

Aristophanes On War: *Acharnians*

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The *Acharnians* is the first extant play of Aristophanes and was presented in 425 B.C., a few years after the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. Like all the plays of the poet, it reflects conditions brought on by the War and its aftermath. The customary adherence of men and women to the institutions of family and state was becoming fractured, and a more independent subjectivity began to assert itself. This new individuality sought to make itself master of the great institutions and the gods who supported these institutions. What differentiates one play of Aristophanes from another is the peculiar form of the interaction between the individual and the institutions. In *Acharnians* the comic poet himself (as Dikaiopolis) is the main character and he is searching for personal enjoyment of both an intellectual and sensual form in the midst of the War. This desire encourages him to take affairs of State into his own hands instead of the Sovereign Assembly and to make a private peace with the Spartans. This leads him to establish a pre-political common market with other Greek individuals, hoping to maximize his enjoyments through barter. After this, the drama takes a very surprising turn. The market is seen as unequal to the task of providing enjoyment. True enjoyment, it turns out, can be found only in a Festival of the god Dionysus that the State supervises. Even the individual enjoyment of the main character is seen as dependent on the gods and the civic order.¹

The journey of the main character began with the historical fact of the Peloponnesian war and ended with a festival of the god Dionysus. The War spelled the ruin of the total political order in which he has lived his life. The latter gives him satisfaction as an individual in the true sense: the festival that allows him to enjoy his individuality is celebrated under the aegis of the Athenian *polis* and communicates the same enjoyment to all the individuals of the State. This particular festival, called the Cups, is a drinking contest, and it unifies several aspects of Athenian life. It depends both on the production of wine and that love of competing so prevalent at Athens. To win in this contest is to enjoy all that is essential in the life of the City.

The play begins as the above-named Dikaiopolis, waiting in the Pnyx at Athens, addresses the audience in a monologue which considers his pains and pleasures. They all stem from the life of the City: he rejoices at the punishment of the demagogue Cleon, and he recalls his feelings of elation or misery at the form which the festivals devoted to poetry have taken. Never has he suffered worse than he does now, he says, waiting in vain for the Assembly to meet in order to discuss an end to the Peloponnesian War now waging. He addresses the audience and

¹ The critics tend to think that the play shows the triumph of a sole individual who impudently and shamelessly enjoys the good things he has won. For a statement of this view, see C. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp.59-80.

thereby shows that his praise and complaints are directed towards the City of which both Dikaiopolis and they are citizens. His attitudes will arouse their interest, whether in approval or disapproval, and they will see themselves in his experience. That the main character should be a representative of Athenian life is not unique to Comedy. The questions raised in every tragedy of the 5th c. B.C. are contemporary to the spectators, though the action be set in the mythological past. Nor is it peculiar to Comedy to have a character of the drama address the audience, since this is done in Euripides as well. What is peculiar to Comedy is that a main character of the drama who is drawn directly from the common life of the day address the audience as his fellows. The audience is thereby made an aspect of the drama itself. It is anachronistic to say that the direct address to the audience is a “break” in the dramatic action, since this sharp division between the stage and the audience belongs really to the nineteenth century.

Although his name has not yet been revealed to the audience, it means ‘Just City.’ Only the whole drama will indicate what this name really means, since at first his actions seem both to define his name and to negate it. As a good citizen he wants the Assembly to meet, to consider a peace with Sparta. Athens was a direct democracy, and all pressing questions were decided by the male citizens in person. Yet Dikaiopolis seems also pre-occupied with his personal pleasures. This contradiction at the very beginning belongs to the drama itself: Dikaiopolis will experience the total tension between good citizenship and his particular interests. Bemoaning his few enjoyments, Dikaiopolis wonders whether the Assembly will add to them by taking up the subject of peace. Only peace, he says, can free him from the endless commerce of the City and restore him to the country. As with many Athenians, the War has compelled him to live in the City away from the more bountiful life of the country, and he yearns for a restoration.

As the Assembly opens, a certain Amphytheus appears to announce that, although the gods have commissioned him alone to make peace with the Lacedaimonians, he needs expense money for the trip: he is of divine origin, but in his human capacity, he travels like anyone else. This god has no real existence elsewhere; he oversees the potential bond amongst the Hellenic states and is thus a necessary invention of the poet. The Greek gods are not fictions in our sense but their existence lies in a poetic world where the Muses inspire those who give their being actuality.

Amphytheus is immediately expelled from the Assembly, since the higher officials, we soon discover, have no interest in peace, but in benefitting personally from the war. Thus the spiritual condition of Athens presents itself: Dikaiopolis, pre-occupied with his own pleasures and pains, desires peace to add to the former. The enemies of peace oppose it since their pleasures are dependent on war. This dependence shows itself with the appearance before the Assembly of an embassy that Athens had sent to the King of Persia eleven years ago. They were delayed ten years by the hospitality of the King and the difficulties of the case, they allege. They have now arrived with an official named the Eye of the King, who will give the Athenians money. Dikaiopolis notices that the Eye of the King is no more a Persian than he himself is: the whole Embassy is a fraud because the Athenian ambassadors are living high at public expense with no thoughts of peace whatsoever. He commissions Amphytheus to make a peace for himself and his family alone, and he agrees. This marks a true revolution, that what belongs to the whole State is now undertaken by a particular individual.

Dikaiopolis, however, has only deepened the state of fragmentation and alienation already subsisting. A War amongst the various Greek states is bad enough, but to appeal to the King of Persia is even worse. Almost within living memory the Hellenic states had united in their efforts to repel the Persian invasion, and now Athens has appealed to the descendant of that invader for help. Officialdom has broken down all the ties to wholeness in the civic realm, and it remains for an individual to restore these ties.

This collapse of the traditional order is the beginning of every Aristophanic comedy. This order depended on a primary customary allegiance to the established institutions of family and state, as these were presided over by the gods of the Olympian religion. After the Persian Wars (490-480) individuals began more and more to assert their independence either within or against that order. Sophism is an intellectual expression of this new independence, as is the spread of same-sex relation in the civic and familial realm. Both Comedy and Tragedy arise as festivals of the State under the aegis of the god Dionysus, as ways of relating this independent spirit to the civic and religious order. This god is said to be born of Zeus and a mortal woman and represents the subjective side of life in the *polis*. He has often been depicted merely as a god of drink and ritual drunkenness, but this is really his least developed side. He presides over the individual as he exists in a certain separation from the life of the *polis*. In the play *Bacchae* of Euripides his adherents flee an oppressive technocratic *polis* for the freer life of unity with nature. This has also its negative side; one of the Bacchantes has so lost her sense of civilized life that she unwittingly kills her own son, the king. Tragedy and Comedy refine the god's nature; these different forms of drama show the relation of the individual to the whole realm of the civic order and the gods. Since the chief god presiding over the civic order was Zeus, the plays are ultimately about the relation of Zeus to Dionysus, at the divine level, and in the human subject, the relation of his civic life to the whole range of his individuality.

Although each comedy of Aristophanes begins with a depiction of the historical breakdown of the civic order, the entire action is concerned with overcoming this breach.² The journey of Dikaiopolis to do this begins to take more definite shape when Amphytheus returns from Sparta with several possible peace-treatises. He is very agitated and explains that he is being pursued by certain Acharnians, said to be men who fought against the Persians at Marathon, who are opposed to any treaty because the Spartans have cut down their vines. The first result then of an individual peace with Sparta is a kind of civil war, a development which indicates why a personal treaty is a limited solution to the problems of our hero.

Amphytheus presents the peace treaties as if they were different vintages of wine. The Greek word for treaty is the plural of the word for libation, or wine poured out in honour of a certain god. One should notice here that this is rather more than a clever 'pun'. Instead, this form that the peace treaty takes represents what peace is for Dikaiopolis. It is not an abstract or spiritual bond but a very particular kind of pleasure. He has shown that he has a very definite

² Many commentators speak of this overcoming of the breach as fantasy. This is not a very useful category since it implies that the historical is real and the rest fictive. In *Acharnians*, however, and every Aristophanic comedy, the experience of the main character falls within the spirit of Greek religion and civic life. Each scene represents a stage in a spiritual journey that begins with the hero's expressions of dismay at how oppressive his life in the *polis* has become.

sense of what pleasure is. Since the name for the thing allows it, peace assumes a material and non-abstract form. As well, the enjoyment involved in drinking wine belongs more to a personal than a corporate or state peace.

Of the three peaces on offer, one vintage of five years, another of ten, and the third of thirty years, Dikaiopolis naturally chooses the longest. He then announces that, paying no attention to the Acharnians who have pursued Amphitheus, he will celebrate the Rural Dionysia and enjoy the country he has yearned for. This festival was one observed at the village level throughout Attica in December and early January; it was a fertility festival and thoroughly phallic. Just as Dikaiopolis had arrogated to himself as a citizen that privilege of making peace that belonged to the whole State, here he acts as the head of a family to decide when to celebrate a festival; the date of the celebration belongs really to the customs of the whole people. He has gained his end of returning to the country-side, and in worshipping the Phallus, companion of Dionysus, he revels in a natural vitality than can also be hostile to the good order of the Family. Thus he addresses the personified Phallus as both ‘adulterer’ and ‘paederast’. Dikaiopolis is clearly hoping to be freed of the structured order of familial life.

Dikaiopolis might have been indifferent to the Acharnians but they have him very much in mind. They have pursued him, whom they regard as a traitor, to his celebration. They barely allow him and his family to begin the rituals associated with it when they intervene forcefully. They regard anyone who would make peace with the Laonians as their enemy and initially they refuse to hear any explanation of his.³ The desire for peace with the Spartans is at first the interest of only one man, and the Acharnians resist a seemingly treasonable innovation.

Dikaiopolis can dissuade the Acharnians from killing him only through their obsessive devotion to charcoal-cutting. This was the main occupation of their district at Athens. Only by threatening to kill a charcoal can he gain their attention. To avoid this horror the Acharnians allow him to address them, with his head on the block, so that they can still kill him if necessary after they have heard him.

Before speaking, Dikaiopolis reflects on the difficulties that attend speaking to people like the Acharnians: they wish to hear themselves and their city praised, even if they are being fooled. Dikaiopolis reflects on what happened to himself, when he satirized various officials and had as a result been prosecuted by Cleon for maligning the state in front of foreigners. Here Dikaiopolis speaks for the first time as Aristophanes. To avoid trouble while he addresses the Acharnians, he says, he must visit Euripides, in order to be outfitted in a manner calculated to gain their pity.

This announced identity between the poet and Dikaiopolis is essential to the play. First, it is a method by which the dramatic action includes the actual City itself in the drama. We tend to assume that the poet is an inspired writer who brings a fictive world into existence. The

³ Every comedy of Aristophanes has an *agon*, or contest at this point in the dramatic action, where the hero’s plan has stirred controversy in the community. The *agon* reveals a duality within the hero, that although a representative Athenian, he is not directly so; at first he represents only a minority opinion, opposed by those who are not as revolutionary as the hero.

Athenians thought that poets were servants of the god Dionysus and that the dramatic action formed part of the festival of that god. A comic example of this thinking is Aristophanes's own *Frogs*, in which Dionysus descends to Hades in order to bring back the dead Euripides, but instead returns with Aeschylus, who, he thinks, can best advise the City. When we see a god in a comedy learning and determining the true end of tragedy, it is brought home to us very forcefully that the two forms of drama belong ultimately to Dionysus and to neither the audience nor the playwright. Moreover the inclusion of the comic poet himself is appropriate to the current dramatic plot. If the central character is looking for enjoyment free of the War, he performs the same function as a comic poet, who shows the city the relation of enjoyment to the whole State.

Dikaiopolis's visit to Euripides to prepare himself for addressing the Acharnians is not easily understood. Many commentators think that this is merely the occasion for a parody of Euripides.⁴ In reality the visit to Euripides is a necessary part of the plot. The most evident connection is that Dikaiopolis, who is also Aristophanes, is a fellow dramatist of Euripides: they have a similar *techne* or craft. Dikaiopolis had first appeared as a citizen, then as a husband and father. In his attempt to assert his own individuality, Dikaiopolis moved from that realm, the State, in which he is most like others, to the more particular realm of the family and finally to the least communal realm as craftsman. Further, the poets are fellow-craftsmen within the realm of the Dionysus who presides over both tragedy and comedy at the great festival, the City Dionysia. Dikaiopolis had earlier celebrated the Rural Dionysia as a member of the family, thinking to find true enjoyment through this festival. Now he thinks that he can appropriate the tragic rags that Euripides dressed many of characters in; he will use tragedy for personal and individual ends. As he makes his appeal to Euripides, it becomes clear that he has a very particular view of Euripides, that his costumes define his plays. This is not simply the view of Dikaiopolis but Euripides himself. Exasperated by his repeated requests for the costumes of his characters who endured great misery, Euripides maintains that Dikaiopolis will have soon deprived him of the very means of making dramas.

Provided with the clothing suitable to wretchedness Dikaiopolis reappears before the Acharnians, whom he now addresses as if they were the entire *polis*. He reminds them that even comedy can teach 'the just things' (*dikaia*). Then he attempts to win over their sympathy by asserting his own great dislike of the Lacedaimonians, who have also destroyed his vines, and he argues that the Spartans are not alone to blame for the War: the Athenians too must accept their share of the responsibility. The exclusion of Megarian goods from Athenian markets, he alleges, moved the Spartans to retaliate. Certainly, according to Thucydides, the Spartans gave this as a *casus belli*, and the Megarians would have been ruined by such an exclusion. This assertion immediately divides the listening crowd into two opposed factions: Dikaiopolis has begun to win them over.

⁴ Often when aspects of an Aristophanic comedy resemble something else, one is informed that we are in the presence of a parody. This term is of very little use in explaining the development of a plot and implies that Aristophanes is not especially interested in a plot, but really in a series of acts that comprise a kind of vaudeville show. In fact, parody is really a very low form of humour. It aims at making a person, an act or speech ridiculous by exaggerating parts of it. Before reducing Aristophanes to a parodist, the interpreter has the obligation to look for a connection between an alleged parodic scene and what went before.

The pro-War faction then appeals to their leader, a certain Lamachus, to aid them. Dikaiopolis treats him with scorn and contempt, pointing out that in the current war Lamachus and his kind, the rich, have drawn soft billets: they are sent at full pay on embassies or to places without fighting. The poor, for their part, must do the fighting without perquisites. Lamachus's constant reply to all charges is that the people have elected him. At the end of their mutual insults, Lamachus declares that he will wage perpetual war against the Peloponnesians. Dikaiopolis says that he will open an international trade mart in which all Greeks, including Peloponnesians, Megarians and Boeotians can trade with him, everyone but Lamachus. Thus the first part of the play ends.

Briefly put, the journey of Dikaiopolis has taken him from the full-blown political order of Athens at war to a kind of pre-political pan-Hellenic world of barter. This journey has included stops at the familial order and finally at the realm of *techne* and its craftsmen. Yet all this has clearly taken place within the realm of Dionysus and his theatre, not historically. Even in the midst of the degradation of the *polis* world, it is not possible to 'return' literally to a pre-political condition. That this is not simply our judgement but that of the drama itself is shown by the consciousness of the main character Dikaiopolis that he is at once the main actor and author of this play. More prosaically, perhaps, this return to a pre-political condition marks only the half-way mark of the drama. No comedy can end simply with a pre-political individuality.

There follows the parabasis, in which the chorus directly address the audience. This is imagined by some to be a 'break' in the dramatic action, mandated by tradition, in which the poet gives miscellaneous advice to the spectators. However, it is in reality more deeply integrated into the action; it more clearly brings to bear the action of the drama upon the life of the citizens. The parabasis falls into two main parts, praise of the poet and a plea for reform in the law suits between old and young that has little relation to the plot up to this point. The poet is praised by the chorus for teaching the 'just things' to the City, both because he has given good advice in previous plays and because he is now playing the part of the peacemaker in the current drama. The advice offered to the city, that the old not be ruined by the young in law-suits is a thought that occurs to the chorus by analogy to the main action. Just as there should be peace between cities, they imagine, so there should be peace within a city. In their remark the chorus anticipates the general drift of the drama, that peace contain the competitive spirit. Their purely formal method of containing it is inadequate to the proposed goal, and the parabasis can by no means conclude the play.

The next scene shows the proposed international trade mart in action. Dikaiopolis had imagined that through this pan-Hellenic individualism peace might be achieved. The result however of Dikaiopolis's attempt to barter with various Hellenes is that it shows the extreme instability of such an arrangement: the peace is established on the basis of personal economic imperialism. A half-starved Megarian arrives, desperate to save his daughters by selling them as pigs. Dikaiopolis, alive to the ruse, nevertheless agrees to a deal, taking the alleged pigs in exchange for some trifling articles of food. When a Boeotian later is willing to trade various of his delicacies for something uniquely Athenian, Dikaiopolis persuades him to accept an informer who had denounced the first deal with the Megarian. The informer is duly crated and sent off. The chorus eulogizes Dikaiopolis for establishing a mart in which all good things come to him of their own accord.

The initial desire for an increase in enjoyments that has moved Dikaiopolis from the beginning has here reached a certain completion. All that belongs to physical pleasure, whether of food or sex, is now his. He has subordinated every status that he had in the *polis*, whether as citizen, father or craftsman to the service of this desire. Further, he has overcome the indifference of the Assembly and the opposition of the Acharnians to his plan. Even a divine being has devoted himself to his scheme. Most recently, representatives of other Greek cities have served his ends. In brief, Dikaiopolis has made himself the master of his world.

If the play were a celebration of his clever self-assertiveness, it should end here, but it does not. No sooner has the second parabasis celebrated the great peace won by Dikaiopolis than he begins to fall under the authority of an objective order not dependent on him. The chorus celebrates the establishment of a paradise, in which war has been banished and *eros* can have its place. Despite this, a herald arrives to announce to everyone a wine-drinking contest to be held in accord with tradition. That this announcement has authority for Dikaiopolis is shown in his commands to some attendants that they prepare the elements of a feast that he will presumably take with him to the contest.

What will occur from here to the end of the drama is the joining together of Dikaiopolis's self-assertiveness and the authority of the Dionysiac feast of Cups. On the one side is the peculiar dominion that Dikaiopolis has made for himself in his trade mart; on the other is the enjoyment-through-competition announced by the herald. As we saw, the trading done by Dikaiopolis was of a most unusual kind. It involved not only what are usually called 'goods' but also young girls and an informer. A father converted his daughters into goods and a thoroughly annoyed Dikaiopolis had converted an informer into something that could be packed into a crate and shipped. So there were present not only actual foods that can be traded but persons from the realms of family and the state, respectively. Opposed to this is the simplicity of a state-sponsored Festival of Dionysus. Dikaiopolis belongs to both worlds, one that he has made for himself, and the other that subsists independently of him and is announced to him.

The experience of Dikaiopolis is contrasted with that of his old enemy Lamachus. He too wishes to participate in the Festival of the Cups, but between that participation and his warlike opposition to the Lacedaimonians there is a great gulf. Two somewhat odd scenes show how the character of Dikaiopolis can develop while that of Lamachus cannot. The scenes both involve visits from people who wish to share in Dikaiopolis's private peace, one a farmer and the other a new bride, or one from the realm of *techne* and earning a living, the other from the realm of the family and thus a deeper community. The farmer's tears over a bull destroyed in the war have harmed his vision, and he wishes to be cured; he is refused with little sympathy. A new bride has learned that Dikaiopolis possesses peace in the form of wine. Interpreting this in an almost magical sense, she asks for some peace-wine so that she can apply it to her husband's person. This will keep him amorous, she hopes, and away from the war-recruiters. Dikaiopolis acquiesces in her request: since she is a woman and removed from the political realm, she is in no way guilty of continuing the war. Her enjoyment will contribute to peace and militate against war. The farmer's potential enjoyment is merely individual and will in no way contribute to the peace.

That Dikaiopolis can make this distinction shows that he has moved beyond the merely selfish dominion that the trade mart has given him. Thus, when the priest of Dionysus summons him to the Festival, he can respond with alacrity. Lamachus has not prepared himself for the feast. He had attached himself to the War and had also benefitted from that attachment. Now he must experience the other side of that attachment, war itself, as he is summoned to the colours.

Soon after this summons, the one to a Festival, the other to War, we see the results. Dikaiopolis has triumphed in the contest and is returning home with two comely companions whom he has met at the Festival. Lamachus has suffered the wounds of war and bears them in his person. Dikaiopolis has competed on equal terms with his fellow citizens in the Festival and thus has the enjoyments of drink and sexual pleasure. Lamachus had parasitically enjoyed the benefits of his war with his Greek confreres. Now he must suffer it.

The Dionysiac festival includes all the elements that Dikaiopolis has been experiencing. The wine that he has drunk is a result of *techne* or that craft that can make something useful for humans out of nature. The drinking contest includes the kind of competition that war and economic imperialism had earlier expressed. Finally, only in a State festival has Dikaiopolis gained the enjoyment he has been searching for.

This festival moreover has clarified certain confusions that Dikaiopolis had earlier experienced. Though his enjoyment of two comely companions might seem an offence to a moralizing view, these women have a different character than the two daughters he had gained through barter. There commerce had violated the familial order. Here the two women are regarded simply as objects of enjoyment. A difference amongst commerce, familial life and sensual enjoyment has been established.

Although Dikaiopolis is also the comic poet, he finds his realization in another Dionysiac festival. The comic drama finds its conclusion in that which is similar to, but not identical to, itself. A comic poet is the craftsman of comedy, not its indwelling reality. Only many years later, in *Frogs*, can Comedy be more radically comprehensive of itself. In that drama, not the poet but Dionysus himself is the hero. He determines the plot of that comedy by going to Hades to bring back his favourite tragic poet, Euripides, but returns with Aeschylus who can educate the State. Only thus can Comedy include both the life of the *polis* and the Dionysiac spirit in their radical division.

Only through the entire journey of the main character does the poet's complete view of war emerge. Dikaiopolis regards war as that which takes away enjoyment of every kind; his first step is to make himself the centre of his own political and familial world. This leads him though to recapitulate the very evils that had led to the War. Like the officials who expel Amiphitheus or benefit from fake embassies, Dikaiopolis has separated his good from the good of the State. The topsy-turvy world he makes for himself in the trade mart is no solution. Only the surrender of hostilities against other Greeks, and a just order at home can secure real enjoyment. Lamachus had hoped for enjoyment at home and hostilities abroad, but this division has worked only to his ruin. Only a festival of the State can ground true peace. It includes both production and competition, but in a setting that is conducive to the enjoyment of all. The competitive spirit that can lead to war is thereby not simply denied but directed. The true comedy lies in the journey of

Dikaipolis from the corruption of the city at war to a deep self-assertion that is so manifestly absurd that he can find only in a return to the life of the city the satisfaction that he craves.