworthy events, *South Park* is similarly able to tie itself directly into its own time period and culture.

Application

Aristophanes is completely unique in many ways. He is the only fully extant comic writer of his time and thus his work constitutes all of what we have classified as Old Comedy. This uniqueness, however, should not discourage us from attempting to better understand his work. In many ways, his unique take on his contemporary society draws us in to Aristophanes' humor and creates an interest in his opinion on social and political matters that are over two thousand years distant. The purpose of comparing one of history's most famous and long lasting comedic writers to a contemporary cartoon should not be seen as a lessening of his true artistic genius. This comparison does not attempt to state that the poetry and wording of Aristophanes' plays is mirrored in *South Park*. It also should not be viewed as an attempt to lessen the cultural impact of

Aristophanes' social and political commentary in such a society with so few comic performances, as compared to modern America with innumerable comedies produced each year in a variety of media. Instead, this comparison exists to provide modern day readers an interesting perspective on the social and political comedy of Aristophanes with the purpose of enjoying his humor more fully and gaining some insight into possible ways an audience would have received his comedy. It also remains an important goal never to stray far from the actual text of the plays in our quest to better appreciate the brilliance of Aristophanes.

Chapter 1: *Wasps*, Modernized

The dilemma Aristophanes chooses to address in *Wasps* is a broad topic that impacts the whole of Athenian society. This play is a warning against the vast power a demagogue stands to gain from the manipulation and exploitation of the jury courts as they existed in Athens.⁵ Aristophanes, as he commonly does in his plays, presents us with a microcosm of this problem in the form of a household afflicted by an aged father's addiction to serving on juries. The entirety of the play focuses on this household and the relationship between the old father (Philocleon) and his grown son (Bdelocleon) and uses its inhabitants to make a larger commentary on society. The plot that evolves around this resulting conflict has remarkable similarities to a plot of one specific *South Park* episode. While many of the comedic themes in the *South Park* canon are strikingly Aristophanic, it is only with Episode 710, "Grey Dawn," that we find such an exact set of parallels. While the political issue is somewhat different in this episode from that which is dealt with in *Wasps*, the social issue is almost exactly the same. Here, *South Park* uses the relationship between an elderly father (Marvin) and his grown son (Randy) as a means for the examination of the right of elderly people to possess drivers' licenses despite the threat they may pose to the public. The jury court and the driver's license function in both works as an object of desire that has the potential to greatly influence the lives of others. This similarity allows for an in-depth comparison between this particular episode of *South Park* and Aristophanes' *Wasps*. Much about the social and political critiques of Aristophanes with regard to how they might have been interpreted by his audience can be gained from such a comparison.

⁵ Henderson 1998: 216

It is crucial as we examine Aristophanes and *South Park* to keep their settings in perspective. The political issues being discussed by Aristophanes in *Wasps* simply do not exist in our present day society in the same way that they existed in Athens. Americans do not live in a city-state and we have a significantly different political structure than Athens in the time of Aristophanes. A comparison will answer far more of the “how” questions concerning Aristophanes’ humor, specifically the way he makes us laugh and the way he makes us think, rather than answer the “why” behind his political stances in this play. With that in mind, however, it is also important to focus on what has not changed from the time of Aristophanes to the present day. The structure of the family still exists in a recognizable way and this concept plays a vital role in both *Wasps* and “Grey Dawn.” The initial appearance of a recognizable family unit exists in both works. This standard set of relationships familiar to the audience, however, is quickly undercut as both *South Park* and Aristophanes use the catalyst of old age to examine the reversal of roles between father and son. The way both Aristophanes and *South Park* use single families to examine a much larger social issue, as well many correlations between specific jokes and themes provide the basis for a comparison between the two comedies.

The difference between television and live performance is vast, yet any plot must be presented in a way so that an audience can clearly understand the context of the action. As Aristophanes and *South Park* introduce their respective audiences to the upcoming conflict, we can examine similarities between these two entertainment media. In *Wasps*, after some brief dialogue containing specific political jokes, the slave Xanthias explains in the prologue just how serious the problem is going to be:

Very well then: That’s our master up there, the big man asleep on the roof.

He's put his father under house arrest and posted us as sentries to prevent his escape. His father, you see, suffers from a bizarre sickness, which no one here will be able to recognize or diagnose unless we tell you...
addiction to jury service, and the world's worst case! (Tr. Henderson 67-73; 88)

It is already clear that we have left behind the realm of general reality and entered into an Aristophanic world where such an affliction is presented as a "disease" and where an old man presents such a serious flight risk. This suspension of reality is a common tactic employed by Aristophanes in many of his plays.

South Park offers us a slightly different introduction to the impending problem but certainly does not shy away from an air of Aristophanic boldness and suspension of reality. As the first scene of Episode 710 opens, we observe a large crowd gathered outside. We soon learn this is a memorial service, and Father Maxi, the town's Catholic priest, offers his thoughts on the situation:

Friends, we gather in this place to mourn the victims of yesterday's tragedy: nine good people who were run over in the street by an elderly woman driver...

It is sometimes hard, in times like these, to understand God's way. Why would he allow nine innocent people to be run down in the prime of their lives by a senior citizen who, perhaps, shouldn't be driving? It is then that we must understand, God's sense of humor is very different from our own. He does not laugh at the simple "man walks into a bar" joke. No, God needs complex irony and subtle farcical twists that seem macabre to you

and me. All that we can hope for is that God got his good laugh and a tragedy such as this will never happen again.⁶

While the actual setup is quite different in each of these introductions, they both provide a similar sense of the ridiculous and also serve the practical purpose of introducing the central conflict to the audience. Both Aristophanes and *South Park* commonly rely on such expositions to introduce their audience to not only the plot, but also the comic setting of the performance. It should not be overlooked that both comedies seem to require a kind of “warming up” of the audience in order for the bulk of the performance to work. This suggests not only a similarity between the humor present in both comedies but also between audiences. While both comedies are clearly popular based on their continued creation, their comedy is right on the edge of acceptable and this is what makes them so enjoyable. An introduction that explains to the audience that the world is now a comic one and that the ridiculous is completely acceptable here, helps both *South Park* and Aristophanes to be accepted by their audiences.

With just this comparison in mind, it still may be hard to recognize the close connection between the two problems at hand in this play and this episode. It will quickly become apparent, however, that both in *Wasps* and in “Grey Dawn,” we will have to deal with the sensitive familial and social issue involving the rights of the elderly. These are no mere helpless invalids, but ex-soldiers and ex-workers who helped build the country that the younger generations now can enjoy. Clearly, removing rights from these fellows will be no simple task. “Senior citizens have to be dealt with very gingerly,”⁷ states Randy, and Bdelocleon echoes the sentiment in saying “whoever riles that tribe of

⁶ Ep. 710; <http://www.imsdb.com/transcripts/South-Park-Grey-Dawn.html>

⁷ Ep. 710; <http://www.imsdb.com/transcripts/South-Park-Grey-Dawn.html>

oldsters riles a wasps' nest."⁸

Before we examine the use of the family dynamic we must first look at the serious underlying themes in both comedies and how they are presented. Aristophanes emphasizes the danger that the jury courts pose when the jurors become reliant on them for sustenance. His portrayal of Philocleon and his addiction not only to sitting on a jury but to the actual power of convicting someone, could have been quite a terrifying concept to an Athenian citizen. The mere allegation of a crime could result in severe punishment at the hands of the wrong juries. As Philocleon explains, there is no individual who can escape his ability to convict once he has been accused, despite their best efforts to convince him otherwise:

Then after I've been supplicated and had my anger wiped away, I go inside and act on none of those promises I made. I just listen to them spouting off every sort of alibi. Tell me, is there any brand of wheedling I don't hear in court? Some of them bewail their poverty and go on exaggerating their troubles until they somehow seem as bad as my own.

(Tr. Henderson 560-565)

This was a tangible, physical threat that could affect anyone living in Athens at the time. There is no fairness present in the decisions of these courts; instead, the crazed old Philocleon decides the fate of the accused. This overstatement of the problem is meant to bring the issue to the forefront of the audience's attention. Similarly, *South Park* brings to light the issue of the unsafe elderly driver by showing an exaggerated trail of death and destruction in his wake. In absurd fashion, cars run people down and crash into buildings

⁸ Tr. Henderson 223-224

throughout the episode in violent but completely unrealistic action. A news anchor gives a report to the town of South Park on the devastation being caused and states:

Another death tonight by a senior citizen motorist. Carl Zorn of Pine Junction was killed instantly when struck by a vehicle driven by Pete and Lydia Malman, who were trying to find Country Kitchen Buffet. This latest tragedy comes only two days after the accident in Deer Creek, where three construction workers and a bulldozer were run down by senior citizen Paul Thom, who was trying to find Country Kitchen Buffet.⁹

The problems of out of control juries and out of control drivers are not at all the same, yet both are serious contemporary problems, each relevant to their audience, and each presented in the context of a comedy. It is difficult for a modern audience to imagine living with the law court system of ancient Athens, but this should not impede our appreciation of Aristophanes' humor and biting social critique. We can also observe the way the two comedies incorporate another, more relatable, problem into their plots. While the right to be a juror and the right to drive are very different issues, the older generation's response in both works to threatened loss of independence and basic rights is quite similar. This is, after all, an older generation with distinct roots in the wars that built both Athens and twentieth century America.

“For war and peace do not form the background, against which the facts of normal everyday life stand out—they themselves shape these facts and all the consequent details,”¹⁰ Ehrenberg states regarding the critical importance war had on Athens. This remark is qualified, however, with the inadequacy of the evidence with which we are able

⁹ Ep. 710; <http://www.imsdb.com/transcripts/South-Park-Grey-Dawn.html>
¹⁰ Ehrenberg 1951: 297

to examine Athenian culture. He continues, “we must... try to discover the effect of war and peace on social psychology, and so complete in its essentials our picture of Athenian society.” And while it is certainly true that much about Athenian life will remain unclear, a comparison that can put the psychology of war into perspective for a modern audience is a valuable tool. The chorus in *Wasps*, made up of elderly war veterans, is mirrored in *South Park* by the AARP, made up of military veterans from wars relevant to the audience of *South Park*. After the town decides to revoke the driving privileges of senior citizens, this militant group of elderly people is called in by Marvin, our Philocleon figure, and what ensues is a violent military takeover of the town by a group of elders demonstrating many similarities to the chorus in *Wasps*. Just as the audience of Aristophanes would surely have gotten a laugh out of the chorus singing their war hymns and recounting their days in military service, a modern audience laughs at the sight of elderly grandmothers wielding machine guns and rocket launchers. There is much more, however, that we should glean from such a comparison. It is interesting to relate the veterans Aristophanes uses in *Wasps*, who served in the Persian Wars, to the veterans *South Park* uses who served in World War II. The mindset of this older generation is strangely similar as it comments on the younger generations and vice versa.

The way that Aristophanes portrays his war veterans is often humorous but not entirely disrespectful. While Philocleon reminisces about his ingloriously mischievous times in military service, the explanation the chorus gives as to why he and his compatriots are so much like wasps can be viewed as at least somewhat complimentary to military veterans:

Right away we charged forth with spear, with shield, and we fought them,

steeped in bitter spirits, each man standing beside the next, biting his lip with fury. We couldn't see the sky for all the arrows overhead, but still, with the gods' help, towards evening we pushed them back... Then we pursued them, harpooning their baggy pants, and they kept running, stung in the jaw and the eyebrow. That's why to this day barbarians everywhere insist that there's nothing tougher than an Attic wasp. (Tr. Henderson 1081-1090)

Aristophanes' chorus goes on to cite the navy and the fact that it was military veterans who won so much power and money for Athens in the form of tribute from conquered states:

No, in those days we didn't care
 about getting ready to make a good speech
 or to trump up a charge against someone,
 but only about who would be
 the best oarsman. That's why
 we took many cities from the Medes
 and are chiefly responsible
 for the tribute's being brought to Athens
 for the younger generation to steal. (Tr. Henderson 1093-1100)

The references to battles here are mixed and certainly should not be taken as specific accounts¹¹ but rather as a conglomeration of all the glory won by the elder generation condensed into a few brief lines. The question remains, however, as to how these

¹¹ Ehrenberg 1951: 298

references affected a general audience. There are indeed striking parallels between these chorus members and their battles with Persians and the elders of *South Park* and their involvement in World War II. This does not at all imply that these wars were similar in scale or structure or that the effects they had on populations were exactly the same. But perhaps we can observe a similar psychological effect of past wars on the various generations in a society by examining how our own comedy treats current veterans.

We see a clear similarity between the sentiments of the chorus and of Philocleon in *Wasps* to that of Marvin when he overhears his family conversing about the possibility of removing seniors' licenses:

Marvin: I heard what you said! You wanna take drivin' privileges away from seniors! Well let me tell you something, peckerface! I worked fifty-five years in the steel mill!

Randy: Yes Dad.

Marvin: And I flew Spitfires over Germany in World War II!

Randy: Yes I know.

Marvin: And I will be God-damned if the government thinks it can step in and take away my right to drive!¹²

How our current population sympathizes with veterans of wars that exist in the living memory of only a few is something that can take *Wasps* and its social commentary from quite foreign to almost domestic in the sense of understanding the characters of this play. So much in Aristophanes is lost because of how specifically his comedy is tailored to suit an Athenian audience in a particular year. Thus this comparison gives us a closeness that,

¹² Ep. 710; <http://www.imsdb.com/transcripts/South-Park-Grey-Dawn.html>

although manufactured, can truly bring an audience into a firmer realm of understanding. As an AARP member in *South Park* states, “No, we gotta be tough! Just like with those damned Japs!” we can use our own perceptions of our history with Japan to consider the Persian enemy as it is discussed humorously by the chorus in *Wasps*. When Aristophanes places his veterans in demeaning or funny situations it is initially unclear as to the purpose and tone of his humor. When a modern audience can observe how we treat our own veterans, perhaps we can better understand how the character of a veteran can be used in comedy. Both Aristophanes and *South Park* want us to find humor in the quirky and sometimes ridiculous actions of the older generation but not to forget their contributions to our own success and certainly not to overlook the many shortcomings and imperfections of the younger generations.

Several scenes and the general perspective of *Wasps* might be influenced by a specific theme which *South Park* employs in this episode as well. The elderly Marvin, for all his comedic grumpiness, actually appears as a sympathetic figure in several scenes. It is clear that his son, Randy never quite grasps that his father should be treated with respect when he questions Marvin, jailed for driving without a license:

We're not treating you like children, Dad. All right? Now I think you owe Mr. Police Officer an apology. Who needs to apologize, hm? Who's the sorry-sorry?¹³

At the resolution of the conflict in this episode we are treated to the usual voice of reason from Stan, the young child, who along with his friend, Kyle, is the most reasonable character in this comic world:

¹³ Ep. 710; <http://www.imsdb.com/transcripts/South-Park-Grey-Dawn.html>

Look, all Grandpa wants is not to be talked to like a child. I think half of what he was angry about wasn't what you were doing, but how you were doing it. And Grandpa, you should be proud that you made it through life to be a senior, but you should also realize that, when you're behind the wheel, you're a killing machine.¹⁴

It is clear that the contemporary audience will sympathize with Marvin and agree with what Stan has just stated. The infantile treatment of Marvin should help us appreciate the scenes after Philocleon's apparent conversion as Bdelocleon leads him around and instructs him how to live his life. How does Aristophanes want us to feel as Philocleon responds to his son's attempts to bring the old man to the forefront of trendy fashion? The discussion over a new cloak can be seen particularly sympathetically:

Philocleon: No I'll never take this off, not while I'm alive! It was my sole salvation when I was in the ranks, when the great north wind made war on us.

Bdelocleon: You don't seem to want anything nice done for you. (Tr. Henderson 1122-1125)

Philocleon: What the hell is this, for heaven's sake?

Bdelocleon: Some call it a Persian cloak, others a tasseled astrakhan.

Philocleon: I thought it was an overcoat from Thymaetidae.

Bdelocleon: No wonder; you've never been to Sardis. Otherwise you'd have recognized it; as it is you don't.

Philocleon: I admit I certainly don't. But it looks to me exactly like

¹⁴ Ep. 710; <http://www.imsdb.com/transcripts/South-Park-Grey-Dawn.html>

Morychus' knapsack. (Tr. Henderson 1137-1140)

While this scene contains many references that we cannot completely appreciate in their full comic glory, the basic premise still exists today. The younger generation disregards the established habits and independent nature of an older generation as it attempts to force the “new” upon them. Just as Marvin is treated and spoken to like a child by his son, here Philocleon is dressed by his son despite protesting the new gaudy fashion trends.

There is clearly much that can be learned about *Wasps* specifically from its comparison to this modern day counterpart. The similarities between portrayals of the destructive nature of both the jury courts and senior driving are crucial to making this comparison but also suggest something more about Aristophanes' intentions and reception. It is clear to us that the destruction of whole buildings and the deaths of many innocent bystanders is a vast exaggeration of the real danger posed by elderly people driving. It is not so clear, however, that the representation of Philocleon taking bribes and being a terrible juror is an equally flagrant exaggeration. While this comparison is never intended to be an exact one to one ratio of accuracy, it is certainly relevant to note how crucial exaggeration is in this kind of comedy. It has been difficult for many modern readers of Aristophanes to rationalize his position in society if he truly believed that such injustice was happening around him. It becomes much easier to see both the man and his comedy as a crucial and appreciated part of Athenian society when we are able to accept political and cultural exaggeration as an integral part of his comedy. The comparison between *Wasps* and “Grey Dawn” should not serve to lessen the importance of Aristophanes, but instead add depth to the way a modern audience can read him.

Chapter 2: Interpreting Celebrity Humor

The individuals ridiculed by Aristophanes are diverse in their political and cultural significance as well as their roles in society. There is a certain sector of these subjects, however, that poses a unique challenge to the modern day reader. These are the characters that mirror the modern day notions of “celebrity.” For the purposes of this section, initially, we will consider those who are famous without a tangible political agenda or a critically important social role before moving on to the possibility of political and cultural associations celebrities can have. It is important to note for this comparison that some of the most obscure jokes Aristophanes presents the modern reader are those that make fun of only a name. These names will first be compared to examples of modern celebrities in *South Park* for the purpose of appreciating the significance and humor present in the jokes. It is to these names that a modern audience feels the least amount of connection as Aristophanes highlights a humorous aspect of someone’s persona or appearance in an aside that is not crucial to the plot. We are not able to characterize them based on political position, services that they perform in society, or any consequences to their existence in classical Athens. We are left largely in the dark as to not only why they are worthy of mention but also why the particular joke is funny. To omit this group and its specific kind of humor, however, would be a significant loss in the study and conceptualization of Aristophanes’ plays within the context of their original environment. The persistence of jokes pertaining to well-known individuals without mention of any political connection indicates that these were recognized and well received in most instances. We can assume, due to the competitive nature of comedic plays, that Aristophanes did not include these jokes simply for his own enjoyment or agenda but for

the entertainment of his audience. While there is no way for us, as modern readers, to fully comprehend the specific humor associated with the mention of each name, we can seek to understand the overall purpose of these jokes within the comedy as a whole by examining how *South Park* employs well known individuals in its comedy.

The evidence simply does not exist that would allow us to define and fully understand each celebrity that appears in Aristophanes' plays and their relevance to the audience. In many instances the only extant mention of such individual is that in the play itself. It seems an impossible goal to appreciate humor about real people who are entirely foreign to us. It is fortunate, then, that *South Park* is so similar to Aristophanes in its slightly disjointed and, at many times, random style of humor. The imagination of Aristophanes and the freedom that comedic performance allowed him is similar to the freedom that animation offers modern day comic writers in regard to the inclusion of celebrities. Both Aristophanes and *South Park* reference celebrities often enough for us to view this humor as critical to both comedies. These jokes sometime serve to advance the plot, but can also exist as incidental inclusions with the sole function of eliciting laughter from the audience. It is this randomness, combined with the lack of detailed knowledge of the subject being ridiculed, which can force a contemporary audience simply to pass over these sections of Aristophanes. It is no easy task to reanimate these meaningful and truly funny inclusions. It becomes possible, however, if we begin to appreciate the notion of mocking those who are most widely known throughout a society and the effects this can have on an audience. The very knowledge that Aristophanes is making a relevant joke can help the modern reader to appreciate singular celebrity references. An understanding of how often *South Park* includes references to celebrities aids in the goal

of appreciating and not simply skipping over many of Aristophanes' jokes. It is also important to note the crucial importance of contemporary knowledge regarding the celebrities *South Park* parodies in order to further appreciate how much is unknown about many of the figures Aristophanes mentions.

Damion Sturm discusses *South Park's* inclusion of celebrity as well as the show's use of animation compared to more realistic modern comedies:

While *South Park* shares the focus of television satire on recent and well-known events and individuals from popular culture, it is also able to use this material in far broader ways than other conventional or "real" satirical television shows. Through the medium of animation, the creators are less bound by or accountable to the "real" than are nonanimated, live-action, skit based shows such as *Saturday Night Live*. Thus, celebrities can be depicted in a bizarre array of unflattering and demeaning situations...¹⁵

This idea comes from an essay that does not include any mention of Aristophanes, but we can certainly draw parallels between what the animation in *South Park* accomplishes and what Aristophanes manages to create on his stage with settings, costumes, as well as the imaginations of his audience members. We cannot attempt to view Aristophanes through the lens of contemporary theater because of how much its role has changed in society. Instead television, which has become the most widely used source of entertainment in our society, is the most appropriate basis for comparison as we conceptualize Aristophanes' treatment of celebrities. While both comedies provide a varied array of jokes in this category we can be sure that the "bizarre array of unflattering and demeaning situations"

¹⁵

Weinstock: 212

Sturm sees in his examination of *South Park* will appear also in Aristophanes.

Aristophanes does not disappoint as his chorus in *Knights* offers a passage insulting several men who remain obscure to us but certainly would have been known to an audience of Athenians. The passage begins with an oddly appropriate sentiment, which can be applied to much of Aristophanes' humor:

There's nothing invidious about calling bad people names; it's a way to honor good people, if you stop to think about it... But it's a fact that everyone who can tell good music from bad knows who Arignotus is. Now Arignotus has a brother of dissimilar character, Aripbrates the sleazy. Yes, that's what he likes to be. But he's not merely sleazy, or I wouldn't even have noticed him, nor even utterly sleazy. The fact is, he's added a brand new meaning to the term. He pollutes his own tongue with disgraceful gratifications, licking the detestable dew in bawdyhouses, besmirching his beard, disturbing the ladies' hotpots, acting like Polymnestus and on intimate terms with Oenichus. (Tr. Henderson 1274-1287)

This passage comes towards the end of the play's action and does not serve to advance the plot in any way. Instead, it appears to us as something unnecessary and possibly vulgar only for the sake of being vulgar. It is necessary to assume that Aristophanes' original audience would have found some enjoyment from this joke even if that enjoyment was derived from simply feeling included as one who recognizes the characters' names. It is relevant to note examples of celebrity humor from *South Park* which are used in a similar fashion and how they may add to the overall entertainment of

the audience. Through the examination of a celebrity reference from our own time period, the significance of this situation becomes clearer in the areas of both name recognition and sexual connotation.

To appreciate what the original audience of *Knights* might have felt when hearing familiar names placed in a vulgar situation we can look at a specific instance in *South Park*. While there are many examples of celebrities in embarrassing circumstances, it may be helpful to examine one of the most famous celebrities in order to observe the most powerful effects of this particular type of humor. Tom Cruise is ridiculed in episode twelve of the ninth season of *South Park*, “trapped in the closet,” in a way that can illuminate several characteristics of Aristophanes’ celebrity inclusions. This episode’s primary goal is to satirize The Church of Scientology and Tom Cruise, being a prominent scientologist, is thus included in several of the jokes within the episode. The characters involved here are a child, Stan, his father, Randy, and Tom Cruise:

Stan: Tom Cruise locked himself in my closet and he won't come out.

Randy: Mr. Cruise? Mr. Cruise, come out of the closet.

Cruise: No!

Randy: Come on, Mr. Cruise, this is ridiculous.

Cruise: I'm never coming out!

Randy: Tom Cruise won't come out of the closet.

Cruise: Just leave me alone!

Randy: Well, we CAN'T leave you alone because YOU won't come out of the closet! ¹⁶

¹⁶ http://www.southparkstuff.com/season_9/episode_912/epi912script/

The dialogue here uses the portrayed situation of Tom Cruise locking himself in a closet in order to bring to mind rumors in popular culture questioning his sexuality. This is an important example for the comparison between Aristophanes and *South Park* due to this joke's reliance on the knowledge of popular contemporary culture. Who Tom Cruise is must be known as well as why the term "come out of the closet" is so ambiguous in this situation. We can begin to appreciate the inherent value that celebrity references have in the works of Aristophanes if we appreciate that often these sorts of connections might exist for some or many of his original audience members. This joke specifically sheds interesting light on the passage from *Knights* that puts the man, Aripgrades, into such a demeaning and, as Henderson translates it, "sleazy" situation. It may help in the appreciation of Aristophanes more in this instance to note that what he portrays is likely exaggeration. Just as *South Park* is only making reference to the possibility of Tom Cruise being "in the closet" about his sexuality, Aristophanes might only be alluding to rumors about Aripgrades. In neither situation is it necessary for an audience member who is a fan of the person being ridiculed to be overly offended because of how ridiculous the situation is. Just as animation provides *South Park* freedom to depict many vulgar and offensive situations, the comic world Aristophanes creates on his stage affords him similar freedom. The audience is laughing only partially at the real Aripgrades but also at the comic version crafted specially for them that will disappear when the show is over.

It is also important to note how much *South Park* relies on what the audience sees to increase the humor of the situation. If only the text of *South Park* were available, the humor stemming from Tom Cruise physically locking himself in a closet would not be so readily apparent despite the implication that he had done so. Throughout this comparison

it is crucial to note how little information we have regarding the actual performance of Aristophanes' plays. Some things remain almost totally lost, such as the composition of music in comedic plays, while others come to us only in indirect ways, such as the costumes worn by performers. Perhaps one of the most important losses for the interpretation of Aristophanes' meaning, however, is the loss of the physical actions of each performer while speaking his lines. This could have shed much light onto what the comic writer truly meant as he would have been directly involved with performance of his play. The comparison to a modern comedic source can always add some insight and help us to appreciate the possibilities each joke contains; however, there is no way to pinpoint exactly what Aristophanes was trying to accomplish in each situation due to the overwhelming lack of information surrounding most jokes.

While sometimes celebrity humor has significance rooted in popular culture, as with Tom Cruise, we also can observe far more incoherent inclusions of celebrities. In episode three of the fourth season of *South Park* the town's children realize that being diagnosed with ADD will lighten their school workload. As the show moves through its commentary on ADD and the practice of prescribing Ritalin to children, a pharmacist adds one more side effect that the drug might produce, "Oh, and he might start seeing little pink Christina Aguilera monsters, but that's to be expected."¹⁷ This hallucination haunts one of the children, Cartman, periodically throughout the rest of the show. There is no explicit reason as to why Christina Aguilera's face is chosen for the head of a small hallucinated monster. Unlike the more relevant use of Tom Cruise, which ties into not only his fame but also rumors about his personal life, this example of celebrity

¹⁷ <http://www.imsdb.com/transcripts/South-Park-Timmy-2000.html>

inclusion draws its humor from the level of randomness and absurdity present in the joke. The modern audience recognizes that Christina Aguilera is an extremely popular and successful entertainer and yet is reduced to a minor role as an imaginary non-human creature. The audience might have appreciated a little pink monster but it certainly appreciates a famous little pink monster to a greater degree. This concept is not lost on Aristophanes as he certainly prefers to make his non-human creatures parody recognizable figures. Part of the enjoyment of this particular type of comedy can come from the feeling of inclusion one receives simply from recognizing a name, even when that name does not affect that plot in any major way.

This more randomized use of celebrity in *South Park* can help us conceptualize a particular scene in Aristophanes' *Wasps*. At the very end of the play we are introduced to the sons of Carcinus who are all presented as crablike sea creatures. These apparently familiar figures come to the stage in response to Philocleon's challenge for a competition of dancing. The effect these characters had on the original audience will never be entirely clear, but we can easily relate their entrance to that of Christina Aguilera's likeness on a small monster. Much of the humor, here, might be derived from the meaning of the name Carcinus, "crab." In fact, in an added stage direction Henderson notes, "A son of Carcinus, costumed as a crab, enters the orchestra."¹⁸ The real humor, however, possibly comes simply from the bizarre nature of the action as well as the recognition of this family portrayed, to some degree, as giant crabs. The extent to which these characters were actually dressed like crabs cannot be determined from the text but we certainly feel the surprise such an entrance would evoke. Aristophanes gives his audience something

¹⁸ Henderson: 411

new and strange to grab their attention and further personalizes it by using celebrity characters.

The play ends as Philocleon dances with these new arrivals on the stage:

Up, you renowned children
 Of Sir Salty,
 jump along the sand
 and the shore of the barren sea,
 brethren of shrimps;
 whirl a sift foot all around,
 and someone kick out
 the Phrynician caper,
 so that seeing the foot in the air
 the audience will cry ooh! (Tr. Henderson 1518-1527)

This very well could have been funny to an audience entirely due to its randomness, similar to imaginary Christina Aguilera monsters, and likely represents a similar kind of appeal to the audience. It is to be expected for this brand of comedy to provide the unusual and the surprising along with its commentary and critiques. It is still possible, however, that this scene could have had deeper roots in popular culture, relying on rumors or the popular perception of these individuals, or possibly a mixture of all factors contributing to celebrity humor.

The inclusion of well-known figures by Aristophanes, people whose fame is not passed on to us through politics or some other medium, can pose a formidable threat to the full appreciation of his works. We are so distant from the society of classical Athens

and all the rumors, trends, and fashions that made up the culture of the city. It is therefore important to recognize the fundamental importance this humor had in his comedy. We may not be able to appreciate the specific references that Aristophanes makes but we can acknowledge their significance to his original audience. To see reflections of familiar names and faces on the comedy stage is entertaining and engaging in ways that generic characters cannot be. As we observed in *South Park*, one must be an actively engaged member of its unique contemporary culture in order to fully appreciate the references contained in the show.

South Park, in addition to celebrity jokes relying on name recognition and popular culture, also enjoys attacking celebrities who have entered the political arena or who have become known as proponents of specific social causes. In our society it is relatively easy to differentiate between a celebrity with a political or social agenda and a career politician. This, however, is not the case in classical Athens. Due to the hands-on nature of Athenian politics and how geographically small the society was compared to our own, it seems that a distinction between politician and celebrity politician is much more difficult to make. This, however, should not discourage a brief examination of how the interaction between fame and the power it provides towards advancing political and social goals is treated in *South Park*. What we will quickly see is that while this topic may be unique in some ways to our own culture and time period, the way *South Park* attacks its opponents is very similar to Aristophanes' treatment of those he views as wrong.

An interesting example of this mixture of celebrity and politics is the caricature of actor and director Rob Reiner in episode thirteen of the seventh season entitled "Butt

Out.” This episode centers around the issue of anti-smoking and portrays Reiner as overweight and willing to use any means necessary to advance his anti-smoking ideals.. The humor in the episode revolves around a reversal of the traditional stereotypical role of tobacco companies being “bad” and anti-smoking groups being “good.” *South Park* also shows Reiner overeating while he describes the ill effects smoking has on personal health. Humor is derived from the physical portrayal of Reiner as severely overweight as well as the hypocrisy of his attack on one health problem (cigarettes) and his complete embrace of another (obesity). *South Park* enjoys exaggerating the features of this figure throughout the episode largely in the same way that Aristophanes enjoys reiterating certain features of Cleon and others in his plays. Though Reiner does not hold the political importance in our time period that Cleon did in Athens, the nature of the jokes are certainly similar in many ways. In almost every depiction of the character, Reiner is shown as suffering the effects of being overweight. He must call for butter to grease his car door in order to exit it, he wheezes and wipes his brow whenever he speaks, and he is constantly pulling more food out of a bag he carries or requesting more. These jokes parallel Aristophanes’ characterization of Cleon as overly loud and belligerent. Just as *South Park* finds new and ridiculous ways to point out Reiner’s weight, Aristophanes seems to always come up with innovative ways to characterize Cleon’s style of speaking. Whether its yelling like a “scalded pig”¹⁹ or a “large-mouthed seagull on a rock haranguing the people”²⁰ Aristophanes repeats these kinds of jokes about Cleon’s voice as well as others about his business in of tanning leather. Rob Reiner and Cleon are not the only ones who are the subjects of repeated ridicule. Aristophanes’ audience was often

¹⁹ *Wasps* Tr. Henderson: 36

²⁰ *Knights* Tr. Henderson: 956

reminded in creative ways that Cleonymus had once dropped his shield on the field of battle.

This portrayal of Rob Reiner does not mirror as much the political attacks on Cleon and his supporters made by Aristophanes as it does personal attacks made throughout many of his plays. These kinds of personal assaults can make it very difficult for modern readers to gain a fair perspective on the figure of Cleon in the political arena of classical Athens. Through translation and through our modern perspectives, the tone and the exaggeration of Aristophanes' blatant personal assaults can be lost on the modern reader. It is far too easy to picture Cleon as a monster from Aristophanes' portrayal. *South Park's* depiction of Rob Reiner is likewise blatantly exaggerated. While the show also is in clear disagreement with some of Reiner's political and social causes, much is overstated for the purpose of making the critique entertaining. This offers us a glimpse into the possibility that one could laugh at Aristophanes' depiction of Cleon at a performance but also support him politically shortly thereafter.

It is tempting to view history in black and white terms in an attempt to simplify the difficult task of interpreting ancient writers and trying to understand the context of their works. Instead, the contradictions and complexities need to be explored and embraced to truly come to a more accurate understanding of the psyche of the Athenian population as they laughed at their political leaders. By examining the way modern audiences can laugh at physical exaggerations and personal attacks used against the ideals of a celebrity in *South Park*, it can be better understood how such comedy in Aristophanes could have represented less divisiveness than might initially be perceived.

Chapter 3: Aristophanic Politics

One of the most divisive as well as interesting issues that arises from the Aristophanic canon is the understanding of the specific political view contained therein. The framing of this issue, of course, already presents a dilemma in its implication that Aristophanes is of one distinct and definable political view. In the preface to his work, *Spectator Politics*, Niall Slater refers to the inherent dilemma in categorizing Aristophanic politics:

At the same time, the polarized debate over Aristophanes' politics (conservative or democrat, satirist or clown, even subversive or agent of repression) seemed trapped in a rather dreary hermeneutic shuttle between a complete identification of comedy and politics (where no one who laughed at Cleon in the theater was allowed to vote for him in the elections) and a complete divorce (where festival laughter never reechoed for a moment after holiday time ceased).²¹

Due to its wide and varied use of jokes as well as its complicated plot structure and use of subject matter, the Aristophanic play can be interpreted in as many ways as there are interpreters willing to offer an opinion. It is all too easy to focus on certain passages that seem to indicate one view while simply ignoring contradictory lines located elsewhere in the text. The ability to justify many different political interpretations of the same play creates the strong temptation to introduce one's own political persuasion or cultural perspective into the concrete words of the playwright. The modern reader of Aristophanes, therefore, is left with the difficult task of separating the political opinions

²¹ Slater 2002: iv

of critics and scholars from the actual politics contained within Aristophanes' words. It is equally important, however, for contemporary readers to keep their own perspective from altering what Aristophanes actually portrays in the actions and texts of his plays.

The use of a modern comedy such as *South Park* in understanding Aristophanic politics may seem a particularly egregious application of contemporary concepts to the works of Aristophanes. This is not the case, however, unless the specific views of the creators of *South Park* are stated and then applied directly to Aristophanes, as if they were his own. This is not at all the most effective way to employ *South Park* to better understand political views in Aristophanes' plays. As Slater indicates, the use of absolutes can create problems as we study politics contained in the text. The desire for the simple answer is the natural tendency for today's audience: was Aristophanes liberal or conservative, democrat or oligarch? *South Park* was created in and for a society that seeks such absolutism yet still forced similar questions with regards to its politics. A contemporary assessment of the show's complicated political message not only provides examples of some of the show's political topics but also demonstrates the tendency for modern audiences to want to "classify" a show into a rigid political affiliation.

Because of the show's acceptance of gays and blacks, its pro-drug and anti-hunting beliefs in the earliest episodes, viewers jumped to the conclusion that *South Park* was another leftie show... However, subsequent episodes proved that the right's fears were unfounded. The show praised big business and ridiculed abortion on demand ("Gnomes," "Cartman's Mum Is Still a Dirty Slut")... People started arguing about the

show's political undertones. Was the show politically liberal or conservative? Both Democrats and Republicans claimed the show for their own—and the debate raged.²²

South Park can be a useful tool in the discussion of Aristophanic politics because it raises many of the same issues. Just like scholars of Aristophanes, contemporary viewers and critics of *South Park* are likely to apply their own lens to their viewing of the show. It is also easy, as with Aristophanes, to recall certain lines or actions from one scene in support of a specific opinion about the show's political affiliations, while completely ignoring contradictory evidence from another. These striking similarities can allow us to examine the political jokes and themes present in both *South Park* and Aristophanes' plays without the need to characterize them with specific political labels. Instead of seeking a conclusion that might perpetuate the "rather dreary" argument between one extreme and the other, we can instead look to create a more organic and fluid conceptualization of Aristophanic politics. Looking back into a culture from such distance and with such limited information makes it difficult to avoid the absolutes that so often characterize the study of Aristophanic politics. It is often hard to imagine an audience that could enjoy the political satire Aristophanes produced and yet still supported Cleon or respected Socrates. It is, however, crucially important to understand how Aristophanes' audience perceived his work. *South Park* can fill in some of the grey areas that will inevitably exist in such a complex system of political satire and help us view his politics, as an original audience member may have been able to.

Aristophanes' political ideas are not a sharply defined set of principles that are

²² Johnson-Woods 2007: 203-204

uniformly displayed in each of his plays. Instead they reflect a fluid, ever changing set of beliefs that are tied directly into the culture of Athens, as it exists the day each play is performed. One obstacle that may stand in the way of our understanding, however, is Aristophanes' and his audience's ability to laugh at themselves, their city, and the customs therein. As with most aspects of Aristophanes and his humor, the modern audience is deprived of much that would have given context and perspective to the political jokes contained in his plays. This loss of context can lead to the simplification of many intricate jokes in the minds of contemporary readers, creating the assumption that a joke is crude, hurtful, or simply senseless. To understand political humor and its underlying message, it is first important to consider the dichotomy that arises when a joke criticizes something the audience does not hate and might in fact be quite fond of.

It is in his play *Birds* that Aristophanes offers his audience a harsh criticism of the whole of Athens. He does so in a characteristically unique way by creating his own imaginary city, which in turn offers many opportunities for jokes at the expense of Athens and many of the people and professions it contains. If we have no contemporary analogue with which to compare *Birds*, it is far harder to understand how an audience of contemporary Athenians might have received this full out comic assault on their city. Would those who loved Athens not have laughed and would those who did laugh feel inclined to bring about reforms? These questions might seem somewhat justified when asked about Aristophanes, but they seem unnecessary when we apply them to contemporary humor. The political complexity that exists in an Aristophanic play is something that we might already comprehend in much of the humor that exists today.

The town of South Park provides many correlations to the comedy we see in

Birds. The audience is provided with a fictionalized representation of American culture that has been distilled down to one town. The animation takes us to a place that is definitely not reality, but we still clearly observe the parallels between South Park's world and that of every day life. Just as Aristophanes creates many opportunities for jokes about real facets of everyday Athenian life, so does *South Park*. The way the show employs recurring public figures can give us some insight into how an audience takes in criticism of their own culture. The mayor of South Park appears in many episodes of the show and exists, in large part, to poke fun at such public officials and their positions:

Even though the mayor is shown to be self-serving, potentially prone to corruption, and generally lacking in political savvy (she has inadvertently “sold out” the town, first to the Hollywood crowd and then to the hippies), she is their leader. She can order them to fart on a regular basis (“Spontaneous Combustion”)...²³

The authority still exists, but as this brief description points out, much about this official and her power over her town is completely preposterous. The important point to draw from this topic within *South Park* is that the audience can laugh whether they like, dislike, or do not even know their own mayor. While there is certainly the implication that politicians are likely to be corrupt and incompetent, an audience does not feel the need for immediate reformatory action towards this governmental office. The joke takes place in a world removed from reality and thus even those who feel favorably towards the mayoral office or perhaps even a mayor themselves can laugh at what happens on the screen.

²³ Johnson-Woods 2007: 207

This lampooning of public figures is featured prominently in *Women at the Thesmophoria* in the representation of both the prytanis and the Scythian archer at his command. This Scythian archer, who demonstrates an overall lack of high intellect, is strikingly similar to a recurring character in *South Park*, Officer Barbrady. This caricature of a small town policeman as comically incompetent is evident in almost every situation in which he appears. The Scythian archer, serving as a kind of police figure in Athens, thus creates an interesting parallel between these two portrayals of law enforcement. Despite the fact that Scythian archers were public slaves, they were still representative of armed enforcement of the state's will. The similarities between both Aristophanes' and *South Park's* depiction of these public figures as doltish are striking. In the third episode of the second season of *South Park* a large plot element is Barbrady's illiteracy and his return to third grade in order to learn to read. The humor in this joke is similar in nature to that in Aristophanes' portrayal of his Scythian archer speaking broken Greek. Both of these depictions ask the audience to decide how much power someone of inferior intellect should have over the general population. As the Scythian archer in *Women at the Thesmophoria* goes on to be tricked in various humorous ways by Euripides, Aristophanes further presses this question. These jokes, similar to *South Park's* attacks on the office of mayor, seem largely to be light hearted in nature. Appreciation of this kind of humor does not require the audience to harbor any significant resentment towards the police or Scythian archers that their government employs.

These comparisons should not imply that all political humor present in *South Park* and Aristophanes is far enough removed from reality not to be taken seriously by everyone involved. Both comedies certainly contain views that inevitably will offend and

anger some in the audience. In Aristophanes' *Knights* we can see many brutal attacks on Cleon and his presence as a public figure. The slave character from *Paphlagon* is a clear parody of Cleon, and Aristophanes does little to hide his true feelings in a description of this character by another slave:

He sized up the old man's character, the rawhide Paphlagon did, so he crouched before the master and started flattering and fawning and toadying and swindling him with odd tidbits of waste leather... And then Paphlagon swipes whatever any of the rest of us has prepared and presents it to the master. Why, just the other day I whipped up a Spartan cake at Pylos, and by some very dirty trick he outmaneuvered me, snatched up the cake, and served it up himself—the one I'd whipped up. (Henderson 43-57)

These words parody the nature of Cleon's political success as well as a specific victory he produced over the Spartans at Pylos, implying that he stole the glory of that victory from others. Aristophanes makes it clear to his audience that this widely accepted leader of the community is no better than a thief and a liar. This play won first place at the Lenaea in 424.²⁴ What mindset could have led to Cleon's widespread and continued political success as well as to the success of this play? To better understand just how an audience could have been able to laugh at all the bad aspects of their political leaders we must look to our own time to understand how it is possible to laugh, understand, and forgive all at the same time.

Just as Aristophanes does not shy away from fiercely attacking specific

²⁴ Henderson 1998: 221

individuals, *South Park* certainly does not forego a chance to attack those in the highest positions of power. George W. Bush is parodied as he attempts to explain a new threat posed by the deceased Saddam Hussein:

Bush: Our intelligence tells us that when Saddam was originally killed, his soul actually went to hell. But while in hell he began a homosexual relationship with Satan, the Prince of Darkness. Satan, however, decided he didn't want to be with Hussein anymore and broke up with him about August. When Saddam became jealous and tried to kill Satan's new lover, Chris, Satan had Saddam sent to heaven to live with Mormons as punishment. Questions? Yes?

Ambassador: Are you high, or just incredibly stupid?

Bush: I assure you, I am not high.²⁵

This particular joke alludes to the common contemporary allegation that Bush is not keenly intelligent as well as the fact that he was not well informed about Saddam Hussein. While the insulting nature of this joke can be seen as quite extreme, it is still possible for even supporters of Bush to be amused. Laughter may be produced by this scene in various ways in different people. Even those who are ardent supporters of Bush may find the sheer ridiculousness of the dialogue humorous. As the roots of this joke are tied directly into the current political environment in the United States, the issues that surround it and that would come to mind in the audience members are important ones. It is the framing of the joke, however, that not only serves to broaden acceptability of this portrayal of Bush in a humorous way, but also differentiates *South Park* from most other

²⁵ Ep. 612: <http://www.southparkstudios.com/guide/episodes/s06e12-a-ladder-to-heaven>

contemporary comedies. While it is easy for countless comedies to make the same reference and to imply the same notion concerning Bush's intelligence, it is incredibly difficult to create such a colorfully ludicrous situation surrounding it. An audience expects political humor, but they also appreciate the creativity and cleverness that is unique to *South Park*. Aristophanes provides his audience with a similar experience. Although his rivals may copy the political jokes Aristophanes makes about Cleon, it is the framing of such jokes and the situations that they arise from that set Aristophanes apart from the competition. His audience comes not just to hear about how loud Cleon speaks but also to see this comic insult presented in new and creative ways. *South Park*'s attack on Bush is far less likely to be laughed at by people who support him if the joke does not include the colorful background of the love triangle involving Satan, Saddam, and Chris. It may be the same political joke that every other comedy of the period is making, but it is undeniably original.

In attempting to separate Aristophanes' specific politics from his plays it becomes apparent that there is no way to fully exclude the spectacle of his performances from his opinions. Each play's original plot, dialogue, setting, and characters make up a large part of the ever-shifting concept of Aristophanic politics. Additionally the complexity of his ideals makes it even more difficult for the modern reader of his plays to appreciate how Aristophanes and his political messages were viewed by his audience. The conclusions that we can reach from a comparison to our modern analogue offer no definitive answers, only an added perspective on these issues. It is important to appreciate the enjoyment an audience could find in the originality of Aristophanes' humor, even if they disagreed with his message. As always, the modern audience must attempt to remove any black and

white conceptions of politics that may arise from reading Aristophanes and attempt to see his plays in a more complex light.

Conclusion

When Cartledge concludes that Aristophanes' brand of comedy was "too intimately and directly connected to the immediate political (in the broad sense) circumstances of its production to survive into a different political environment,"²⁶ he may simply be referring to the shift of comic style in Greece that produced what we call Middle and New Comedy. If, however, he is questioning the ability of these plays to retain their prominence as some of history's greatest and most enduring works of art, there is a significant flaw in his argument. It should not be overlooked that despite all we have lost regarding the performance and context of Aristophanes' plays, they remain a staple of a classical education throughout the world and have been so for many cultures throughout history. Even without a full understanding of the political and social commentary contained in Aristophanes' plays it seems that the brilliance of these works still attracts the attention of many in their intellectual journey. This achievement in itself seems to contradict the assertion that his brand of comedy could not survive outside of his own society. His comedy has been translated and interpreted by a countless number of enthusiasts and been assigned to students and read for enjoyment. While his plays will certainly never be what they were the day they were first performed in Athens, even existing only in text their brilliance has allowed them to endure. It may be that the comedies Aristophanes wrote could not continue being created beyond their era in Greece and that new forms of comedy had to evolve, but this should not be seen as tarnishing Aristophanes' legacy. This type of comedy requires the absolutely perfect environment, as well as writer, in order to flourish. As Athens changed after its loss of the

²⁶ Cartledge 1990: 72

Peloponnesian War it is not surprising then that Aristophanes and his Old Comedy began to change.

South Park does not parallel Aristophanes' work in every way. Certainly, the artistic components of Aristophanes' poetry and meter are not present in the modern cartoon. It is the shades of meaning, social and political critique, and audience interpretation that we can come to understand more fully in Aristophanes' works by examining this contemporary comedy. Based on subject matter, political and social, both comedies are in agreement about what are the proper targets of comedy. There is more to the comparison, however, than merely the content of the jokes. It is the way the jokes are presented, the tone with which they are told, that makes *South Park* and Aristophanes both absolutely unique examples of comedy. They create a fantasy world in which comedy becomes the way of all things and where nothing is taboo. And in each of these the audience accepts all of the jokes, regardless of their offensive nature or any disagreements they might have, and laughs because that is the only reasonable option. It seems that one of the largest correlations between these comedies is that becoming offended and arguing with the joke is simply not an option for most observers. How can one seriously be offended in *Clouducuckooland* or at a fictional child animated from colorful paper cutouts? The subject matter is serious but the portrayal is creative and fosters acceptance by the audience while still offering social and political critiques with the highest degree of subtlety and skill.

Despite the ability of both these comedies to encourage a raucous humor throughout their audiences, it is natural that some simply will not accept this kind of entertainment. Peggy Charren, the founder of Action for Children's Television, used the

intriguing phrase “dangerous to the democracy”²⁷ when describing *South Park*. Interesting words when we consider the similarities between *South Park* and Aristophanes who was writing during the height of a civilization that is considered the basis for our own democracy. It becomes apparent that an appreciation and understanding of modern comedy not only helps in the understanding of Aristophanes but the reverse is also true. Comedy is indicative of human nature in general and of the society from which it originates. While there are many differences between *South Park* and Aristophanes, these differences seem to arise mostly from the diverse cultures in which each comedy is produced. The root of the humor present in both examples is largely the same, and the social and political commentaries demonstrate remarkable similarities. Human nature is, for the most part, the same as it was in the time of classical Athens and great art will always have this truth at its core. Despite the thousands of years that separate us from the audience experiencing Aristophanes for the first time, people still laugh at clever use of language, a satirical attack on a celebrity or politician, and, yes, a fart joke.

Comedy in general has changed greatly since the time of Aristophanes and as many have stated, his is not the kind of comedy that can be easily duplicated. If, then, any correlation between *South Park* and Aristophanes is believable or at least conceivable, should we not be pleased that our society has produced and embraced such a work? While these comparisons have focused largely on a better understanding of Aristophanes through modern comparison it is impossible to ignore the timeless notions about humanity that only comedy can illuminate. When it is hard to feel any personal connection to distant historical events, comedy can provide the link necessary to

²⁷ <http://reason.com/archives/2000/05/01/go-in-down-to-south-park>

understand how such distant peoples really are akin to us in many basic ways. It is also difficult to ignore how relevant Aristophanes is to understanding our own society when we consider comments such as Charren's regarding the danger of something that, in reality, is a beacon of free speech and unwavering commitment to making people laugh. Comedy is vital to human nature, and has played a role throughout history in every civilization in some capacity. Our modern society should thus be proud and excited to share one of the greatest forms of comedy with one of history's greatest and most influential civilizations.

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