That Joke isn’t Funny Anymore
A Generic Inquiry into the Fundamentals of Old Comedy

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The classical Athenian drama is one of the most studied and beloved remains from ancient Greek culture. The preserved plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes are not only studied by scholars, but read and appreciated, staged and reinterpreted by multitudes of people outside the lecture halls of universities. Because of this, the dramas are still evolving in a sense; they become part of a new tradition among newly written plays and new approaches to stagecraft whenever they are performed on stages over the world. Of course, what has been passed down to us is only a fraction of the total output, and while we can say with certainty what the Athenian dramas mean to us today, few things are clear about what the plays meant to those who wrote them and to those who saw them being staged for the first time.

Of the two primary 5th-century Athenian theatrical genres, old comedy is particularly shrouded in mystery. This situation has arisen in large part due to the lack of diversity in the source material. While complete tragic plays of three playwrights have survived to our times, old comedy is represented and judged by a fraction of the output by one single comedian – Aristophanes. The eleven plays that are now considered to be, more or less, complete have been the basis upon which the definition of old comedy has been built. The genre that has been defined from these plays is centred around lewd jokes, politics, attacks on notorious people, fellow comedians and tragedians; opposition between inhabitants of the countryside and the city, young and old, men and women, wise men and not so wise men, Greeks and foreigners, different Greeks, etc. This way of defining a genre, however, has some limitations that become acutely apparent when applied on a genre so fragmentary as old comedy.

The first, and most obvious, is the fact that it is precarious to define a genre from the works of one single author. By most definitions (and definitely the most useful ones) genres are made up of many works by many authors. There are exceptions, e.g. the post-romantic resistance to genre based on the idea that genre is a “prescriptive taxonomy
and [...] a constraint on textual energy,“¹ or the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce’s view that genre was “a classical ‘superstition’ that concealed the true nature of the aesthetic.”² Croce’s view has prompted quite a few responses, some of which will be discussed later.

However, when dealing with old comedy one must remember that it is an artificial distortion of the plays to view them as isolated artefacts, because they were originally part of a larger context: they were staged along with other plays against which they competed. Aristophanes showcases a kinship with other comedians in his plays, even at times mentioning his colleagues and their habits and styles when writing comedies. Old comedy was a genre made up of multiple works by multiple authors, and in order to find out its implications we should, ideally look at as many works by as many writers as possible. That approach is difficult, due to the lack of source material, although some interesting work has been done in recent decades on the fragmentary material of other comedians than Aristophanes, e.g. Eupolis and Cratinus.³ Aristophanes, however, still often looms over such projects, with his plays forming the basis for comparisons. Another approach, which can be combined with the previous, is to look for different markers in the plays than the plot points listed above, and to use a broader source material, looking outside the genre itself.

The second issue is that prescriptive genre definitions tend to make scholars strive for neat compartmentalisations that can lead to debates over where to put certain texts. One scholar may find evidence in the text that fits in well with one particular genre definition and another may find different evidence that point in a different direction. In the end we may not be much the wiser about the meaning of the text – the definitions have changed, but the text remains the same.

A third issue connected to this form of generic allocation is that by putting labels on texts one may make comparisons to other genres that distort the significance of the genre studied more than it clarifies it. Wilhelm Süss stated that old comedy was made

up of “[die] beiden Grundelemente […] Agon und lose, burleske Szenen.” That kind of definition gives a prospective reader a clear preconception about what can be expected from old comedy. It puts the idea in the reader’s mind that any coherent plot is not to be expected. If the reader then encounters any tendencies towards an overarching story, they may disregard them and instead try to reconcile the phenomenon with the information they were given beforehand. The idea that old comedy is made up of loose, burlesque scenes was for a long time the consensus with one scholar calling old comedy “episodic vaudeville”. Such a comparison does not do the genre any favours for the same reason that I have mentioned above, but it is particularly problematic because it mixes two forms of historically staged performances that were firmly situated in completely different contexts.

To avoid these and other pitfalls in my quest to answer the questions I wish to pursue in the aim of this thesis, I will employ a different approach to defining genre. The method I will use is based upon a theoretical framework primarily taken from rhetorical genre theory. This theory, instead of relying on prescriptive labels, is based around the situational and cultural contexts of genres and focuses in particular on the groups that used them, and the actions associated with them.

My goal at the outset of this work was to read old comedy by its own criteria. It is not an exhaustive inquiry into every aspect of old comedy, but a glimpse into some of the fundamental characteristics that define the genre. Consequently, this thesis also became an inquiry into ways to define genre.

Aim

The aim of this thesis is to investigate and define from a genre perspective how cultural, social, and situational factors interacted in old comedy between 425 and 388 BCE. The three factors are derived from rhetorical genre theory and it is mainly ideas found within that theory that will be used to define what a genre is within this thesis. How the terms are defined will be discussed in the next chapter.

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Method

In order to achieve the aim of this thesis I will employ a mainly rhetorical theory of genre, that will be described in-depth in the following chapter. This theoretical framework will be compared to other perspectives, which have been and still are hugely influential both in the study of genre questions and in the understanding of what genre is. To some extent the scope of the theoretical chapter will trace the development of genre theory from antiquity to the rhetorical genre theory of today, since the Platonic and Aristotelian genre theories, which are intimately linked with the dramatic genres of tragedy and comedy, will be discussed and compared to rhetorical genre theory. Other ancient genre theories will also be described and reflected upon, as well as general practices and views of ancient authors in relation to the genre or genres they worked within. The focal point, however, will be the development of modern rhetorical and literary genre theories.

The next chapter, which will focus specifically on comedy, will be more argumentative and there the theoretical framework will be applied on the source material. From the basis of ideas presented in the theoretical chapter, the source material will range from comedic plays and tragedies to philosophical and historiographical prose texts. This selection has been made in order to present a view of the genre that is as broad as possible, although I have opted to exclude ancient discussions on comedy that are dated later than the original stagings of the plays, because I believe that it is crucial to this inquiry to focus on first-hand accounts, due to the emphasis within the theoretical framework that I put on “genre users” (I will return to this in the theoretical chapter). Scholars such as Plutarch, whose views on comedy I have frequently come across during my research, have therefore been excluded. Aristotle’s writings on genre form a separate case because, although by his time comedic drama had changed considerably from what it was in the 5th century, his opinions on old comedy and on genre in general form the basis for much of the theory in this thesis.

Close readings of the source material will be made on the basis of the different theories presented in the theoretical chapter. By the term “close reading” I mean a reading in which the critic attempts to take into account every aspect of the text
however small. An important aspect of close reading, in my view, is to analyse the work under scrutiny by its own intrinsic premises. It is not until the work has been understood in itself, to the fullest extent possible, that extrinsic inputs can be added, such as the work’s place in history, its social impact as well as social influences on the work, etc. Due to the state of the source material from the time period I am investigating, genre users and their views will have to be deduced largely from comedic plays, historiographical, and philosophical texts.
Chapter 2: Theory

A Brief Historical Background

To begin, I will here present some of the historical trends in genre studies that have influenced the development of rhetorical genre theory. In essence the theory stems from a criticism of a prescriptive literary definition of genre. This is not meant to be seen as a comprehensive overview of every genre related theoretical trend during the 20th century, but as a guide to help the reader better understand the theoretical framework through its history. It should be pointed out that not presented here will be implemented into the finished theory, but in the words of Tzvetan Todorov: “[every] theory of genres is based on a hypothesis concerning the nature of literary works. We must therefore begin by presenting our own point of departure, even if subsequent efforts lead us to abandon it.”

Plato’s discussions on literature as a mimetic art is argued to be the starting point for classical genre theory. In the Republic Plato discusses that more or less all human creation is rooted in mimesis. He uses the example of a bed or couch being made first in an original shape of divine origin. This shape is then imitated by the carpenters, who manufacture couches, and these couches can be imitated by painters in their pictures. In the same manner as painters, writers imitate nature and acts of men. Grounded in this idea of mimesis is the notion that the type of imitation one indulges in is directly connected to one’s character. A writer of tragedy can, therefore, not write comedy and vice versa. To Aristotle, who based his own genre theory on ideas found in Plato, genres had their foundations in the different types of action they represent. The choice of the writer to mimic one action or another derives from the writer’s own character. A noble writer will write about the actions of noble men and the actions of ignoble men will be

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8 Plato, Res Publica, 597β.
written by ignoble writers. Those are the two fundamental categories into which all
texts, and all writers, fall. Interestingly enough, Aristotle mentions Homer as a writer of
both noble epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and ignoble comedy, the *Margites*. Homer
seems to be used by Aristotle as an archetype writer, who brought to man the
foundation of what would later become tragedy and comedy (much like Prometheus
brought fire).\(^9\) Tragedy and comedy can be viewed as the two genres that most clearly
illustrates the division between the noble and ignoble. According to Joseph Farrell,
Aristotle stands apart from the great multitude of ancient critics in that he considers the
essence of genres to lie in the actions that are described and not in their metrical form.
The texts of Homer, Hesiod, and Theocritus, that other critics considered to be equally
epic based on their shared hexameter, were treated as different by Aristotle on the basis
of their difference from one another regarding subject matter.\(^10\) However, this is the
view on genre that Aristotle expressed in the *Poetics*, but, as we have seen above, he
took quite a different stance in the *Rhetoric*, where the character of the rhetor did not
determine what he created, but the expectations of the audience. I will not try to answer
the question why this discrepancy exists, but it is an interesting and noteworthy one that
raises other questions as well, such as whether Aristotle believed that the art of the
rhetor was different from that of the tragedian or the comedian or not, and if he did, to
what extent it differed and why.

At the same time, there appears to have been a lack of consensus on genre among
ancient scholars after Plato and Aristotle, namely among the critics of Alexandria and
the writers of *progymnasmata*. While they seem to agree that authors must adhere to the
strict rules of style within their respective genres, they acknowledge that, in reality,
authors do mix stylistic features. Even a genre so well established and studied as epic
seems to elude the ancient critics.\(^11\)

Joseph Farrell, on the other hand, claims that ancient theorists did not perceive
any “generic ambiguity.”\(^12\) By that he meant that among ancient critics it was seen as
certain that a text belonged to one genre only. According to Farrell, there were not even
disagreements about which genre a text belonged to; it was clear to everybody. This

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\(^9\) Aristotle, *De Poetica*, 1448β.
\(^12\) Farrell, “Classical Genre in Theory and Practice,” p. 386.
certainty was helped by the conventions of metrical form, e.g. a text written in dactylic hexameter could only be considered to be an epic. The result of this theoretical approach is a literature determined by its form, where the writer picks a genre and then sticks to its conventions. If one agrees with Plato that a writer can only write texts suitable to his character, then, of course, this determinism is not problematic in any way; it is just the natural order. The ancient genre theory is, thus, at odds both with the theoretic notion of Derrida and other post-romantics that postulates that great literature can only be achieved by breaking “the law of genre,” since no-one can break free from a genre that is, as it were, devised by god, and Rosmarin’s view that genre exists only in the critic’s mind.

Farrell argues that these dogmatic views on genre professed by ancient critics are not reflected in the work by ancient writers, who, while aware of and often candid about their affinity to generic conventions, regularly step outside the generic boundaries they seemingly are bound by. This division between theory and practice has long been well known among classicists, he claims, but has eluded scholars in other fields.13

In the earliest texts it is hard to find any evidence of reflection among writers on the nature of genre, but in classical times an awareness of the expectations imposed by generic convention can be seen, especially within old comedy, and by Hellenistic and Roman times the playing with and challenging of generic boundaries are integral parts of much literature.14 The tragedy and comedy of 5th-century Athens are intimately connected by their social settings and structural composition. Both were played at religious festivals and were staged as a competition between three playwrights, who employed the similar formal attributes of a limited number of actors and a chorus. While this connection passes without acknowledgement within the remaining tragic plays, it is often used as a plot device, in one way or another, in the surviving comedies. There are occurrences of “para-tragedy,” passages where the diction and more stringent meter of tragedy are employed, as well as the actual occurrence of tragic playwrights within the plot of some plays. By utilizing these tragic elements, which clash with the tone and actions in comedy, the comedic playwright can point to the discrepancies

between comedy and tragedy. Farrell argues that the reason why comedy comments on its relationship with tragedy is because it did not enjoy the same high status that tragedy did. As fair an assessment as that may be, it is not foolproof since among the comedians themselves they could have perceived the case to be the other way around. Comedy can be a powerful tool for asserting dominance over an opponent by pointing to how silly and daft their actions and opinions are. The comedians could have very likely aimed to point out the faults in tragedy, and yes, perhaps because they felt that comedy was considered a lower art than tragedy among the general public and they wanted to change that opinion. This is mere speculation, however.

In a 1979 article on ancient rhetoric and genre criticism, Thomas Conley begins by stating, among other things, that “[a] good many new ideas introduced in recent criticism are [...] very old; while many old ideas about genre remain largely misunderstood.” What Conley refers to is mainly the Aristotelian definition of genre and the way it has been used and repackaged over time to form different theories of genre. First of all Conley criticizes how some scholars have interpreted the three gene of rhetorical activity that Aristotle put forth in the Rhetoric. These, Conley claims, were intended by Aristotle to be used as guides when constructing speeches dedicated to different types of audiences. But the criticized modern scholars have instead of viewing them as tools seen them as three distinct rhetorical genres, which have then formed the foundation for their own definitions of genre. Aristotle did not mean that because a speech had this or that form it belonged in one genre or another, argues Conley, but this is how his statement has been interpreted by many modern critics. Aristotle rather looked to the recipients of speeches and their “different roles and expectations.”

The genre concept in the Rhetoric is not centred around guidelines for the recognition of literary groupings, such as epic or tragedy, like in the Poetics, but around more fluid notions of user experience. Conley writes: “[...] in the Rhetoric, ‘genre’ is

20 Cf. Aristotle, Ars Rhetorica, I.3.1358b1ff, where Aristotle discusses the three part composition of every speech: the speaker, the subject of the speech, and the person the speech is aimed at. In comparison, Aristotle in de Poetica is concerned with the intrinsic values of different types of literature (cf. 1447a)
a function of the conditions of the reception of the work rather than anything distinctive of the work itself. It is not as much something constituted by a set of rules to be followed as it is a problem which is solved in a new way by each successful work.”

As mentioned above, to Aristotle the reception of the work by the audience is at the core of the rhetorical genres. The audience expects the rhetor to find a solution, to a problem stipulated by them, that is at the same time befitting and novel.

One aspect of genre theory that makes it so appealing to scholars is the logical rigor it allows. It is a system of classification and taxonomy that can bring the somewhat vague language of literary criticism closer to the strictness and transparency of its scientific counterpart:

A critic can use genre conceptions both to explain why a given work has the shape and content it does and to evaluate that work by comparing it to others of the same generic class. Moreover, given a set of generic conceptions, it is possible for a critic to explain and evaluate a work with a considerable amount of logical rigor.

Having acknowledged that, Conley claims that “[the] very rigor of genre criticism contributes to one of its chief embarrassments, […] the fact that it must always stand in external relation to the work under consideration.” He exemplifies this with two differing 19th-century views on the genre of Horace’s Ars Poetica. The earliest view is by O. Weissenfels who concludes that the Ars Poetica belongs in the genre epistula, because it was “composed in a loose conversational style” in the manner of all epistulae. The other view belongs to E. Norden, who claimed that Ars Poetica is a “formal introductory treatise, an eisagoge”, “written in accordance with a fixed rhetorical scheme.” Conley comments that:

[Both] Weissenfels and Norden were able to couch their arguments in rather strict syllogistic form. That is the kind of rigor genre criticism can provide a critic. Yet their conclusions are quite opposed to one another. […]. Their premises differ, too, though both sets are supportable from the text. Only the Ars remains the same. The miracle by which a disorganized “conversation” is transformed into a

\[\text{that constitute genres, whereas in } \text{Ars Rhetorica} \text{ genre is an expression of what happens in different scenarios between the speaker, the subject matter, and the hearer – sort of an input-output function.}\]

masterpiece of didactic poetry, therefore, is external to the poem itself and is, evidently, performed only in the mind of its critics.\(^{27}\)

It is easy to agree with Conley on this, since a simple syllogistic reasoning can rarely cover the meaning of an entire rhetorical or literary work. When presenting certain aspects from a work as premises for one’s conclusion, more often than not must other aspects be disregarded. This view on genres as frames into which critics can insert logical deductions on the nature of a certain work can lead to tendentious readings that distort more than they clarify. As Conley put it: “[Both] were able to support their respective identifications of the genre of the *Ars* by citation of the text. Their definitions of the genres told them what to look for. But the result is not any sort of clarification.”\(^{28}\)

Aside from the illusions of logical rigor, Conley criticises the limiting and reductive nature of genre conceptions, a fault he concedes that all classifications share.\(^{29}\)

These innate characteristics of genre classifications may even cause the meaning of studied texts to be distorted, because critics lump different texts together under one generic definition which then serves as the basis for the building of theories concerning the exact nature shared by those texts.\(^{30}\) Conley illustrates this critique with an example of how Aristophanic comedy, in the early 20\(^{th}\) century, was frequently seen as “thinly disguised political propaganda,” a view which was later challenged by critics who meant that the plays should be looked at as comedic plays. To view the plays as plays, seems compelling, but Conley argues that:

Viewing the plays from a generic perspective in which, as “comedies,” they are made to conform to a definition of comedy (in this case, a definition grounded in a particular psychological theory) results in the omission of large sections of the plays that do not fit the generic conception. This is particularly interesting in view of the claims of the comic approach to have filled in the critical gaps created by the political view of them, a view which tended to play down (or, in some cases, ignore) the buffoonery and obscenity which the comic view highlights, and which tended to concentrate instead precisely upon those parts of the plays which the comic view, in its turn, excludes from consideration.\(^{31}\)

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\(^{27}\) Conley, “Ancient Rhetoric and Modern Genre Criticism,” p. 50.


\(^{29}\) Conley, “Ancient Rhetoric and Modern Genre Criticism,” p. 50.


What Conley appears to criticize here is not the generic conceptions in themselves, but rather the way in which the idea of what a genre is and what can be included within its frame has made critics blind to what is actually said in the texts. Just like his critique of the differing readings of *Ars Poetica*, what lies at the core here are the liberties taken by critics to exclude parts of the texts that do not support their case. Conley suggests that “genre approaches” makes it inevitable to “produce distorted versions of the plays,” since “critics […] tend to look through the plays rather than at them, to view them as specimens of a type rather than attempting to encounter them on their own terms.”

That genre approaches make critics overlook individual traits in texts is problematic, but it does not suggest that genre criticism is entirely to blame. Individual critics and their use of the theoretical foundations at their disposal are, in my view, equally to blame. When Conley writes that “one of the worst aspects about genre criticism is […] that it detaches us from our experience of the work” it suggests that he sees genre criticism in itself as a force that controls critics and the conclusions that they draw. Conley never proposes any answers to the problems (nor does he claim that it was his intention to do so) discussed in his article. Nevertheless, it has been fundamental in the development of the theory behind this thesis. By pointing out some problems that may arise when genre is viewed as a prescriptive term that is limited to measuring qualities within the literary artefacts themselves, it led me to search for ways to amend those problems and in the end change my view on what literature can be.

John Frow claims, in an article from 2007, that genre has fallen out of fashion “as a vital issue in contemporary literary theory,” in recent decades, while at the same time being very much alive “as a point of reference.” That suggests that there is consensus on the meaning of and use for genre among literary critics. Also, it raises the question of whether genres are taken for granted, i.e. their taxonomies and the criteria imposed on texts in order to fit into genres are generally accepted, or whether critics have moved beyond genre, as it were, and the reading of texts as “specimens of a type” to use Conley’s phraseology, and instead begun reading texts on their own terms. Frow’s observation does not suggest the latter, but points to a situation where genres are used

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for easy referencing in a casual or semi-casual environment, i.e. among friends and co-workers, etc. It is a term mostly used to lazily criticize unimaginative works within any creative discipline.

Frow asserts that genre is thriving in the classroom as a subject of taxonomy that lends schoolchildren easy to grasp classifications to aid in their learning of language and literature.\textsuperscript{35} Perhaps then genre is treated in modern scholarship as neat taxonomies aiding in the description of texts as well. There is also the possibility that genre is used to facilitate the comparison of texts. However genre is used today, Frow claims that: “it’s just not one of the topics about which interesting discussions are happening these days.”\textsuperscript{36} He thus speculates:

Perhaps the major reason for this is the continuing prevalence of a neoclassical understanding of genre as prescriptive taxonomy and as a constraint on textual energy and thus the shaping of accounts of genre in terms of the Romantic reaction to that model.\textsuperscript{37}

Frow suspects that the loss of interest within literary criticism is the exact reason why it is so popular in the classroom. Literary critics are deadlocked in the idea that for anything really interesting to happen genres must be transgressed. Apparently not much had changed from the time Conley wrote his article in 1979 till Frow wrote his in 2007; genre is still seen as “prescriptive taxonomy.” Frow even cites Jacques Derrida’s article “The Law of Genre” describing it as “one of the most powerful of recent analyses.”\textsuperscript{38} That article was published in 1980, so it suggests that – since nothing important had happened in the field of genre theory in 27 years – old genre conceptions die hard. In his analysis Frow observes that Derrida tries to illuminate a paradox inherent to genre, namely that while it is a law that regulates texts it is impossible not to break that law by mixing genres, thus turning a “pure” expression into an “impure” one.\textsuperscript{39} He remarks that this view on genre presupposes that it is indeed a matter of law, notwithstanding how undermined that law is from the start. He writes: “[for] all its productive ambivalence, Derrida’s argument participates in a familiar post-Romantic resistance to genre.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{35} Frow, “Genre Theory Today,” p. 1627.
\textsuperscript{36} Frow, “Genre Theory Today,” p. 1627.
\textsuperscript{37} Frow, “Genre Theory Today,” p. 1627.
\textsuperscript{38} Frow, “Genre Theory Today,” p. 1627.
\textsuperscript{39} Frow, “Genre Theory Today,” p. 1627.
\textsuperscript{40} Frow, “Genre Theory Today,” p. 1627.
critique of this “post-Romantic resistance to genre”, by Michel Beaujour, is cited, stating that to talk of texts that break free from the constraints of generic law is to “sacralise a handful of extraordinary texts through which post-romantic paradoxes hold on to a literary status they otherwise challenge and undermine.” ⁴¹ From the basis of these claims it seems that the true paradox lies not within the “law” of genre, but rather within the critical resistance to genre: at first it denies genre any merit and then it lauds certain texts that break the chains of generic conformity.

Beaujour tries to mend the problems caused by the “post-romantic” approach to genre with something he calls “sociopoetics”. Sociopoetics “seeks to describe systems of discursive functions and speech acts embodied in all kinds of utterances,” and Frow fills in: “[there] are as many genres as there are (and have been, and will be), they form an open-ended set, and there is no overriding logic within which all genres might be subsumed and from which they could be deduced.” ⁴² Beaujour’s sociopoetics is a useful addition to the study of genre, because it turns the focal point away from the idea that genres are mere formal entities (later it will become clear why a purely formal view on genre is problematic) and stresses that they are “historically specific,” i.e. their meaning and usefulness are connected to cultural and situational factors rather than the strict formal features of texts (cf. Conley’s description of the generic definition of Aristotle expressed in the *Rhetoric* above). Frow points out, however, that despite its merits Beaujour’s methodology, due to its descriptive nature, cannot be used to bring any deeper understanding of “how genres can be recognized, of the structural or situational features that make such recognition possible, and of the historical force of genre norms.” ⁴³

Beaujour attempts to strip genre theory of any prejudiced notions regarding the status of certain texts and classical genres, as they were, and instead focus on describing the actions that take place and their place in a historical (or social) setting. But, like Frow points out, this theory can only be applied on the object studied as a descriptive tool, it cannot be used to clarify the questions raised by Frow. Furthermore, Frow raises the question of whether the shift in focus from theoretical (i.e. the kinds of genres

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criticized by Derrida et al.) to historical genres will be beneficial or not. His fear is that to view genres as “historically specific codifications of particular clusters of discursive properties” could lead to a situation where, once again, genres are merely a complete list of all the kinds of literature there are.  

Frow concludes that genre theory still remains in an unrefined state: “[the] beginnings of an account of the social life of forms, but not with a fully-fledged research paradigm, and indeed with a problematic that has little purchase on most current work in literary and cultural studies.” Genre theory has been stuck in the same place it was forty years ago and the interest to engage in it from a literary point of view is ever waning. Frow believes that it is troubling, because: “if Todorov is correct in arguing that ‘genres are the meeting place between general poetics and event-based literary history’ and that ‘as such, they constitute a privileged object that may well deserve to be the principal figure in literary studies.”

Frow suggests looking outside the field of literary criticism and into disciplines such as “cognitive science, rhetoric, anthropology, microsociology, the sociology of classification, film theory, and possible-world theory” to spark new life into the study of literary genres.

The field of “New Rhetoric” is given attention in Frow’s article. Here he explores how “[genre] is conceived of as a mediating structure between texts and the situations in which and on which they operate.” He describes how, within New Rhetoric, the focus lies on “the way discourse works as a practice shaping the meanings of a social environment” instead of on classification of the discourse. He goes on to argue:

[This] emphasis needs to be supplemented by a distinction between those genres that are immediately rooted in a social situation and those (such as most literary genres) that have a more mediated relation to the social – responding first to the institution and the abstract speech situation of literature rather than to a more specific social context and functioning as practice by being representations of practice – this is nevertheless a particularly powerful refocusing of the idea of

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genre from a taxonomic function (in which texts are thought to belong to a genre instead of being uses of it) to a pragmatic function.⁵⁰

Within the genre theory of New Rhetoric, the focus is shifted away from the taxonomic function of genre, i.e. genre as a set of labels that facilitates the compartmentalisation of texts. Instead, genres are considered to have multiple functions and within different genres different functions are given different merit.⁵¹ Frow cites the genre definition of Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Campbell and names it “[the] key definition”:

[…] ‘a genre is composed of a constellation of recognisable forms bound together by an internal dynamic,’ a dynamic that is a ‘fusion of substantive, stylistic, and situational elements’ and that works as a range of potential ‘strategic responses to the demands of the situation.’⁵²

Frow argues that this definition of genre offers a singular framework that can be applied on all genres while allowing the “sufficient flexibility to accommodate the fact that different genres give a different weight to the formal, rhetorical, or thematic dimensions of their structure and have a characteristic configuration in each of them.”⁵³ He explains further:

If we can assume that each of these three dimensions has a constitutive role in the makeup of genre and that there is no genre whose properties are not codified in each dimension, we can then distinguish genre from organizations of discourse that are more general (e.g., mode, style, speech variety, or discursive formation) and less general (e.g., thematically defined subgenres or speech acts).⁵⁴

This viewpoint still presupposes the genre as a sort of prefab box that the text has to be shoehorned into, but it offers a foundation for a solid theory to be built upon. Conley’s concern, however, that texts are distorted by critics trying to explain them with generic concepts is still valid, to some extent, within this model. The problem lies in the vagueness of its three defining aspects: the formal, the rhetorical, and the thematic. It is still up to the individual scholar to decide what they entail and to what extent they are present in any given genre. Frow’s claim, for example, that “the elegy shifts from a primarily metrical definition in classical antiquity to a primarily thematic definition in

the early modern period” is somewhat unsatisfying.\footnote{Frow, “Genre Theory Today,” p. 1631.} It fails to explain the kinship, that Frow obviously senses, between the elegiac genre of antiquity and that of “the early modern period,” and because of that it opens up for the question of whether the two can be said to be incarnations of the same genre at all. On the other hand, it offers a framework for the investigation of questions of that nature. The substantive, stylistic, and situational elements can be compared between different texts to see where they intersect, and then it comes down to the critic to argue why those intersections are significant.

On the sad realities of genre studies, Frow concludes:

One of the strongest reasons for the decline of genre theory is surely that genre continues to be considered a matter of the categorization of texts rather than a matter of the textual categorization and mobilization of information about the world. Rather than asking, What kind of thing is this text? we should be asking something like, What kind of world is brought into being here – What thematic topoi, with what modal inflection, from what situation of address, and structured by what formal categories? Who represents this world to whom, under what circumstances and to what ends?\footnote{Frow, “Genre Theory Today,” p. 1633.}

Again, from the claim that “genre continues to be considered a matter of the categorization of texts”, it is clear that genre theory within literary criticism has not evolved much over the last forty or so years. The same concern raised by Conley is raised by Frow, and he is not the only one who, in recent years, has recognised the need for a healthy injection of new ideas into genre theory.

One reason why genre theory within literary criticism has not evolved much during the last decades may be because the concept of genre has been outmanoeuvred by another concept. David Duff argues that genre, in the 1960’s, was widely considered as something completely negative, a word that carried the connotations of “conformity, predictability, standardization, the inertia of tradition,” all of which were antithetical to “the avant-garde literary theory” of the time.\footnote{Duff, “Intertextuality versus Genre Theory,” p. 56.} Radical, young scholars were drawn to the idea that there are no genres – a concept that fit well within the framework of intertextuality, which was a freshly coined theory at the time.\footnote{Duff, “Intertextuality versus Genre Theory,” pp. 54–55.} Duff claims that by
reinventing genre as intertextuality, genre could both be stripped of its “authoritarian connotations” and be expanded beyond simple norms and conventions.\(^{59}\) This intertextual genre concept that has evolved within literary criticism shares some resemblance to the rhetorical genre concept, in that both fields recognize the need to look beyond formal generic conventions and look at the social frames within which genres work.

“Language arises from man’s need to express himself, to objectify himself.”\(^{60}\) If we accept that about language, then genre can be said to arise from man’s need to compartmentalise his expressions, to divide his objective self into smaller parts that are easier to grasp than the whole. Genre is invented when we grow weary of just using language as a mode of expression and also wish to express language. Arguably, this is genre from a linguistic standpoint. Mikhail Bakhtin argued that “language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity”.\(^{61}\) These “concrete utterances” are catalogued and differentiated from one another based on thematic content, style and, which Bakhtin considered the most important, compositional structure. Even though each utterance is unique, certain “sphere[s] of communication” have evolved with their own sets of “relatively stable types of these utterances”.\(^{62}\) These types are what Bakhtin calls speech genres. Speech genre is a markedly vague term and it can be used to label any limited language act, what is referred to as “utterance” in Bakhtin’s vocabulary.\(^{63}\) In fact, since human activity is boundless, so are the speech genres. This makes consensus over what to name particular speech genres more or less impossible; each time a genre is mentioned it must be explained and clearly differentiated from other genres.

To Bakhtin, the speech genres are divided into two categories: primary and secondary. The primary genres are the simple, everyday utterances and the secondary genres are the complex ones, such as poetry, novels, scientific research, etc.\(^{64}\) In order to clarify, the primary genres could be called simple and the secondary could be called complex genres. This because the secondary genres are made up of primary utterances.

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61 Bakhtin, Speech Genres, p. 60.
62 Bakhtin, Speech Genres, p. 60.
63 Bakhtin discusses “the utterance” in detail in Speech Genres, pp. 71-73.
64 Bakhtin, Speech Genres, pp. 61-62.
The literary language is defined by its complex verbal nature. A literary text, such as a novel, is composed of e.g. dialogues, letters, thoughts and ideas (all of which are simple in their verbal structure) and, it is implied, fictional because when they are combined into the complex system of the novel, they have a relation to one another only within that sphere. The simple utterances no longer have any immediate connection to reality and other utterances outside the novel’s sphere. They have become parts of a whole (the novel) and are presented to reality via the novel “as a literary-artistic event”. In Bakhtin’s book, it is not good enough to focus on just one type of utterance. Since language is used in both simple utterances and complex utterances, the critic who solely focuses on either primary utterances or secondary utterances is treating language as something that it is not.

One of the greatest problems of setting a theoretical framework is the weighing between precise definitions, that risk being too narrow, and too wide definitions, that risk being blunt.

[...] one of the risks of theory [is] that it lends itself to the development of a closed set, usually consisting of few members – a neat taxonomic system that does not reflect rhetorical practice so much as an a priori principle.66

Hans Robert Jauss also expressed ideas that are echoed in the rhetorical genre theory of today. Criticizing Croce’s view that art is purely individual, he highlighted both the influence of expectations from recipients and of previous works.67 Jauss claims that: “[even] where a verbal creation negates or surpasses all expectations, it still presupposes preliminary information and a trajectory of expectations [Erwartungsrichtung] against which to register the originality and novelty.”68 All creative expression is thus affected by its place in history, culture, etc. a notion that, of course, could be placed inside the realm of intertextuality. Jauss continues:

This horizon of the expectable is constituted for the reader from out of a tradition or series of previously known works, and from a specific attitude, mediated by one (or more) genre and dissolved through new works. Just as there is no act of verbal communication that is not related to a general, socially or situationally conditioned norm or convention, it is also unimaginable that a literary work set

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68 Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p. 79.
itself into an informational vacuum, without indicating a specific situation of understanding.\textsuperscript{69}

Jauss claims that all literary works belong to a genre within the framework of “the horizon of the expectable.” The ideas mentioned above are important within rhetorical genre theory, actually forming part of the basis of it, and Jauss’ way of expressing those ideas are similar to how the are expressed by rhetorical theorists, as we will see. This will aid the understanding of the discourse within the discipline.

Amy Devitt asserts that there has indeed been a change in the views of genre, “shifting from a formalistic study of critics’ classifications to a rhetorical study of the generic actions of everyday readers and writers.”\textsuperscript{70} “Critics’ classifications” versus “rhetorical study” is an important dichotomy to remember, because it says a lot about Devitt’s view on the development of genre theory. Genre theory may have been closely associated with literary criticism in the past, but now fields such as rhetoric have picked up the torch, being the fields where new exciting ideas and concepts are discussed. This is largely due to literary criticism still being stuck in its old formalistic views on genre. Devitt highlights the view offered by Adena Rosmarin to exemplify a clear schism between the rhetorical and the literary critics. Rosmarin, Devitt claims, holds the view that “genres exist only in the critic’s mind and in the critic’s use of them.”\textsuperscript{71} Rosmarin sees genre as a tool to be used mainly by critics, and disregards that it can have any effect on language and the formation of literature. Genres, then, only exist to the extent that they are useful to the critic, being a discursive tool that facilitates the tagging of studied objects. This view is problematic because it relativizes how texts are grouped into genres, which opens for an arbitrary scholarship that distorts texts in the manner described by Conley. One can, however, question whether literary theory has been so focused on the critic’s perspective and “formalistic study” as Devitt wants us to believe. As we have seen above, Jauss, for one, does not focus on “critics” in a scholarly sense, instead claiming that works belong to genre because there are expectations that influence both writers and the readers. Fowler, also, did not use “the critic” as his starting point in \textit{Kinds of Literature}. Both Jauss and Fowler discussed genre in the same decade as Rosmarin’s book \textit{The Power of Genre}, that Devitt bases her criticism on, was

\textsuperscript{69} Jauss, \textit{Toward an Aesthetic of Reception}, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{71} Devitt, \textit{Writing Genres}, p. 169.
published, so Rosmarin’s ideas do not seem to have been the consensus within literary studies at the time.  

One of the fundamentals of rhetorical genre theory is the notion that genre is a response to recurring situations. It has been expanded upon and specified by a number of scholars. Edwin Black described genres as “responding to types of situations that recur;”  

Carolyn Miller as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations.” Devitt then traces similar thoughts on genre, incorporating ideas from various fields, back to the definition given by Miller. David Russell defines genre as “typified ways of purposefully interacting in and among some activity system(s).” Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin has a slightly different definition, writing that genre is: “dynamic rhetorical forms that are developed from actors’ responses to recurrent situations and that serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning.” Devitt herself defines genre as “a dynamic response to and construction of recurring situation.”

To the greatest extent, claims Devitt, has Miller’s theory been influenced by Lloyd Bitzer’s work on rhetorical situation. According to him “language users first respond in fitting ways and hence similarly to recurring situations; then the similarities among those appropriate responses become established as generic conventions.” Also in the work of Kenneth Burke can a similar idea be found: “critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose.” I think that the most useful addition to the concept of genre made by Bitzer is that responses should be fitting to the situation and therefore they share similarities. In the similarity of the responses a genre can be established.

The backtracking of genres can be a perilous endeavour, that may well lead down a fruitless path to find “the mother genre, the antecedent of all other genres.” However, “tracing the evolution of a genre back to some of its antecedents can reveal the nature of the genre and its situational and cultural origins as well.” To search for the roots of a genre by only looking at previous genres can be misleading, because

73 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 13. The definition by Edwin Black can be found on the same page, as well as the following examples from other critics.
74 Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” p. 159.
75 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 14.
76 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 14.
77 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 92.
78 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 92.
while intriguingly similar in form or content they may have fulfilled different functions or responded to different recurring situations than the genre used as the point of departure. Instead, it may be more fruitful to investigate the situational and cultural contexts in which the genre functions. A question that can shed light on the function of a genre is how creators and recipients (writers and readers, etc.) at a particular time and place used and discussed the genre. When tracing antecedents, this approach can be used too. “[The] developing changes in ideologies, situations, and settings that create the circumstances for a new genre” are equally important to investigate as antecedent genres sharing linguistic similarities.79

Above, I briefly mentioned Devitt’s rendition of Rosmarin’s critico-centric take on genres. Devitt, in her book, discusses other views on genre from a literary perspective and for the sake of plurality, I will present some of those here, as interpreted by Devitt. Devitt seems to subscribe to a rather narrow definition of literary genres, which is evident in the introduction to the sixth chapter. She writes:

Our [rhetoric scholars’] genre theory is a reconceived, rhetorically based genre theory, not the categorization of literary kinds of old, when the term genre included only literary genres. Our main concern is with the everyday texts of everyday people, not the special texts of a cultural elite, the genres of which have already received considerable scholarly attention.80

In the fundamentally unequal society of 5th-century Athens, drama was among the most egalitarian genres, e.g. female characters, not only male ones, provide the action in many surviving plays (albeit written by men and played by men), and it is arguably literary. That is, literary as opposed to rhetorical, which, if one agrees with Aristotle, deals with persuasion.81 The genres that were seen as rhetorical in nature, such as pleads in the courts or political speeches in the assembly, were, in that sense, more elitist than the drama or the epic or the lyric. If the goal is to study “the everyday texts of everyday people,” I do not see that the literary kind is any less “everyday” than the rhetorical kind within the framework of this thesis.

Fowler suggests that genres have been dismissed as irrelevant because they are viewed as absolutes. That is, once that they have been established, they are seen as

79 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 93.
80 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 163.
81 Aristotle, Ars Rhetorica, 1355b.25.
forever applicable on all literature that was before and that which is to come afterwards, and so all genre theory is one and the same.\textsuperscript{82} In the case of old comedy, the genre does not fare well when compared to modern comedies, because it in many senses does not fulfil the criteria that we expect from comedies. Genres are constantly changing, Fowler claims, and therefore genre theory too must be in constant change. I do not think that Fowler is referring primarily to a diachronic change, in the case of genre theory, because that would not make any sense for the largest portion of historical genres that are no longer evolving. Instead, the theoretical framework must be tweaked to suit different generic situations in order to be as useful as possible.

Fowler takes a cultural view on genre. He criticizes the statement by Northrop Frye that “Literature is not a piled aggregate of ‘works,’ but an order of words” as being too narrow and says that “[when] we read literature, what we read are groups of works, or works, or parts of works: not words”.\textsuperscript{83} He discusses literary canon as a factor in establishing genre and claims that literature is determined by culture, e.g. that literature is not the same thing in India as it is in Britain.\textsuperscript{84} Fowler solely discusses “traditional” genres. According to that concept, literary genres differ by the names they are given in any given culture. The epic of Gilgamesh is called an “epic” in western discourse, because that work mostly resembles works defined as “epic” in western culture. Without a doubt the Homeric epics would have been distinguished as whatever the Sumerians defined the epic of Gilgamesh as, had they had the chance to hear them. As such, literary genres do more to define their respective cultures, than the other way around. Culture adds an extra dimension to the genre discourse. When discussing genre from a cultural viewpoint the meanings of genres in different cultures must be taken into account and explained. In the case of classical Greek literature, much of the work is to define the role of the genres within their contemporary society. Drama means something decisively different to a modern westerner than to an Athenian from the 5th century BCE, so when studying dramatic works from 5th-century Athens precaution must be taken not to read the text as one would a modern stage play.

\textsuperscript{84} Fowler, \textit{Kinds of Literature}, pp. 1-6.
The Conclusive Theoretical Framework

In order to make the theory upon which the readings in the following chapter rests as transparent as possible, it will be presented in the form of a list. The different points are however not meant to be understood as loose entities to pick and choose from, but as parts of a whole, in which they are all a necessary part.

Firstly, a few core terms must be explained. The research in this thesis is centred around three concepts: culture, sociality, and situation. Situation, as a component of what constitutes a genre, has been explained in a few different ways, but there are a concepts that recur. A situation, from a rhetorical viewpoint, is an isolated event in space and time marked by exigence, i.e. the need or urgency of the circumstance, composed of both the material circumstance of the event as well as the subjective understanding of it by its participants. For situations to be useful in a theory of genre, they must be recurring. From a strictly material viewpoint a recurring situation is an oxymoron, since no two situations can be exactly the same, and that is why the subjective sense of recurrence among the participants is an important factor. It is human beings who perceive a situation, therefore human experience must be taken into account. Devitt uses the example of theatrical plays that are advertised as the same play each time they are performed but which differ from one another as an example of a recurring situation. She notes that “the variations of the particular performance are, in fact, what is appreciated, why the audience attends the play rather than reading the script.” The audience knows that one performance of a play differs from another, but despite that they consider two performances to be two iterations of the same play.

The social aspect of genre is rooted in the different groups that use a genre and the fact that genres are made up of multiplicity. In order for a genre to be established, “multiple actions by multiple people” are required. A simple discursive action involving two people, e.g. a writer and reader, is not enough to allow for a genre to be established. Simple multiplicity does not constitute the entirety of the social nature of genres, however, because that concept is intertwined with the “socially developed understandings of situations” among participants that was mentioned above.

85 Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” p. 156.
86 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 20.
87 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 33.
88 Devitt, Writing Genres, pp. 33–34.
recognise recurring situations, as mentioned above, because they have learned a set of common markers. Such markers are often shared within certain “social structures and particular groups” rather than within an entire culture. Devitt writes that: “one common way of describing genre’s social involvement is to claim that genres function for a group of language users to fulfil the group’s needs.”

Genres are, within this system, differentiated as groups of people using literature to solve the exigencies of particular situations that pertain to the genres.

“Genre analyses in the past have sometimes been primarily situational (examining local purposes, participants, and settings) and insufficiently cultural.” At the same time Devitt claims that “the heart of genre’s social nature is its embeddedness in groups and hence social structures.” It is also within the group that “rhetorical situations are likely to be perceived as recurring,” because within a group people’s “experiences are similar enough and repeated in similar enough ways to be perceived as recurring situations.”

“Culture (loosely defined as a shared set of material contexts and learned behaviours, values, beliefs, and templates),” writes Devitt, “influences how situation is constructed and how it is seen as recurring in genres.” The aforementioned definition serves the purpose of this thesis, but it does not provide the necessary limits that are needed for it to be practical. The question is by which criteria culture should be delimited. Within the framework of my analysis of old comedy, I will simply let culture be shorthand for the “shared set of material contexts and learned behaviours, values, beliefs, and templates” of the people who came in contact with old comedy.

With these definitions made, it is time to define genre.

1. Genre is action. “Genres help people do things in the world. They are also both social and rhetorical actions, operating as people interact with others in purposeful ways.”

2. The construction of genre lies at the nexus of culture, recurring situations, and other genres. Culture gives the genre users a common set of knowledge, that is

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89 Devitt, *Writing Genres*, p. 34.
90 Devitt, *Writing Genres*, p. 34
91 Devitt, *Writing Genres*, p. 36.
92 Devitt, *Writing Genres*, p. 36.
93 Devitt, *Writing Genres*, p. 25.
crucial for the group since without it the group would not be formed due to a lack of common understanding. The knowledge of other genres is what allows the genre users to differentiate themselves from users of other genres. The recurring situation is the reason for the genre users to come together. It gives them something to respond to, and when multiple responses are made, marked by reciprocity, a genre is formed.  

3. Exigence lies at the centre of genre. It is a sense of urgency that drives creation, but it is also what makes people take in the creations of others. Ralph Rosen writes that “[…] it is helpful […] to think in terms of a genre’s ‘dynamics’ rather than any static qualities of form or language. What distinguishes one genre from another […] becomes more a matter of what they do than of what they are.”

This claim points back to point number 1 on this list. Exigence is not mentioned, but it becomes apparent later in the text that it lies implicitly within a genre’s “dynamics.” Without exigence, what a genre does becomes what a genre is: a fossilised set of building blocks, which can be used to imitate genres. When exigence is taken out of the genre equation, we get the formalised study tools that Frow discussed. The reasons to take certain actions are also the things that place particular genres in certain times and places in history.

4. Genres are inherently social concepts. For a genre to be a genre, and not just a solitary action, a multiplicity of actions need to be taken by multiple people. Glenn Most writes: “[genre] is often formulated as a set of rules, but it may be better to understand it as a historically contingent and flexible reciprocal system of mutually calibrated expectations, correlating some participants who are more or less active […] with others who are more or less passive within a loosely bounded but largely self-conscious cultural community […]”

5. Genres affect their participants. “Part of what all readers and writers recognize when they recognize genres are the roles they are to play, the roles being played by other people, what they can gain from the discourse, and what the discourses

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95 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 29.
are about.”\textsuperscript{98} The genre affects the way in which we interact with a text: “Readers not only classify it and expect a certain form, but also make assumptions about the text’s purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader.”\textsuperscript{99} Because readers make these assumptions, generic forms can be deceiving. Writers can utilize formal features associated with one genre to create a different text that does not correspond thematically to what can be expected by the form presented.

Ways to Read Old Comedy

What follows is a discussion on theoretical approaches to old comedy taken from a few works with different angles that arrive at different conclusions about the nature of old comedy.

In the book \textit{The Comedian as Critic} (2012), Matthew Wright discusses how the playwrights of old comedy engaged in literary criticism.\textsuperscript{100} Wright claims that, since almost all early Greek literature is lost to us, “old comedy is now our best evidence for the origins and early development of literary criticism as an intellectual discipline.”\textsuperscript{101} He bases that claim on the comedians’ interest in the generic questions that have been mentioned above. That Plato is seen as the forefather of literary criticism is, according to Wright, both due to him being the first to attempt to systematically discuss literary matters and due to the form of prose treatises that his writings were written in. Acknowledging that there was never an actual genre of literary criticism in the 5th century BCE, any text (regardless of its form) that discusses literary matters can be considered literary criticism.

Wright stresses that it is important to include as much source material as possible when studying old comedy as a genre. Earlier scholarship has mainly focused on Aristophanes in general and the extant complete plays by his hand in particular. When drawing conclusions about the genre in general, like Wright does, it is imperative to include a selection of source material that is as wide as possible. Devitt establishes that

\textsuperscript{98} Devitt, \textit{Writing Genres}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{99} Devitt, \textit{Writing Genres}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{100} M. Wright, \textit{The Comedian as Critic – Greek Old Comedy and Poetics}, Bristol Classical Press, Bristol (2012).
\textsuperscript{101} Wright, \textit{The Comedian as Critic}, p. 1.
genre is inherently social, and a genre cannot be established without the actions of multiple people. In the 5th and 4th centuries BCE old comedy was a genre that worked according to this multiplicity. There was a multitude of playwrights putting up a multitude of plays for a multitude of people to see and engage in. When scholarship is narrowed down to only include a few plays by Aristophanes conclusions can be drawn about Aristophanes and his plays, but conclusions are difficult to draw about the nature of the entire genre of old comedy.

An interesting theoretical position is taken by Wright at the beginning of his book, one that I think unconsciously echoes Conley’s criticism of the distortive genre labelling. When discussing comedians as literary critics versus literary critics proper, he claims that it is unproblematic to consider comedians to be critics in the same manner as, e.g. Aristotle and Longinus, because “the elusive authorial presence, the jokes and the irony […] can be seen as mere surface distractions.” To trace opinions in old comedy, however, is, according to Wright, difficult in the extreme, because nothing in the comedies can be taken at face value. This is one of the most fundamental premises that Wright bases his inquiry on and one he states more than once. In all fairness it should be pointed out that Wright means that these characteristics of old comedy make the interpretation of the literary criticism in the plays more difficult than the interpretation of e.g. Aristotle, but it still points to an interestingly reductive view on the plays. That old comedy contains aspects of literary criticism is certainly a fair and interesting assessment, but one should be wary to conclude that criticism is the most prominent aspect, around which everything else, i.e. the jokes and the irony, etc., revolves and to claim that the plays are written with the only intent to be literary criticism. Evidently there are much more to old comedy and it is the interplay between all its aspects that make up its meaning.

In response to a common assessment that all artistic creations shown to the public were part of the civic democratic practices in Athens, Wright claims that the literary criticism of comedy was rather aimed at a literary elite. An elite that could afford to keep written copies of the plays and discuss them in private. This emergence of book

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102 Devitt, Writing Genres, p. 33.
103 Wright, The Comedian as Critic, p. 2.
104 Wright, The Comedian as Critic, p. 1.
ownership led to re-evaluations of literary form and an interest in linguistics and textuality.\(^{105}\) Comedy, then, plays with this new understanding of what literature is and, according to Wright, “[…] the comedians can be seen as exploring the tensions between textuality and performance; between new and old; between elite and popular values; between aesthetic and practical views of poetry; between form and content.”\(^{106}\) To Wright, these “tensions” lies at the core of the genre and he goes on to say that “[if] we persist in defining comedy in terms of a populist performance genre, this implies a particular view of its purpose and its stance towards intellectual matters. But what sort of genre is comedy?”\(^{107}\) There can be no simple answer to that question, says Wright, because it depends on our outlook: for some scholars the essence of a genre lies in its origins, for others in its diachronic development. Wright points out that none of these theoretical outlooks are fruitful for the study of old comedy, rather one must focus on “what it became at the specific period in which we are interested.”\(^{108}\) Wright explains his view on what comedy had become at the time:

The evidence seems to suggest that in the last few decades of the fifth century, comedy evolved into a new sort of art-form, which retained many of its original features but was significantly different from what had gone before. In the hands of certain imaginative practitioners such as Aristophanes, old comedy transformed itself into a hyper-sophisticated, hyper-literary genre of entertainment – a genre characterized by intertextuality and allusion; a self-consciously palimpsestic genre, full of quotation, parody and pastiche; a genre which could present itself as a secondary or parasitic form, drawing for its energy and inspiration on other forms of poetry; a genre in which one could expect to find discussion of literary aesthetics, or obscure items of Homeric vocabulary, alongside critical evaluation and literary polemic. This new, distinctively literate sort of comedy was […] aimed primarily at a ‘target’ audience of discerning readers (or fellow-writers) who knew their stuff.\(^{109}\)

That old comedy was a genre “characterized by intertextuality and allusion […], full of quotation, parody and pastiche […],” is an assessment that most scholars agree with, and it is indeed some of the keywords most widely used when describing old comedy in handbooks and encyclopaedias. That it means that old comedy was “a hyper-

\(^{105}\) Wright, The Comedian as Critic, pp. 3-4.

\(^{106}\) Wright, The Comedian as Critic, p. 4.

\(^{107}\) Wright, The Comedian as Critic, p. 4.

\(^{108}\) Wright, The Comedian as Critic, p. 4.

\(^{109}\) Wright, The Comedian as Critic, pp. 4-5.
sophisticated, hyper-literary genre,” on the other hand, is not something that everybody would agree with. In fact, since characteristics such as allusion, parody, and pastiche are devoid of any intrinsic values, it is up to critics to analyse, draw conclusions, and argue for their viewpoints on what it actually means in each case a comedian uses these techniques.

One scholar that in recent years has made a different argument than Wright, but based on the notion that old comedy has the aforementioned characteristics, is Keith Sidwell. In a review of Wright’s book Sidwell writes:

To my mind, [Wright] has succeeded in demonstrating two important things in this thoughtful and well-written book. First, he has established beyond reasonable doubt that literary critical discourse was already well-advanced enough to be available for comedic purposes in the later fifth century. Second, he has shown that authors of Old Comedy were probably more committed to poetic excellence and to winning the judgement of those who had the resources, intellectual and financial, to enjoy their offerings textually, than they were to winning the crown in the theatrical contests. There remains a puzzle, however, if [Wright’s] analysis is correct: what purpose did competing in the festivals actually serve for these highly educated (and competitive) writers? My view would be that, because the real goal of the genre was to mock and criticize individuals (cf. [Xen.] Ath, Pol. 2.18) who were opponents of the author’s own political caucus, and its main technique was on-stage caricature, the only important thing was to compete (for without competing, the author could not fulfil his sponsors’ political goals).“Sponsor” is the keyword here. In his book Aristophanes the Democrat: The Politics of Satirical Comedy during the Peloponnesian War, Sidwell argues that the main role of the comedian playwrights was to act as their sponsors’ proxies in the theatre and advocate their political agenda. What Sidwell says, in plain text, is that Wright makes some good points in his book, but he fails to see the true point of old comedy, that which Sidwell has proposed. This is evident when he writes: “the real [emphasis] goal of the genre was to mock and criticize individuals […] who were opponents of the author’s own political caucus […].” Sidwell is a proponent of old comedy as a genre of political criticism, in which the playwrights advocated the political interests of their

Wright is a proponent of old comedy being a genre of literary criticism, in which the playwrights could vent their own thoughts on literature. This, of course, raises the question of whether one is right or if they both are. What is obvious is that they both can base their claims on evidence found in the texts, and there is nothing that suggests that their conclusions rule out one-another. It should also be pointed out that it is clear from his review that Sidwell agrees with Wright’s conclusions, but he wants to augment them with his own conclusion of the nature of old comedy.

The author’s voice and the extent to which it is possible to trace the author’s own opinions in the plays is a discussion that is ongoing. Both Wright and Sidwell addresses the difficulty to pinpoint the author in the texts. Wright writes:

In a dramatic text […] the author’s voice is never heard directly. We encounter a number of different characters speaking, but none of the views expressed, either about literature or about anything else, can be attributed to the author. This fact may seem perfectly obvious, but it is worth stressing because many people have been tempted to forget it – or, at least, to adopt a ‘pick-and-choose’ approach to interpretation, taking selected lines and utterances from the plays and treating them as if they reflected, more or less accurately, the author’s real-life opinions.\textsuperscript{112}

Again, he goes back to the crucial point in his argument that comedians cannot be trusted, and I tend to agree with Wright that it is perilous to label the playwrights with views found in the plays. He even goes so far as to say that the authority of the parabases (the parts of the plays which are generally accepted as the author’s address to the audience) “is no more than an illusion.”\textsuperscript{113} Helen Foley, however, takes it for granted that a comic “[spoke] in his own voice […] in the parabasis,” when she writes about how unusual the \textit{Acharnians} is because Aristophanes identifies with the protagonist throughout the entire play.\textsuperscript{114} The characters in comedy are given many different voices, so that one character may act contradictory to itself depending on what the situation demands. Wright establishes that the parts of comedies that claim to be serious are the ones we should be most cautious about.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{112} Wright, \textit{The Comedian as Critic}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{113} Wright, \textit{The Comedian as Critic}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{115} Wright, \textit{The Comedian as Critic}, p. 10.
Sidwell is on a similar track acknowledging that everything that is said in a play is “bounded by its dramatic context” and if we try to look for any serious statements in between the jokes we are inhibited by our modern understanding of what is funny, i.e. something that made sense as an ironic joke to the audience in the Dionysus Theatre may be taken at face-value today.\(^{116}\) On the matter of contradictory character opinions, he writes: “[if] *Acharnians* is a ‘peace-play’, in the sense that it argues for peace with Sparta, why does the chorus in the parabasis (653-5) ask the Athenians to reject Spartan peace overtures? […] It is not that answers of some kind cannot be found to such problems, merely that they are all speculative and not the stuff of which consensus is made.”\(^{117}\) In the preceding quotation, Sidwell highlights an important problem in scholarship on old comedy, namely the speculative nature of many claims, the reason to which both Sidwell and Wright are bringing up: the difficulty to derive anything substantial from the plays themselves. However, Sidwell also speculates that old comedy actually can be taken at face-value at times, especially in the parabases, and he claims:

> Just because [the plays] do not appear to communicate anything substantive and coherent to us, this is no guarantee that they did not do so for the audiences for whom they were designed and who would have been possessed by their historical position of everything we lack through ours, an instinctive knowledge of the context of the drama (in every sense) and an awareness of the nuances of the contemporary language and its references.\(^{118}\)

Furthermore, he stresses that the playwrights at times “made comments (sometimes in the first person) about his own and his rivals’ work,” and that these comments actually are coherent and reliable, just that we do not possess the knowledge of the original audience.\(^{119}\) The problem with basing a claim on what people may have known in the past is that it can never be proven unless written evidence can be found (and even then the proof may be dubious). If we do not approve of Sidwell’s claim that the audiences of the past considered the parabases to be statements of the author’s political agenda, the entire argument collapses, and in the end becomes mere speculation, which Sidwell himself acknowledged only paragraphs earlier.

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\(^{116}\) Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat*, p. 3.
\(^{117}\) Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat*, p. 4.
\(^{118}\) Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat*, p. 5.
\(^{119}\) Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat*, p. 5.
Michael Vickers claims that almost all characters in Aristophanes plays are based on and meant to spoof Pericles, Cleon, and Alcibiades, who was Pericles’ foster-son.\(^{120}\) The main target was Alcibiades and Vickers writes that “Alcibiades’ some-time effeminacy, his dissolute and irreligious life-style, and the constant fears that he was aiming at tyranny underlie most of Aristophanes’ extant comedies.”\(^{121}\) The claim is based on a statement made by the *Old Oligarch* or *Pseudo-Xenophon*, as the writer is also known, that the people that the comedians were legally allowed to lampoon had to be rich, aristocratic, and powerful.\(^{122}\) From that he deduces that since there were not many in Athens who fit the bill, Alcibiades had to be prominently ridiculed in old comedy. Judging from Vickers’ book he is on a crusade against philological conformity. The claims he makes can be easily met by claiming that he does not have enough substantial evidence to make them, but Vickers rejects such criticism made by “the academic frontier police.” He employs a method that “Keith Hopkins once called the ‘wigwam argument’: ‘each pole would fall down by itself, but together the poles stand up, by leaning on each other; they point roughly in the same direction and circumscribe ‘truth’.”\(^{123}\) His method is thus based around picking out “hitherto unconsidered scraps” from various sources and combine them into a *fact* that “amount[s] to something substantial.”\(^{124}\) Vickers uses *Acharnians* to exemplify his method. He claims that Dicaeopolis was a caricature of Pericles, basing his argument on the idea that “Aristophanes delicately creates a verbal portrait by means of allusive references to the statesman’s concern with δικαιοσύνη (‘justice’), to his having adorned the Acropolis, and to Pindar’s epithet δικαιόπολις for Aegina, an island for which Pericles had a bitter hatred.”\(^{125}\)

In a sense, it can be claimed that more scholars than Vickers, e.g. also Wright and Sidwell as described above, have to use the “wigwam” methodology, due to the general paucity of source material connected to old comedy. One has to grasp at every little straw in order to build arguments based on the scarce evidence that is available from the

\(^{121}\) Vickers, *Aristophanes and Alcibiades*, p. XIII.
\(^{122}\) [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 2.18.
\(^{123}\) Vickers, *Aristophanes and Alcibiades*, p. XIV.
\(^{124}\) Vickers, *Aristophanes and Alcibiades*, p. XIV
\(^{125}\) Vickers, *Aristophanes and Alcibiades*, p. XIV.
existing plays and other sources. Vickers’ method stands apart, however, in that he focuses a lot on source material that is not directly connected to old comedy. Working from a set of hypotheses, he searches for every little bit of evidence in support of those that he can apply to Aristophanes’ plays. Due to the state of the art, it is a methodology that has some merit. A couple of uncertainties appear when studying Vickers’ theoretical approach. Mainly, if we accept his argument that the plays he has chosen in his inquiry (Aristophanes’ eleven surviving plays) are lampooning Pericles and Alcibiades, there are two possible scenarios. Either these eleven plays have survived to this day because they are about Pericles and Alcibiades and therefore deemed worthy to preserve by ancient scholars and that explains why they are the only surviving plays (Vickers believes this), or all of Aristophanes’ plays (or at least a larger number of them) were about Pericles and Alcibiades, in which case the reason for the survival of the plays that survived cannot be deduced from Vickers’ argument. It must be obvious to everyone who studies the literature of the 5th century BCE that many things can happen in two and a half thousand years of poor fire safety, fragile writing materials, war, flooding, etc.

Although Vickers claims to have his foundation in a different theoretical school than most other philologists – a claim that is likely connected to his feuds with the critics of his earlier work, whom he refers to more than once – his arguments do not appear to be as extreme as he claims. Some of his arguments do not appear more or less plausible than some of Wright’s or Sidwell’s arguments, the difference being that Vickers goes out of his way to point out how different his method is to everyone else’s. That is not to say that he does not bring an interesting methodological approach to light when he discusses “the wigwam method,” and the insistence that all possible source material should be considered, regardless of how minute they may appear in solitude. A humbler (and hopefully one that will prove more comprehensively truthful) approach would be, I believe, to disregard the hypotheses of who is being lampooned in which play and instead attempt to make as unprejudiced readings as possible.

I wish to briefly discuss the three views on old comedy that are given by Wright in The Comedian as Critic, by Sidwell in Aristophanes the Democrat: The Politics of

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126 Vickers, Aristophanes and Alcibiades, p. XV.
Satirical Comedy during the Peloponnesian War, and by Vickers in Aristophanes and Alcibiades: Echoes of Contemporary History in Athenian Comedy. The three of them have reached widely differing conclusions about the nature of old comedy (naturally with an emphasis on Aristophanes’ surviving plays), but they all have one thing in common: they are searching for the one true objective of the genre. They paint a picture of old comedy as a particularly topical genre, but disagree on what the topic is.

For Wright the topic is literary criticism for the enjoyment of the well-educated who could afford to buy the scripts of their favourite plays in order to study them at home and discuss them with friends. In essence the comedians, especially Aristophanes, had an elitist outlook. Sidwell considers the true role of old comedy to be the attack on those individuals who were political opponents of the comedian. Vickers’ claim is that most of Aristophanes surviving plays are about Alcibiades in disguise.

Of course, what I am doing here is exactly the same thing that I am accusing these three scholars of doing: reducing complex narratives into one neat manageable objective. The points I make in this thesis could also be accused of reducing a complex genre containing many contradictory elements, and that is part of the point I wish to make: perhaps it is the nature of the genre and the poor state in which it has come down to us that lends itself to the search for one true purpose of it all. The limitations imposed by the lack of source material makes broad conclusions hard to draw – one can rarely hope to claim anything with confidence about anything more than the artefacts at hand, disconnected from one another. Perhaps that is why it is so tempting to focus on what I would call secondary elements of the genre.

Evidence for literary criticism and political statements and attacks on individuals can all be found in the textual remnants of the genre, but none of those elements can be said to outweigh the other in importance in regard to the foundations of the genre. If the object was to attack political opponents, the comedians were doing a lousy job of stating a clear agenda of their own against which their opponents’ agendas could be criticized – there are too many conflicting points made throughout the plays for any certainty to be established about what any character’s true agenda is. If Aristophanes consistently wanted to lampoon Alcibiades, he hid it well under layers upon layers of other

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129 Vickers, *Aristophanes and Alcibiades*, p. XIII.
references. If the point was not to please the multitude in the audience, but to cater to the literary interests of the well-read, “what”, as Sidwell puts it, “purpose did competing in the festivals actually serve for these highly educated (and competitive) writers?”

Acknowledging that all the above are among the features of the genre, I will try to outline the specifics of the genre, the specific situations, and actions associated with them without naming any of them the main objective of the genre, because, studying the genre, I do not believe that any of them is the main objective of the genre.

Interest in old comedy besides Aristophanes seems to have been on the rise in the last couple of decades, evident in Wright’s book and also in Ian Storey’s book *Eupolis - Poet of Old Comedy* (2003). Eupolis was a contemporary of Aristophanes and one of the most prominent comedians during the Peloponnesian War. Storey points out that although the focus on Aristophanes in modern scholarship is only natural, often the question of whether he was in the mainstream of old comedy or an outsider is often ignored. There are comic writers contemporary with Aristophanes and Eupolis who are not considered to have written the same type of comical plays. Storey writes:

> It is often assumed that scholars of the third century BC considered Kratinos, Aristophanes, and Eupolis as the most successful or best-known exponents of Old Comedy, and then, having identified these ‘stars’, extrapolated from their topical and political comedy to produce the common assumptions about Old Comedy, politically driven and full of personal humour and ‘obscene language’. In this way writers that stood outside that tradition (Krates and Pherekrates) could be ignored in the study of comedy. But the reverse may equally be true, that the Alexandrians started from the conclusions of Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1128a22–5)—that ‘former’ comedy was full of *aischrologia* (‘disgusting talk’) and ‘modern’ comedy operated through *hyponoia* (‘subtle implication’)—and, having established these criteria for Old Comedy, began to search for poets who fulfilled them, i.e. Kratinos, Aristophanes, and Eupolis.

This points interestingly to how assumptions derived from a few select writers may have shaped the way old comedy is interpreted even up to this day. Eric Csapo also supports this theory, writing that “Aristophanes, Cratinus, and Eupolis formed the Old Comic canon, not because they were superior yet typical, but precisely because they

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131 Storey, *Eupolis*.
133 Storey, *Eupolis*, p. 3.
were the most political, most characterized by free-spoken verbal abuse and most capable of representing the ‘fierce moralism’ that the theory ascribed [i.e. they Aristotelian theory] to comedy’s first phase.”134

If writers such as Aristophanes and Eupolis are not representative of the genre as a whole, rather belonging to a clique within the larger community, perhaps old comedy should be understood as something else, maybe even as something more, than “politically driven” plays “full of personal humour and ‘obscene language’.” Other, later disregarded, writers may have been interested in completely different thematic landscapes. This cannot be proven, but it is interesting as a thought experiment, because it points to the dangers of basing genres on the smallest common denominators. Unless there is a full corpus from a certain time (which in this case it is an impossible task to amass) the search for commonality in extant texts may very likely lead to conclusions that are wrong. If the goal is to inquire into the function of the genre (which is not an uncommon approach, as is evident in the sections on Sidwell and Conley above), the tradition poses as a great obstacle.

Aristotle’s role as an unbiased observer is also dubious. That old comedy, according to him, is full of “disgusting talk” and the comedy produced in his time “operated through subtle implication,” says more about Aristotle’s tastes than it does about the essence of the genre.135 His contrasting of αἰσχρολογία (disgusting talk or obscenity) with ὑπόνοια (hidden though or guess, thus “subtle implication” in Storey’s translation) suggests that he considered older comedies to be worse than new ones because their lewd jokes were spoken clearly, so that everyone could picture them instead of letting the imagery form in the imaginations of the spectators. Whether his generalisation is correct or not is nearly impossible to answer without a comprehensive corpus to compare it against. It fits in well with some of Aristophanes’ jokes, and from that it is easy to jump to the conclusion that Aristotle was correct about the genre as a whole.136

135 Aristotle, Ethica Nicomachea, 1128a.
136 Cf. Aristophanes, Ranae, 1-11, for an example of αἰσχρολογία.
Aristotle was born too late to ever have witnessed an original stage production of old comedy, and throughout his life the Athenian society (in fact the entire Greek world) was changing considerably, thus turning the cultural foundations of comedy into something else than what it had been in the latter half of the 5th century BCE.

Storey, on the topic of why Aristophanes, by Aristotle’s time, had become the foremost playwright, writes that:

My own feeling is that two texts of the fourth century directed popular opinion and attention towards Aristophanes, so that when one thought of comedy, one thought first of him: these are Plato’s Apology and Symposium. Sokrates would become an almost mythical figure in Athenian lore. At Apology 19 C Plato blamed Sokrates’ poor image at Athens on the portrait created by Aristophanes in Clouds, and then in Symposium we meet that comedian himself, selected by Plato as the representative of comedy and given one of the best pieces of imaginative fantasy in ancient literature. These works, especially the latter, would go a long way to establish Aristophanes as the master of Old Comedy, even if the actual victory totals did not match his reputation. 137

If this is the case, Aristophanes has not survived in the public consciousness by his own merit as a playwright, but through Plato’s excellence in writing philosophical prose. The genre of Old Comedy, as manifested through the works of Aristophanes, was preserved as a study object in a different genre: philosophical dialogue (and in extension philosophical prose on the whole). Storey makes a compelling argument for why Aristophanes’ plays have survived more intact than any other, or rather why the Alexandrian scholars of the 3rd century BCE had chosen him to be a part of the comic triad that he discusses earlier in the book. To use the same reasoning as Storey, one could speculate that the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides have been saved for posterity because they are featured together in Aristophanes’ Frogs. If Aristophanes’ plays were preserved due to his provenance in Symposium and Apology, it is interesting to note how his plays have over time gained fame for themselves. Their scholarly value has increased due to their seemingly truthful rendition of political and cultural life in the Athenian polis, at the end of the 5th century BCE.

137 Storey, Eupolis, p. 4.
Chapter 3: Old Comedy

So far, the emphasis in this thesis has been on the theoretical foundations of the mostly rhetorical genre concept and some problems associated with the study of old comedy. In this chapter the discussions from the previous section will come into practical use as they will be applied on the source material. The bulk of the texts will be excerpts from old comedy, but comparisons will also be made between old comedy and the closely associated genre of tragedy, and also historiography and philosophical texts. All translations from Greek into English contained within this section are my own, unless otherwise stated. I believe that adds an important transparency, which will make it easier for the reader to trace my reading of the original text. The goal is to make translations that are as close to the original Greek as possible rather than to write beautiful English.

An Inquiry into the Situational and Cultural Aspects of Athenian Drama

A good place to start this inquiry would be to trace the physical spaces that the drama occupied in general and comedy in particular. This is in order to establish the genre’s cultural context beginning with its most concrete aspects. The most obvious space is of course the theatre and the religious festivals during which the plays were performed (the focus here will be on the City Dionysia and the Lenaea). But there are also the private spaces where the citizens who could afford to buy the scripts could read and discuss and even perform the texts (although how people actually used their written copies is hard to establish).\textsuperscript{138}

Aside from the religious practices of the festivals, the City Dionysia and the Lenaea were quite different in terms of social space. The City Dionysia took place in a time during the year in which the city of Athens was full of overseas foreigners and according to Simon Goldhill it was one of the most important, if not indeed the most

\textsuperscript{138} Wright, The Comedian as Critic, p. 4.
important, of the annual festivals in the Athenian calendar. The ten elected generals would make libations to Dionysus at the theatre to inaugurate the festival before the start of the dramatic contests. For the generals to act in this fashion was apparently rare and there is no proof of it ever happening more than a maximum of four times in any one year, of which most occasions except the City Dionysia are explicitly connected to their actual civic function.\textsuperscript{139} If the ten most powerful military leaders, representing the ten tribes that made up the Athenian people, led the inauguration of the dramatic contest it must have been extraordinarily important to the Athenian state. It is also noteworthy that it was the city’s highest ranking military leaders who offered libations to the god and not some of the other high ranking officials. It has been noted that the reason for the generals’ prominence at the City Dionysia was because of the proximity to the beginning of the military campaign season in the spring.\textsuperscript{140} The custom then suggests that it was important to the Athenians to display their generals in a public forum attended by foreigners. One can also assume that for the Athenians to put such effort into making a grand ceremony at a festival held when the city was full of people from all over the Mediterranean, they must have valued the dramatic art highly as a way to showcase Athenian greatness.

The Lenaea, on the other hand, was held during the winter, when unpredictable and severe winter storms made long ship voyages impossible, rendering foreign involvement unlikely. Nevertheless, it was an important festival in terms of dramatic involvement. Margalit Finkelberg writes the following in contrast to Goldhill’s claims about the City Dionysia:

The Lenaea […] hosted the comic as well as the tragic competitions, which acquired formal status somewhere around 440 BC, at the height of the improvements of the theatre initiated by Pericles. As distinct from the City Dionysia with its international status and lavish display, the Lenaea was a domestic festival, whose audience consisted of Athenian residents only. […] This was probably why at the Lenaea, as distinct from the City Dionysia, non-citizens could sing in the choruses and metics were allowed to serve as choregoi. To quote Peter Wilson: ‘The festival appears to have been less

concentrally focused around the politai than the Dionysia: the absence of phyletic khoroi and the permitted involvement of non-Athenian khoreutai and metic khoregoi point in this direction.' But not only the dithyrambic choruses and the display of the tribute of the allies were conspicuous by their absence at the Lenaea. Neither the libation poured by the generals nor the honours paid to the benefactors of the city nor the parade of the war orphans played any part in this festival. Yet, the tragic agon was there all the same, and the records mentions among the participants in the Lenaean competitions the names of Sophocles, Agathon, and others.141

The Lenaea seems to have been a festival primarily focused on the performance of comedies, because comedy competitions are attested at the festival from 440 BCE, while tragic competitions do not seem to have been a part of the festival program at all until 432.142 The interesting thing that Finkelberg points out is that despite the lack of pomp and grandeur and displays of power for visiting foreigners of the City Dionysia, the dramatic contests were important at the Lenaea, and even so important that famous dramatists would premier their latest plays there. There is even an explicit mention in Aristophanes’ Acharnians to its being staged at the Lenaea.143 It has been proposed that more political satire was allowed by the public at the Lenaea than at the Dionysia, because foreigners were not present at the former.144 This notion has been deduced from the aforementioned section of Acharnians, which will be discussed later.

It could be argued that the purpose of old comedy is the staging of plays in the theatre with the goal of making the audience laugh.145 The promotion of laughter can then be said to be comedy’s main exigence. It is what Aristotle claims to be the goal of comedy.146 This notion may appear easy enough to agree with, but as we have seen above it is anything but. Sidwell, Wright, and Vickers all considers comedy’s purpose to be other things than to promote laughter. To them, it appears, the jokes of comedy are the devices employed by the comedians to further certain agendas, and it is those

142 Rehm, “Festivals and audiences in Athens and Rome,” p. 188.
143 Aristophanes, Acharnenses, 504.
145 R. Rosen, “Comedy and Iambos,” p. 89.
agendas that, to these scholars, are the true exigencies that need to be solved. I do not agree with this division; it seems clear to me that the promotion of laughter is the true exigence of old comedy, because whatever agendas there may be in any given play by any given comedian, the promotion of laughter is the one constant that is always there.

This claim is rooted in the idea that ancient drama (and other forms of poetry) first and foremost evoked emotions in the audience. Amusement and laughter were produced by comedy and from tragedy came emotions such as sorrow, pride, and excitement. There are ancient sources that confirm that this effect occurred in the theatre, which will be discussed below. Finkelberg has written about the emotional effects that tragedy had on the ancient audience, but it can easily be imposed on the comical audience as well, just with different emotions. She takes examples from Herodotus, Gorgias, and Plato to illustrate how the audience feels emotions influenced by what they see and hear and how they start to sympathize with the characters. She draws the conclusion that it is not the simple arousal of emotion among the spectators that is the goal of tragedy, but for them to identify with the characters in the plays who feel emotions, and from there comes “the gain”, i.e. the pleasure caused by poetry. From that perspective, Wright’s claim that Aristophanes wrote for those in the audience who could appreciate subtle literary criticism seems exaggerated.

Herodotus mentions a tragedy by Phrynichus about the fall of Miletus to the Persians, which was staged about one year after the incident. The Athenians are so moved by the play that they burst into tears during its performance and afterwards they fine Phrynichus 1000 drachmas for reminding them of their misfortune and subsequently prohibit the play from ever being staged again. To Finkelstein, this event points to the need of emotional distance between the audience and the action of the play for the audience’s emotional involvement in it to have a positive effect. It was not a bad thing per se that the audience burst into tears watching Phrynichus’ play, they just did it for the wrong reason – the play hit too close to home. Finkelstein writes:

Comparison between the Athenians’ reaction to the tragedy of Phrynichus on the one hand and to the performance of traditional subjects on the other

149 Wright, The Comedian as Critic, p. 5.
150 Finkelberg, “The City Dionysia and The Social Space of Attic Tragedy,” p. 23.
indicates with great precision what kind of effect they regarded as most favourable for tragedy. To feel pleasure at a tragic performance, the spectators should be able, in Plato’s words, to ‘abandon themselves and accompany the action with sympathy’ without at the same time losing the safe distance between the action and themselves. That is to say, no pleasure is produced by poetry either when it represents events that arouse too direct an emotional involvement or when the events represented arouse no emotional involvement at all. Such were the limits set to the effect of poetry by the taste of the fifth-century Athenian audience.  

So, for a tragedy to be effective in enacting its generic purpose – to answer the audience’s expectations – the action must not be too close, emotionally, to the audience and not too far detached either. I believe that this applies not only to tragedy, but to comedy as well. The famous lines from Aristophanes’ Acharnians where Dicaeopolis talks about how he was accused by Cleon, which are generally seen as referring to how Cleon dragged Aristophanes to court over his previous play, can be seen as one example of an instance when comedy invoked “too direct an emotional involvement.” But quite a few of the preserved plays by Aristophanes deal directly with the current affairs of the Athenians: how was it possible for him and other comedians to bring up current and emotionally charged topics with (relative) impunity? The answer may partly lie in the way that the audience and the actors on stage interplay in comedy versus tragedy.

The tragedies are spectacles played out in front of the audience. They offer a glimpse into an event with actions taken by the actors and interactions between them. The action is never claimed to take place right there and then; instead, the audience is given access to past events in an illusion of authentic history. Whether the majority believed that events from the mythological past had actually occurred or not, it must have been clear to most that the tragedians could in no way know exactly what, for example, Jason and Medea or Philoctetes and Neoptolemus thought and felt, but the point of the drama was to make the audience believe that it was genuine and therein lay the artistic freedom and the chance for the playwrights to prove their mastery of the art. This is evident in the many plays about the same topics, interpreted by a multitude of playwrights. The agreement between the audience and the dramatist was that the

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151 Finkelberg, “The City Dionysia and The Social Space of Attic Tragedy,” p. 23.
152 Aristophanes, Acharnenses, 502–3.
dramatist would tap into the emotions of the spectators if the audience would let themselves be immersed by the spectacle in front of them.

Comedy, on the other hand, is played with the audience. The comedians were not trying to stage the past; references were of course made to past events, but the action took place at the time that it was performed on stage. The plays could take place somewhere else than Athens during a festival, but made no claims of being restagings of the past. The placement of comedy in the present makes it possible for the comic actors to address the audience directly. Dedoussi writes:

If an Agamemnon were to speak directly to fifth-century Athenians, he would commit an anachronistic solecism, and lose the seriousness and dignity of a tragic character; the result would be parody, or paratragedy, a feature proper to Old Comedy. [...] In Old Comedy, on the other hand, self-referential remarks and mentions of the theatrical conditions of tragedy and comedy are a frequent occurrence.

The difference between comedy and tragedy can also be described as comedy being centred around the contemporary and tragedy around the universal. While contemporary events can be incorporated into tragedies, they are always in a universal or eternal setting, just like universal topics, such as the divine, is always rooted in contemporary issues when they occur in comedies. Self-reference was, however, not a unique trait in comedy, but used in tragedy as well. The difference is that when self-reference is used in tragedy it is to “intensify the dramatic emotions,” thus drawing the audience more into the shared dramatic illusion, while in comedy the references break the dramatic illusion, making the audience more aware of the fictionality of drama.

A prime example of the self-referential nature of old comedy, mentioned above, and also of the way that characters tend to address the audience directly is found in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*:

Ξα. περὶ ἐμοῦ δ’ οὐδεὶς λόγος

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ἐπιτριβομένου τὸν ὠμον οὕτωςι σφόδρα.\textsuperscript{158}

Xa. No word on my behalf / when my shoulder is utterly killed in this way!

In the lines preceding this remark, Dionysus and Heracles are discussing which tragedians are dead and which are still alive. Xanthias, who is carrying Dionysus’ heavy luggage, is here most likely not addressing the other characters on stage (they never acknowledge Xanthias’ remark), but the audience. Dionysus and Heracles carry on their lengthy discussion, briefly interrupted a couple of times by Xanthias who restates his claim. For the joke (that Dionysus and Heracles are so preoccupied by their discussion about the misfortune of others that they completely ignore Xanthias’ presence) to work, Xanthias’ remark must be aimed directly at the audience and not heard by the other characters on stage. By sharing with the audience his snide comment about the never-ending conversation that he and the other spectators (namely, the audience) have to endure, they are incorporated into the action on stage.

While the main story is preoccupied with a lot of tedious exposition, refreshing the minds of the audience about the current situation in the tragedy department and giving the reason as to why the tragedians who are still alive do not fulfil Dionysus’ criteria for talented playwrights (which is needed in order to give Dionysus a logical reason to go to Hades), the audience and Xanthias together devise a funny side-story. This trope is called an “aside.” Dedoussi remarks that Aristophanes frequently used asides for broad humorous jokes wherein one character insults another who does not hear it.\textsuperscript{159} In Xanthias’ comment also lies evidence of the comedian’s knowledge of the genre’s physical as well as intellectual setting. For the joke to work it must take place live before an audience. The joke becomes vague when written out in text, for that reason, because it loses that extra layer of action that conveys its meaning. In other genres, e.g. tragedy, the interaction between the genres’ users, such as writer and reader or actor and audience, is often more convoluted, because it is not acted out so directly and thus working on an unspoken level, but this line shows how literal the interaction is in old comedy.


\textsuperscript{159}Dedoussi, ”Greek Drama and its Spectators,” p. 128.
The beginning of *Frogs* is an excellent example of how aware Aristophanes was of the generic situations of old comedy:

ΞΑΝΘΙΑΣ
Εἴπω τι τῶν εἰωθότων, ὃ δέσποτα,
ἐφ’ ὄζ ἄει γέλωσιν οἱ θεώμενοι;

ΔΙΟΝΥΣΟΣ
Νὴ τὸν Δί’ ὅ τι βούλει γε, πλήν «Πιέζομαι.»
Τοῦτο δὲ φύλαξαι· πάνυ γάρ ἐστ’ ἤδη χολή.
Ξ. Μηδ’ ἕτερον ἀστεῖόν τι;
Δ. Πλὴν γ’ «Ὡς θλίβομαι.»

Xa. Shall I tell one of the regular, master, / that the spectators always laugh at? / Di. Yes indeed, by Zeus, whatever you wish, except “I am weighed down.” / Beware of that one, for it is already altogether disgusting to me. / Xa. Nothing else witty either? Di. Well, except “how squeezed I am!”

No attempt is made at presenting the plot of the play or give any context (except what the audience can deduce from the costumes, masks, and the décor). Instead the action jumps straight into a discussion about the comedic art and an acknowledgement that the play takes place before an audience. However, right here at the start the joke that will become a running gag throughout the play (one of its occurrences is referred to above) is established. In that sense the audience is actually introduced to one of the fundamental themes, at the beginning of the play, or, as Silk notes: “[…] it might occur to us to note the artificiality of saying that this kind of opening retards the action: it would be truer to say, it is the action.”

After a few lewd jokes suggested by Xanthias and rejected by Dionysus, the comical practices of other playwrights are brought up:

Ξ. τί δήτ’ ἔδει με ταύτα τά σκεύη φέρειν,
εἰπέρ ποιῆσο μηρέν ὄντερ Φρύνιχος
εἴωθε ποιεῖν; καὶ Λύκις κάμιευψίας
σκεύη φέρουσ’ ἐκάστοτ’ ἐν κομιῳδίᾳ.

Δ. Μὴ νυν ποῆσης’ ὡς ἐγὼ θεώμενος,
ὅταν τι τούτων τῶν σοφισμάτων ἵδω,
πλεῖν ἢ ἱαυτῷ πρεσβύτερος ἀπέρχομαι.

Xa. Why was it then necessary for me to carry this luggage / if really, I am not going to do what Phrynichus / is accustomed to do [i.e. joke about the heavy

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161 Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy*, p. 32.

burden]? Also both Lycis and Ameipsias / always do this with the luggage carriers in their comedy. / Di. Now, do not do it, for whenever I am a spectator, / and I see one of those stage-tricks, / I leave more than a year older.

Aristophanes presents one aspect of the interplay between the comedians and the Athenian audience. From the beginning of *Frogs* the conclusion can be drawn that the objective of old comedy is to amuse the audience by telling a series of jokes. Aristophanes flatters the audience by mentioning that not just any old standard jokes will do, the audience demands novelty and novelty they are promised. Actually, the god of drama himself demands fresh jokes; he is not the one making the jokes, Xanthias, his slave, is. Dionysus actually takes the role of spectator, while Xanthias assumes the role of comedian. By doing that Aristophanes has staged how the situational demands of the audience and the writer’s response interacts and results in the play that is played out in the theatre.

In a genre so focused around competition, how to please the audience, especially the judges, must have been a question constantly floating around in the minds of the dramatic writers. In reality, the interaction between the playwrights and the spectators would of course not have been so direct as it is staged in the play: rather it would have been the reaction of the audience at the theatre and the discussions between the Athenians about drama that could give the playwrights hints about what the generic expectations were and how to best utilize those to write the best plays possible.

As I have mentioned before, Xanthias will constantly fail throughout *Frogs* to avoid the old “my burden is so heavy” joke. Dionysus’s demand for new jokes turns out to be hard to please in the reality of the play, and likely it was never expected by the spectators, and because of that Aristophanes never had the intention to reinvent the wheel, as it were. Instead he uses this old joke, that others have done before, in new ways. When Xanthias first mentions Phrynichus, Lycis and Ameipsias, they appear to be criticized for their lack of imagination, but soon (when it is clear that Xanthias is going to use that same joke over and over again) it becomes clear that the writer humbly adds himself to their rank, unable to satisfy Dionysus’ demand for novelty. But while he does the same thing as his contemporary colleagues, Aristophanes tells the joke in a *metacomical* context, thus turning the old joke into something new.
Some Themes and Thematic Development in Old Comedy

Silk contrasts the beginning of *Frogs*, which he calls “Aristophanes’ last extant Old Comedy,” with the beginning of *Plutus*, Aristophanes’ last extant play. In *Plutus* the situation is very different to the one that exists in *Frogs* and the situations of Aristophanes’ other extant plays. To Silk it is more reminiscent of Menandrian new comedy than old comedy.\(^{163}\) Instead of jumping directly into a comical situation or acknowledging the dramatic context, *Plutus* begins with a prologue that might as well be taken from tragedy:

ΚΑΡΙΩΝ

Ὡς ἁγαλέον πρᾶγμ' ἐστίν, ὦ Ζεῦ καὶ θεοί, δοῦλον γενέσθαι παραφροσυνόντος δεσπότου.

"Ἡν γὰρ τὰ βέλτισθ' ὁ θεράπων λέξας τύχῃ, δέξη δὲ μὴ δράν ταῦτα τῷ κεκτημένῳ, μετέχειν ἀνάγκη τὸν θεράποντα τὸν κακῶν.

Τοῦ σώματος γὰρ οὐκ ἔδ' τὸν κύριον κρατεῖν ὁ δαίμων, ἀλλὰ τὸν ἐωνημένον.

Καὶ ταῦτα μὲν δὴ ταῦτα· τῷ δὲ Λοξίᾳ, δὲς θεσπιωδεὶς τρίποδος ἐκ χρυσηλάτου, μέμψιν δικαίαν μέμφομαι ταύτην, ὅτι ιατρὸς ὄν καὶ μάντις, ὡς φασιν, σοφὸς μελαγχολῶντ' ἀπέπεμψέ μου τὸν δεσπότην, ὅστε ἀκολουθεῖ κατόπιν ἀνθρώπου τυφλοῦ, τούναντίνιν δρόν ἢ προσῆκ' αὐτῷ ποεῖν.

Οἱ γὰρ βλέποντες τοῖς τυφλοῖς ἡγούμεθα, οὐτοίς δ' ἀκολουθεῖ, κἀμὲ προσβιάζεται, καὶ ταῦτ' ἀποκρινόμενος τὸ παράπαν οὐδὲ γρῦ.

Ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅτι τῷδ' ἀκολουθοῦμέν ποτε, ὦ δέσποτ', ἀλλὰ σοι παρέξω πράγματα.\(^{164}\)

Zeus and you other gods, how hard it is / to be the slave of a demented master. / Suppose the servant gives him good advice, / and his owner then decides to ignore it – / the servant has to share the consequences. / It’s a heaven’s will: a man’s body belongs / not to himself, but to the one who’s bought him. / But that’s as may be. It’s Loxias, / who from his golden tripod prophesies, / that’s actually to blame – because / a wise healer and seer they call him, / and yet he sent my master


\(^{164}\) Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy*, p. 24-25. Both the Greek text and its translation are cited from Silk.
home so mad / that now he’s following a blind man, / the opposite of what he ought to do. / Those of us with sight lead those without; / but he follows, and drags me along as well, / and not so much as a squeak from him in front. / Well, I for one will not stay silent. / Unless you tell me why we’re following / him, master, I’ll give you trouble.

Like in Frogs, here is a story about a slave and his master, but in a completely different situation. While Xanthias and Dionysus immediately acknowledge that they are in front of an audience in the theatre, Cario addresses the gods seemingly unaware of the audience. This action, thus, takes place in front of the audience like in a tragedy. To add tragic elements to comedies is not uncommon, which is discussed below, but what makes the opening of Plutus stand out is that it is tragic rather than paratragic, i.e. it does not use the tragic register to joke in any direct sense.¹⁶⁵

Silk notes: “[the] texture is fairly even, and the diction, in particular, covers a fairly narrow range. The most distinctive sequence is 8-9, where first ‘Loxias’ as conventional equivalent for Apollo and then the elevated idiom patently evokes the idiom of tragedy, in conformity, one infers, with the dignity of the subject.”¹⁶⁶ “Dignity” is not an epithet one would stick on anything in old comedy after reading any other of Aristophanes’ plays, but here it is fitting because there is nothing irreverent about this scene and no-one is lampooned. Cario is utterly pathetic, and the emotion that his speech invokes is sympathy (rather than ridicule), something that is (as I have discussed above) more befitting to the tragic register than the comic. In contrast, Xanthias’ struggle with Dionysus’ baggage throughout Frogs invokes no sympathetic feelings, because there is no sincerity in his moaning about his misfortune. He is only sincere when he explicitly asks in line 12 why it was necessary for him to bring all that stuff if they are not going to joke about how heavy it is, and even that is utterly ridiculous.

The beginning of Plutus is a testament to Aristophanes’ development as a writer. He is challenging the audience and their expectations with this serious and tightly composed tragical prologue. The audience expects to be entertained and to laugh right from the start, because they know from experience that they will be, but instead they are

¹⁶⁵ Cf. the beginnings of Euripides’ Bacchae, Electra, Supplices, Ion, Orestes, Phoenissae for similar stylistic and emotional registers.
¹⁶⁶ Silk, Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy, p. 25.
confronted with the sincere human cost of slavery: “[...] how hard it is to be the slave of a demented master. Suppose the servant gives him good advice, and his owner then decides to ignore it – the servant has to share the consequences. It’s heaven’s will: a man’s body belongs not to himself, but to the one who’s bought him.” If Aristophanes ever wrote anything political, this is it.

The lack of lewd jokes and cues for physical humour must have caught the attention of the spectators, who were expecting the opposite of what they were served. It is only because the audience and the playwright have a previous agreement about the terms of old comedy that Aristophanes’ can present something like this to the audience. Had this been his first play, the style and tragic demeanour had not been accepted by the audience as fitting to the comical situation that had been created between the audience and earlier playwrights of old comedy. When Aristophanes had become an established dramatist who had carved out his own niche within the genre, he could expand his repertoire by playing to different emotional registers than previously, thus surprising the audience. This tragic style could only be used for so long before the audience would remember that they are in the theatre to laugh, and right at the end of Cario’s prologue it reverts back to a typical Aristophanic comical situation:

Κα. Οὐ γάρ με τυπτήσεις στέφανον ἔχοντά γε.  
ΧΡΕΜΥΛΟΣ  
Μὰ Δί’ ἀλλ’ ἀφελὼν τὸν στέφανον, ἢν λυπῆς τί με,  
ἵνα μᾶλλον ἀλγῇς.167

Ka. Surely you won’t beat me while I wear this wreath. / Chremylus. No, by Zeus, but if you annoy me, I will take away your wreath, / so that you will suffer exceedingly.

For all his efforts to speak in a dignified manner, the spell is broken once Cario turns to address his master, who immediately puts the slave back in his place by threats of sacrilege and violence, a line mirroring lines 6-7. The relationship between the comic slave and his master is still the usual, despite Cario’s initial effort to pull the action in another direction, which rather enhances the joke that comes afterwards by contrasting with it. Silk notes: “[…] granted that the slave is to some degree talking the language of tragedy, his talk is still broadly ‘in character’. From his words we readily recognize a

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consistent type: a grumbling, honest, streetwise servant." Cario takes a short trip to the realm of tragedy, but is never far from his comedic roots.

Frogs stands out among Aristophanes’ existing plays as the play most preoccupied with the dramatic art. Some of the other plays, however, share characteristics with Plutus, e.g. Clouds which begins in a similar manner with an invocation of Zeus:

ΣΤΡΕΨΙΑΔΗΣ
ioû ioû.

ὦ Ζεῦ βασιλεῦ, τὸ χρῆμα τῶν νυκτῶν ὅσον.

 appréατον. οὐδέποτθ’ ἡμέρα γενήσεται;

καὶ μὴν πάλαι γ’ ἀλεξωλνόνος ἤκουσ’ ἐγώ.

οὶ δ’ οἰκέται έόργουσιν. ἄλλ’ οὖκ ἄν πρὸ τοῦ.

ἀπολλοῖο δή’, ὦ πόλεμε, πολλῶν οἴνεκα,

ὁτ’ οὔδε κολάσ’ έξεστί μοι τοὺς οἰκέτας.

ἄλλ’ οὔδ’ ὁ χρηστός οὕτος οἰκίσαι

ἔγειρεται τῆς νυκτός, ἄλλα πέρδεται

ἐν πέντε σισύραις ἐγκεκορδυλημένος.

ἄλλ’ εἰ δοκεῖ, ρέγκωμεν ἐγκεκαλλιμένοι.

ἄλλ’ οἱ δύναμαι δείλαιος ἐδέειν δακνόμενος

ὑπὸ τῆς δαπάνης καὶ τῆς φάτνης καὶ τῶν χρεῶν

διὰ τούτοι τὸν υἱόν. ὁ δὲ κόμην ἔχων

ἵππαζε καὶ ξυνωρικεύεται

οὐδὲν ἀπόλλυμαι ὁρῶν ἄγουσαν τὴν σελήνην εἰκάδας.

Strepsiades. Boo-hoo / o King Zeus, so great is the affair of the nights! / Boundless! Will it never be day? / It has been so long since I heard the rooster. / The household slaves are snoring. But they would not have before. / May you perish, o war, on account of many things, / for it is not even possible for me to strike my slaves. / Neither does this serviceable youth / wake through the night, but farts wrapped up in five coverlets. / But if it seems good, let us snore wrapped up in coverlets. / but I cannot sleep, wretched man, bitten by the expenditure and the manger and the debts on account of my son. He who has hair / and rides horses and drives chariots / and dreams of horses. I am ruined / seeing the moon bringing the twentieth.

168 Silk, Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy, p. 25.
The most interesting feature of this opening is how it is infused with cues for physical jokes, with the mentions of how the slaves are snoring and farting. Although Strepsiades’ financial hardships are lamentable, his actions and hyperbolic mannerisms (e.g. his cursing the war for not even allowing him to beat his slaves) renders the scene completely ridiculous, and therefore more akin to Acharnians and Frogs than Plutus.

Erich Segal notes that Plutus is a domestic play in the fashion that later became a staple in Menander’s new comedy: the action takes place on a city street outside a home, “[the] wife is a New Comedy matrona and Cario a typical slave […]. In the Ploutos Aristophanes conforms to what became standard New Comedy practice: a unified plot.”

This development in Aristophanes’ writing towards the domestic seems to have been predated by some of his colleagues: Cratinus’ play Pytine is one example and in fragments of Crates’ plays “[there] is plenty of domestic chatter […].” and Pherecrates is said to have moved away from writing crude jokes to writing intricate plots.

The core of Segal’s argument is the shift from crude jokes and “episodic vaudeville” to “[the] ultimate φύσις” of comedy: “the structured plot with happy ending.” To me, that sort of reasoning which presumes a straight development from a crude, inferior beginning to a final, fully matured stage seems far too simple and deterministic to hold any true merit. If the development went from unfinished comedy to finished there is no reason to examine the plays, because the early ones (the old comedy) can be disregarded as flawed attempts to write proper comedy and the later plays (the new comedy) does not require any input because they are perfect.

That the development of comedy went straight from what today is seen as old comedy to new comedy is a tempting argument, but ultimately impossible to ascertain. The assumption is made from the partial remains of the production of two authors, Aristophanes and Menander, and an idea that the old comedy of Aristophanes is a genre distinct from the new comedy of Menander. The division between old and new comedy was not made until the 3rd or 2nd century BCE, at which time both Aristophanes

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and Menander were a part of history.\textsuperscript{174} To the two comedians’ respective audiences there most likely was no difference between comedy of Aristophanes and that of Menander; they were just two different writers producing comedy at different times.

The concepts of culture, situation (with a focus on exigence), and genre can help to shed light on the question of whether old and new comedy, when looked at within the frame of 5\textsuperscript{th}- and 4\textsuperscript{th}-century Athens, should be actual genres distinct from one another or not. This question, of course, lies outside the chronological boundaries of this thesis, so I will not attempt to give a conclusive answer, just make a few short observations.

From a generic viewpoint, there exists no proof that the genre users saw any division between old and new comedy, as discussed above. Aristotle’s discussion on the old and new comedy in \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} offers no conclusive evidence of him actually considering the division to be between actual genres.\textsuperscript{175} It appears that he defined a development within comedy from one way of solving the urgency of the recurring situation to another. From a modern viewpoint, Aristotle did not know about new comedy, because he died before Menander began staging comedies, but nevertheless his input is interesting as a historical commentary on the development of comedy in his own time.\textsuperscript{176} From a situational viewpoint the goal of comedy appears to be the same, but the solution to the situational urgency appears to be different between Aristophanes and his contemporaries and Menander. However, as discussed above, the “domestic plots” of Menander were not a new invention. The cultural aspect is the most difficult to sum up. Avoiding such general cultural topics such as language and Panhellenic religion and morals, I will discuss culture from an Athenian perspective. Claims have been made that Macedonian influence over Athens in the last decades of the 4\textsuperscript{th} century “voided comedy of political contents altogether,” killing the very essence of old comedy and turning it to something completely different.\textsuperscript{177} Since the birth of old comedy in the early 5\textsuperscript{th} century, the Athenian society changed constantly over the course of the stormy 5\textsuperscript{th} century, with the Peloponnesian War at the centre. As I have argued above, the causing of laughter was the ultimate goal of comedy, with political

\textsuperscript{174} Csapo, “From Aristophanes to Menander?,” p. 115.
\textsuperscript{175} Aristotle, \textit{Ethica Nicomachea}, 4.1128a16-25.
\textsuperscript{177} Csapo, “From Aristophanes to Menander?,” p. 116.
satire being one of the means to achieve that goal, and later I will argue that it was only after the beginning of the Peloponnesian war that political satire became a generally accepted form of comedy used by some of the upcoming comedians. Of course, it has also been argued that while laughter was the goal of comedy, satire, mockery and ridicule, was the way that was achieved in old comedy.\(^{178}\) If that premise is accepted, then the cultural basis for the comedic genre had changed at the end of the 4\(^{\text{th}}\) century in Athens. What I wished to illustrate with the slight digression above, is that the division between old and new comedy is in no way absolute.

The comparison to vaudeville, which I mentioned above in the introduction, is problematic because it lumps together two distinct forms of staged performances that have their own unique situational and cultural contexts, which are far separated from one another. However, Segal points to an interesting interaction between contemporary comedians. It is unlikely that one play was made that had these *domestic* features and once the other playwrights saw that they realised that the *domestic* theme was the new status of comedy, and therefore they should abandon all other ideas. Most likely they influenced each other and borrowed from one another.

Storey notes that in the 420’s there was a trend with plays about teachers and teaching and he mentions that plays such as Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, *Wasps*, and *Banqueteers*, Eupolis’ *Goats* and *Flatterers*, as well as *Konnos* by Ameipsias, were made during that decade and featured that theme.\(^{179}\) If there were trends of this type and comedians influenced one another (which there probably were and they probably did, because one of the fundamentals of genres is that their practitioners do not create in isolation) to write plays on a certain theme in the 20’s, it is probable that the same thing was true at the end of the 5\(^{\text{th}}\) and early 4\(^{\text{th}}\) century as well.\(^{180}\) Another aspect is of course the general zeitgeist within the Athenian society; that too must have had an impact on the choice of themes to write plays around.

That the “typical” old comedy lacked a proper plot is also not correct. The plots may not always have been so condensed that they could take place in one generic setting, but plots they were with premises and developments towards a conclusion. The

\(^{178}\) Rosen, “Comedy and Iambos,” p. 89.
\(^{179}\) Storey, *Eupolis*, p. 67. Fragments from *Banqueteers*, *Goats*, *Flatterers*, and *Konnos*, can be found in *Poetae Comici Graeci*, under the headline of the respective authors.
\(^{180}\) Cf. Devitt, *Writing Genres*, p. 33 on generic multiplicity.
premises are not always clearly stated, and the conclusions may be less than satisfactory for modern tastes, with their whimsical endings that sometimes resolve nothing. The Athenians, however, did not seem to mind and expected nothing else, because it was an established convention, resembling the commonly used *deus ex machina*-endings of tragedy. In essence the plots would have been orbiting a certain theme connected to the zeitgeist rather than being placed in a formalised setting where straight plots with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end could be played out for the amusement of the audience. “Old Comedy must have had a pool of familiar ideas and themes, none of which was new or original. Comic success lay in the new twist given by the poet.”

In a culture where mimesis was the norm and people were used to seeing myths retold and reinterpreted in tragedies and by rhapsodes, a practice where playwrights borrowed from one another and gave their own twists to standard themes could not have been in any way foreign. Storey focuses primarily on the possible connections between Eupolis’ *Goats* and Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. He speculates that Eupolis’ play was produced at the Dionysia in 424 BCE, winning first prize, that it therefore predates that of Aristophanes which was put up the next year, and that *Clouds* was received poorly because it was so similar to *Goats*. Both plays are concerned with education and ideas and a simple old man from the country going into the city in order to meet with a teacher.

It was probably not the case that one play plagiarized the other; instead they had similar themes and exploited the same ideas. While Socrates in *Clouds* is portrayed as a sophist who is involved with higher education, the teacher, named Prodamus, in *Goats* was very likely a *didaskalos* who taught young boys. This would mean that Aristophanes has put the theme on its head – developed it, as it were: “[rather] than a Strepsiades who finds himself in ‘higher’ education, we have an *agroikos* who is back in ‘primary school’.”

The humour too appears to be different in the plays: in *Goats* the education featured dance, which suggests a more physical form of humour, while *Clouds* does not feature dancing, instead the education is purely intellectual, and the humour is based on

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verbal jokes. A parallel can be drawn between two other plays by Eupolis and Aristophanes: *Marikas* and *Knights*. In this instance it was Eupolis who had written a play with similarities to Aristophanes’ play. Furthermore, a fragment of Aristophanes’ earliest play *Banqueteers* suggests that also that play involved themes of youth and age, ideas and teaching.\(^{184}\) Those themes appear to have been in vogue during the 420’s and most likely the playwrights incorporated them into their plays because the themes were widely discussed among the citizens of Athens.

**Representation: The Tragic and the Comical**

As I have mentioned above, tragedy and tragedians are often referred to or lampooned in Aristophanes’ comedies. In *Frogs* the main objective is for Dionysus and Xanthias to go to Hades and bring back Euripides, because the living tragedians at the time of the play’s premier do not meet the high standards of the god of drama. The tragedians are portrayed as essentially different from the comedians. That is clear from the way that Xanthias and Dionysus discuss the best way to write comedies in the play’s opening and Xanthias reference to other comedians in rather collegial terms, but they are wholly oblivious to the prospect of making their own tragedy – for that they need a tragic writer.\(^{185}\) At times characters break into the tragic register, going out of character, shifting back and forth between the low- and highbrow:

Witness the exuberant range of *Frogs’* language, farts at one end and a hint of paratragedy (‘thrice wretched’, 19) at the other. And witness the unpredictable image of life that the language creates. If the slave in *Plutus* behaves more or less like a real slave, what are we to say of his counterpart in *Frogs*, who is indeed – like a real slave in real life – preoccupied with his baggage duties and his physical pains, and addresses his master as a slave would (ὦ δέσποτα, 1), yet in the same breath speaks like the actor playing himself (‘tell them’)? And the master is hardly more predictable than the slave. He too is ready to concern himself with the actor’s lines; and though a god, he too uses coarse language (‘shit’, 8, above all) that is seemingly unrelatable to anything one might predicate of his equivalent ‘real-life’ persona.\(^{186}\)

\(^{186}\) Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy*, p. 29.
In *Plutus* the tragic register is not only something that is alluded to or spoofed, it just is tragedy, until the tragical situation is broken and brought back to the comical register. Another example of a situation where Aristophanes borrowed from the tragic register is found in *Acharnians*, his earliest surviving play.

Here Dicaeopolis goes to Euripides’ house to borrow the get-up that Telephus uses to disguise himself as a beggar in the play of the same name, in order to persuade the Acharnians of his cause by appearing more tragic and appeal to their sense of sympathy.\(^{187}\) There too, like in *Frogs*, is the tragic not devised by the comical character himself, merely borrowed from a true tragedian and the tragic elements are there for ridicule. The speech that Dicaeopolis gives in front of the Acharnians is a parody of a similar speech from Euripides’ play *Telephus*, so Dicaeopolis borrows both from Euripides costume and his speech.\(^{188}\) Helen Foley notes that Aristophanes goes out of his way to make it clear to the audience from whom he is borrowing, thus making it clear what the joke is supposed to be, and that *Acharnians* as a whole is full of references to *Telephus*.\(^{189}\) Therein lies a great difference between this early loan from tragedy and the implementation of tragedy in *Plutus*: in *Acharnians* there are references to tragedy and those references are clearly labelled for the convenience of the audience, while in *Plutus*, as I have established above, stylistic features of tragedy in more general terms are employed.

Wright uses Dicaeopolis as an example of a character with the typical fluid *voice* of comedy.\(^{190}\) He cites the beginning of Dicaeopolis’ speech that he gives dressed in the beggar outfit, borrowed earlier from Euripides (*Acharnians* 497-503):

> Begrudge me not, gentlemen of the audience, if I, a mere beggar, venture to speak before the Athenians about politics while I am doing comedy. This is because comedy too understands what is right. What I’m going to tell you is terrible – but it’s right. This time Cleon will not accuse me of disparaging the city in the presence of foreign visitors …\(^{191}\)

He compares the claim expressed in this speech, that comedy knows what is right, with one that is made later in the parabasis, that he finds contradicts this first claim: “that

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\(^{188}\) Wright, *The Comedian as Critic*, p. 11.

\(^{189}\) Foley, “Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*,” pp. 34-35.

\(^{190}\) Wright, *The Comedian as Critic*, p. 11–12.

\(^{191}\) Wright, *The Comedian as Critic*, p. 11.
Aristophanes will never stop making fun of what is right [...].”192 Wright warns his readers about seeing comic characters as mere mouthpieces for their authors’ views, and that is a valid point that should always be considered when dealing with fictional accounts. But that does not mean that knowing what is right and joking about it are two opposing actions. Dicaeopolis says that “[he is] doing comedy” and speaking about politics at the same time, and “[that] is because comedy too understands what is right.” Dicaeopolis is not claiming to be doing anything else than make fun of stuff, and in that light the two statements do not appear to be dissimilar at all.

Wright notes that the passage above has been widely interpreted as a programmatic declaration about the nature of comedy, and that “it is ostensibly an advertisement for the social function of comedy.” It can be read as containing either a political message to the Athenians or a wider moral teaching, traced from the emphasis on “what is right” (τὸ δίκαιον – also what is lawful and just) and the fact that its scope goes beyond that of mere politics. Beyond the scope of the programmatic, the speech is a form of ἀπολογία (a speech in defence), with Dicaeopolis defending comedy against the unspoken assumption that tragedy is the only dramatic genre that knows what is right. Comedy has no right to lecture the audience, but dressed in tragic attire and delivering a parodic version of a tragic speech Dicaeopolis can claim that right from tragedy.193 In regard to the plot, this opening to the speech works to justify Dicaeopolis’ right to give the speech to the Acharnian men. He anticipates that they will not take his words seriously, since he is a comic character, and therefore justifies the seriousness of his speech by claiming that comedy can tap into the serious register of tragedy and discuss what is right.

Foley claims that “[…] Aristophanes uses the contrast between genres to define his own comedy,” by breaking into the territory of tragedy and stealing the values associated with it to use in his comedy, he can build a solid foundation for his “[speech’s] claim to free speech, truth, and justice.”194 Likewise, Aristophanes’ stolen tragic building blocks puts tragedy in an unflattering surrounding. He mocks the very foundations upon which it is built, its pretence of giving the audience a glimpse into a

192 Wright, *The Comedian as Critic*, pp. 11–12.
193 Wright, *The Comedian as Critic*, p. 11.
194 Foley, “Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ Acharnians,” p. 43.
world removed from their own and its pathos, like someone hanging a painting by Rembrandt in the bathroom. In a sense even the audience is mocked for rather listening to the reasoning of a mythological tragic character than a comic character modelled after the average contemporary Athenian citizen.

Foley further compares the tragic Telephus-as-beggar with the comic Dicaeopolis-as-Telephus-as-beggar:

[...] Whereas Euripides’ Telephus did not disguise himself on stage, but enters disguised, Aristophanes’ audience sees Dikaiopolis begin to adopt the importune behaviour of a beggar as he acquires each aspect of his excessively ‘realistic’ and hence ultimately untragic Telephean guise. As in Aristophanes, Telephus’ reference to his disguise gives his audience (not the other characters) privileged knowledge of his identity. Yet whereas Telephus’ gesture enhances and makes visible his unjust suffering, Aristophanes’ dramaturgy undercuts tragic pathos to stress the different ways that costume and dramatic identity can be read self-consciously by his audience. In addition, Dikaiopolis finally uses the beggar role less to evoke pity, than to establish his heroism and good citizenship.

Already before Dicaeopolis has began to make his apology, Aristophanes has began to establish the theme of comedy as a genre more open and truthful than tragedy. Telephus is disguised when he appears, and Aristophanes uses that fact to establish a dichotomy between the deceitful tragedy and the truthful comedy. In Foley’s view, the reason why Euripides is rolled out on stage on the ἐκκόκλημα – a machine used in the theatre to roll the backdrops back and forth – is to further stress how comedy reveals to the audience what tragedy hides backstage.

Although Acharnians is a play about a man committing treason against his homeland and betraying his countrymen, Aristophanes has his main character convince half the chorus that he is innocent with the use of tragic, Euripidean, and sophistic rhetoric. While he does that, he is also showing the audience how it is done – how the mechanics of theatre work to trick the audience into believing that what they see is something else than what it is. The reason Aristophanes does this, Foley claims, is to show the audience that comedy is fair and honest when it conducts its agenda: “to offer

195 Foley, “Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ Acharnians,” p. 43.
196 Cf. Acharnians 1-42 where Dicaeopolis is depicted sitting on the Pnyx, talking to himself about Athenian politics and everyday life, and 241-62 where he and his family are preparing a procession.
197 Foley, “Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ Acharnians,” pp. 43-44.
198 Nelson, Aristophanes and his Tragic Muse, p. 249.
199 Foley, “Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ Acharnians,” pp. 43-44.
justice to its audience and to make the city examine the errors and absurdities committed by certain of its politicians.”

If all of this is true and Aristophanes’ intention was to do the above, it has some interesting implications for the nature of old comedy before the staging of *Acharnians*. Aristophanes works hard in this play to establish that these aforementioned political and moral aspects are a natural element of comedy and that comedy is a genre that, unlike tragedy, will truthfully reveal to the audience what is right. This suggests that the agreed solution to the recurring situation’s exigence of old comedy between the audience and the comedians is not that which Aristophanes is saying it is in *Acharnians*. Aristophanes proposes a renegotiation of the terms between himself and the audience. If Storey’s proposition is correct, old comedy was not only political and perhaps earlier plays than *Acharnians* did not give moral advice or “examine the errors and absurdities committed by […] its politicians” or “offer justice to its audience.” Csapo notes that before the 420’s, there is no evidence of a comedic plot revolving around attacks on notorious citizens. He stresses that Aristophanes is thought to have led the development toward these politically topical plots. Of the total comical output during the 5th century, the number of confirmed or suspected political plays are diminishingly small with only 21 plays. On this Csapo noes: “[i]f the political style can be said to dominate fifth-century comedy, this dominance must be measured only in terms of the brilliance of its reception and not by any statistical measure of production.”

What this tells us is that political satire was probably not a popular way to approach the needs of old comedy. It also points to overtly political plays being a short trend in the history of old comedy, the centring on which is likely due to posterity’s focus on Aristophanes.

Emmanuela Bakola argues that Aristophanes, like some of his fellow comedians, devised a comic persona for himself. This persona paints the picture for the audience of a “young but brave poet who single-handedly strives for the reform of both the city (and therefore heroically fights its most dangerous enemies, often enduring mistreatment by his own people and their misunderstanding of his mission) and comedy (and thus speaks

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200 Foley, “Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ Acharnians,” p. 44.
201 Storey, *Eupolis*, p. 3.
202 Csapo, "From Aristophanes to Menander?,” p. 119.
203 Csapo, "From Aristophanes to Menander?,” p. 119.
against any kind of cheap and vulgar comedy).” In *Acharnians* that persona, its actions, and the consequences for the poet of those actions are clear. It is difficult not to, despite the obscurity of the comic language, see references in this play to the actual circumstances for the poet in the reality outside the comic fiction.

Jeffrey Henderson also makes similar arguments to Csapo, pointing out that while “incidental mockery” of all sorts of people for many different reasons was common, it is wrong to assume that this mockery was meant to further specific political agendas. The purely political plays, “play[s] that focused on current public issues and took a recognizable and more or less coherent political stance,” were few. Henderson’s argument is that such plays were staged only at times when the comedic dramatists (i.e. those who were prone to write political plays) felt that the normal order of affairs in the Athenian state was under attack from populistic opportunists. Before Aristophanes, dramatists such as Cratinus had written political plays in the 430’s, but Aristophanes was the vanguard of direct political attacks. He speculates that Cleon’s attack on Aristophanes after *Banqueteers*, the one mentioned in *Acharnians*, was indeed a response to Aristophanes having written a political play too overt for the tastes of the Athenian audience.

What I see when I read the aforementioned passages from *Acharnians* is a writer of comedy who wanted to make comedy something more than just crude humour and filthy jokes (n.b. not replace, but add to) for it to be taken as seriously as tragedy and to be an equal genre that could raise issues that tragedy could not due to its cultural and situational limitations. The backdrop and cause of this action taken by Aristophanes in the play can also be found in the passage cited above: Cleon’s attack on him because of his previous attempt to write political comedy.

As mentioned above, Dicaeopolis’ speech has the form of a speech in defence of his comic nature and actions, much in the same manner as was customary in Athenian courts. Firstly, it should be pointed out that what Wright translates as “speak […] about politics [emphasis]” can be translated closer to the Greek as “speak […] about the city,”

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because the original word is πόλις. This connects Dicaeopolis introduction to the latter claim that “Cleon will not accuse [him] of disparaging the city [my emphasis] in the presence of foreign visitors.” What Aristophanes presents to the audience is a new attempt to expand the comic repertoire, and this time he is going to make sure that no-one can accuse him of stepping out of bounds for what is culturally acceptable to joke about. First, he asserts that no accusations can be made about him mocking the polis in front of foreigners and later in the speech he emphasizes that he is criticizing individual citizens and not the polis as a whole, to make sure that he cannot be accused of speaking ill of the city in front of his fellow citizens either. Based on this I want to propose that Aristophanes had had a vision to herd old comedy in a more political direction than before, but his attempt had backfired and hurt his reputation, and that this was either his personal agenda that influenced other comedians or one that he shared with a group of fellow comedians.

When Aristophanes won first prize with Frogs at the Lenaea in 405, the second prize went to the play Musae by Phrynicus. Not much remains from that play, but of the little that does, one part is particularly interesting as it connects it with Frogs and in a broader context with Attic drama as a whole:

Μάκαρ Σοφοκλέης, δές πολὺν χρόνον βιούς ἀπέθανεν εὐδαίμον ἀνήρ καὶ δεξιός· πολλὰς ποιήσας καὶ καλὰς τραγῳδίας καλῶς ἐτελεύτης’, οὐδὲν ὑπομείνας κακόν

Blessed Sophocles, who after living a long time / has died a happy and fortunate man; / having written many and beautiful tragedies / he passed away happily, awaiting nothing bad.

This appears to be nothing other than a proper eulogy for Sophocles, who had died sometime after he had staged his last tetralogy at the Great Dionysia the preceding year. It has been speculated, due to the occurrence of Sophocles, the mention of balloting, and the play’s title, that it featured a competition between tragedians like in Frogs, but this is impossible to ascertain. Thrice Sophocles is described as being blessed, fortunate,

209 Aristophanes, Acharnians, 515-16.
happy, etc. in the adjectives μάκαρ, ἐὐδαίμων, and δεξιός, also his passing is described as having transpired well or happily with the adverb καλῶς, probably denoting that he passed away in peace. Wright speculates whether the above quote was meant to be taken seriously or not.²¹³ He takes δεξιός to mean “clever,” in this case, which it could very well have meant. If that is the case it falls, according to Wright, into a broad comical discourse on cleverness, that today is vague at best, because it is hard to establish when it has been used ironically or not.²¹⁴ Μάκαρ can be dismissed from the list on the ground that it is a general epithet of the dead who are blessed because they no longer have to partake in the ills of life, but nevertheless it fits the tone of the two other epithets, i.e. Sophocles who was blessed in life is now blessed in death.²¹⁵ As I have given examples of above, the voice of comedy is hard to pinpoint in the extreme. Characters change between different modes from silly to serious, high and low, sincere and ludicrous, straightforward and ironic, etc. in an often seamless fashion that lends the comedies their evasive nature.

Ussher writes that the vagueness of the language of old comedy (Aristophanes in particular) was noted, albeit not met favourably, later in antiquity:

It will make a great difference, Horace warned his would-be dramatist, if the speaker is an old man or a young one, a modest ‘matrona’ or an interfering nurse, a foreigner, a merchant, or a farmer (A.P. 114 ff). ‘Plutarch’ complains that Aristophanic diction – in spite of its wide range of confused and warring elements – has failed to make such character distinctions: one could not recognize a speaker, by his speech, as a son or a father, a rustic or a god, an old woman or a hero (Mor. 853 D).²¹⁶

The characters are fluid, not really characters at all, especially not in the strict sense that those who favour Menandrian comedic stock characters demand them to be.²¹⁷ Instead, they are more akin to sketches that can be filled in with more and changing detail depending on what the current situation demands, e.g. the slaves Xanthias and Cario can use a tragic voice at times because the situation demands it, whether it is for gravitas (as in the beginning of Plutus) or silly contrast (as in Frogs).

²¹³ Wright, The Comedian as Critic, p. 28.
²¹⁴ Wright, The Comedian as Critic, p. 28.
²¹⁵ Cf. LSJ, s.v. ΜΑΚΑΡ III.
²¹⁷ Ussher, “Old Comedy and ‘Character’, p. 72.
With that knowledge comes questions of how this passage should be read. It is taken out of context and appears straightforward, but it could just as well have been part of a joke that poked fun at Sophocles or at some prominent Athenian figure who had given a eulogy in the manner presented.\textsuperscript{218}

Frogs shows that it evidently was not frowned upon to joke about the dead, since the play won first prize.\textsuperscript{219} Since there is no further evidence than these lines from Musae of the context in which this eulogy for Sophocles originally was, I will treat it as it is written: as a sincere statement. While the voices of general characters are elusive in Aristophanes’ comedies, the tragedians portrayed (or the tragedian – Euripides) have fairly consistent characteristics. In Acharnians, before he is wheeled out of his house, Euripides’ houseslave upon being asked if his master is in tells Dicaeopolis: οὐκ ἔνδον ἔνδον ἔστιν, εἰ γνώμην ἔχεις (Not in but he is in, if you have means of understanding).\textsuperscript{220} And then immediately, when he realises that Dicaeopolis does not have means of understanding, explains: ὁ νοῦς μὲν ἔξω ἐξυλλέγων ἐπάλλαξ, οὐκ ἔνδον, αὖτις δ’ ἔνδον ἄναβάδην ποιεῖ ἀπαγωγῶν (His mind on one hand out gathering little verses is not in, but he himself is in upstairs writing tragedy).\textsuperscript{221} This little exchange exemplifies the kind of shrewd plot devices that Euripides was known for, but also establishes his character as a shrewd rogue – he can be in two places at once. Likewise, in Frogs Euripides is the same roguish character, the only one who can pull Dionysus out of Hades again:

Ηρ. ἐὰν οὐ Σοφοκλέα πρότερον ὄντ’ Εὐριπίδου μέλλεις ἀναγαγεῖν, εἰπέρ ἐκείθεν δεῖ σ’ ἀγεῖν; Δι. οὐ πρίν γ’ ἂν Ἰοφῶντ’, ἀπολαβόντων αὐτὸν μόνων, ἄνευ Σοφοκλέους ὦ τ’ ποιεῖ κωδωνίσω. κάλλως ὁ μὲν γ’ Εὐριπίδης πανοῦργος ὄν κἂν ἐνυποδέρναι δεῦρ’ ἐπιχειρήσει ἐμοί· ὥ δ’ εὖκολος μὲν ἐνθάδ’, εὖκολος δ’ ἐκεῖ.\textsuperscript{222}

He. Why don’t you rather bring Sophocles back who is superior to Euripides, if it is necessary for you to bring anyone back from there? / Di. Not before I try how Iophon does, after I’ve brought him in private, / without Sophocles. / Besides,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[218] Cf. Aristophanes, Ranae, 12-18.
\item[219] Cf. Aristophanes, Ranae, 772-78, 830-1533.
\item[220] Aristophanes, Acharnenses, 395.
\item[221] Aristophanes, Acharnenses, 398-400.
\item[222] Wilson, Aristophanis Fabulae, Ranæ, 76-82.
\end{footnotes}
Euripides is sly / and would try to drag me away back here; / the other man was content here, he will be content there.

Euripides, since he is ‘πανοργος’, is the only plausible candidate among the skilled tragedians to bring back, because he is the only one who can contrive an escape plan. This is the premise upon which Dionysus’ entire plan to bring back Euripides and no-one else rests. Euripides is used as a MacGuffin – a desired object that is important to the fictional characters (but not to the audience) and that drives the plot forward – and only by finding it can Dionysus’ problem be solved. At the end of the play, however, that entire premise, upon which the entire plot rests, is turned on its head, when Dionysus instead chooses Aeschylus and Pluto lets them out of Hades.223

From Acharnians to Frogs the Aristophanic Euripides is the same character. John Davidson writes about this scene:

[…] Dionysus’ comment that Euripides is “a slippery character” is simply part and parcel of the general comic denigration of him. The translation “slippery” fits this particular context rather well, but the original Greek word panourgos bears connotations ranging from downright “wicked” or “villainous” to the somewhat less pejorative range of “cunning” or “smart”. In any case, the implication that Euripides is always up to some mischief is again projected onto him by certain characters in his plays. The idea that he could help to “pull off an escape” (where his slipperiness could come in handy) refers to the fact that a number of his plays feature exciting escapes.224

Euripides was not only, as the above quote suggests, ridiculed by Aristophanes, but was lampooned by other comedies as well. Davidson mentions that Teleclides, a comic contemporary with Aristophanes, joked that Euripides was so inept that he could not write his own comedies (a joke that Davidson connects once again to the “generally bad press he received in comedy): Μνησίλοχος ἐστ’ ἄδεια τι δράμα καὶ νῦν / Ἐὐριπίδης, καὶ Σωκράτης τὰ φύγαν’ ὑποτίθησιν (It is Mnesilochus who is cooking up some new drama for Euripides, and Socrates is placing the firewood).225

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223 Aristophanes, Ranae, 1471, 1480.  
224 J. Davidson, “Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides”, in K. Ormand (ed.), A Companion to Sophocles, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2012) pp. 38-52: p. 39. I have opted to translate the passage a little differently than Davidson. “Slippery character” is “sly” and “pull off an escape” is “would try to drag me away back here”. This was in an attempt to keep the English closer to the original Greek text.  
The Mnesilochus mentioned is probably the same older relative of Euripides who is portrayed in Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazousae*. This account of Euripides is diametrically opposed to Aristophanes’ version of Euripides. In Aristophanes’ account he is clever and utilises the same schemes as in his plays (so the plays must obviously be the product of his own mind), in Teleclides’, however, he is a fraud. For the sake of fairness, and since the play the lines are cited from is lost and the lines therefore lack context, it must be stated that Mnesilochus cooking up a drama with the help of Socrates is not necessarily a metaphor for them writing a play for Euripides. There are other possibilities, such as them just acting or devising stage-effects for Euripides, but without any other information the cooking of the drama most likely means that they are devising a plot for a play.

Aristophanes’ account can be traced back to plots in Euripides’ tragedies, like Davidson notes, but Teleclides’ claim is nearly impossible to assert. Some people in the audience must have picked up on the reference, otherwise it would have been a case of poor writing, and perhaps it was, but perhaps the joke was that the claim was so outrageous and absurd.

Teleclides’ joke could have been twofold: first he slandered Euripides, just for good measure, by spreading a rumour that Euripides had help at home and did not come up with his own plots and then he made sure it stuck by pointing out that his clever style looked like the work of Socrates. The word πανοῦργος used to describe Euripides in *Frogs* gives a hint that Teleclides and Aristophanes shared a similar view on the tragedian, but chose different ways to express it. Someone who is πανοῦργος is ready to do anything wicked, and in *Frogs* that sort of shameless ambition is what Dionysus needs to get out of Hades alive.226 While Teleclides does not use the exact word, the implication is clear from the context that Euripides does not shy away from exploiting the work of others for his own gain. In both instances the audience is presented with a portrayal of Euripides that is anything but positive.

The portrayals of Euripides in Aristophanes are generally deeply connected to his literary style and the content of his plays, and therefore may not be at all representative.

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226 Cf. LSJ s.v. πανοῦργος.
of the man himself. In the scene above from *Acharnians* his slave is twisting words and taunting Dicaeopolis with paradoxical riddles, Euripides himself acts in the same way in the beginning of *Thesmophoriazousae*, where he confuses Mnesilochus in a similar fashion, telling him that he does not have to be told what he will see and consequently does not have to see what he will be told. The same mannerisms are portrayed in the latter half of *Frogs*, e.g. Aeacus’ retelling of how Euripides excited the criminals and the lowlifes in Hades to vote him the best tragedian by telling stories full of twists and turns and contradictions. In the manner later described by Aristotle, Euripides is portrayed in the above examples as one and the same with his art. But where tragedians in Aristotle’s account are noble men telling stories about noble deeds of noble men, in Aristophanes’ Euripides is an ignoble man using cheap tricks to please ignoble men.

After this detour into comic representations of Euripides, it is time to turn the focus back to Sophocles and representations of him in comedy. With the backdrop of the mistreatment of Euripides, the representation of Sophocles stands in stark contrast. Just like the comparison between Aristophanes’ and Teleclides’ descriptions of Euripides, there are many similarities between Phrynicus’ description of Sophocles in *Musae* and Aristophanes’ in *Frogs*. In *Frogs* Sophocles is described as a) a better tragedian than Euripides, and b) content in life and thus to be content in death. Phrynicus’ account mirrors this by stating that a) Sophocles was a happy man, who passed away happily, and b) he wrote many beautiful tragedies. Aristophanes further enhances his depiction of Sophocles by making him act with almost saint-like humility and generosity: although he was the greatest tragedian, and therefore entitled to meals in the prytaneum of Hades seated next to Pluto, he yielded his right and let Aeschylus keep his chair.

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230 Aristophanes, *Ranae*, 76–82.
The difference between Aristophanes’ and Phrynichus’ characterizations of Sophocles, and Teleclides’ and Aristophanes’ renditions of Euripides, is that while Euripides’ mannerisms can be tied to his writing, it is difficult to connect Sophocles’ happiness and humility to his tragedies. Sophocles does not act himself in the examples, the accounts of his character are indirect, either through plain description (in Musae) or through retellings by other characters (in Frogs), and perhaps that is why his character appears as more rooted in the manners of the actual man than in parodies of his plays. Phrynichus seems to have wanted to remind the audience about the virtues of the beloved tragedian, thus stirring up emotions of grief but probably also happy memories among those who had seen his plays or knew him personally; his opinions about Euripides, however, are unknown, since there exists no evidence of him ever being mentioned in a play by Phrynichus.

It would appear that Phrynichus uses a portion of his play to praise a recently deceased colleague, but Aristophanes’ accounts in Frogs show no similar notions. Euripides too had passed away in 406 BCE, and the fact that he, according to Dionysus, was the last remaining good tragedian is the premise that sets the journey to Hades in motion. But Euripides is still treated with the same ridicule that he had been in earlier plays, and that was obviously not considered a faux pas since it led to Aristophanes celebrating one of his greatest triumphs at that festival.232 Once again, I think the reason that Aristophanes could attack the man in this fashion lies in the comical situation. In a context void of any humorous overtones, such repeated attacks against one individual would certainly have been met with outrage and accusations of slander.

In his comic version of Euripides, as discussed above, Aristophanes turns him into a caricature of his own plays and characters, and while the literary critics connected a man’s character to his art and vice versa, the astute theatregoer would have been able to distinguish between the real man and his Aristophanic persona. It would have gone against his previous renderings of the tragedian if Euripides suddenly was treated with reverence and seriousness, and that sort of cowardice fits in badly with the dramatist’s earlier works, and the audience knew what to expect and would expect nothing less.

232 Cf. New Pauly, s.v “Aristophanes of Athens, Poet of the Attic Old Comedy, 5th cent. BC.”
The Audience of Drama

The Athenian audience was, of course, not one unitary social group where everybody shared the same ideals, and had the same motives, and so on. The audience was divided by many different factors such as wealth and occupation, and people would come from many different places in Attica and, during the City Dionysia, different places over the Mediterranean. It is not hard to imagine that the playwrights tried to cater to the interests of the largest possible amount of people in the audience, when devising their plots. This makes tragedy and comedy interesting genres from a generic viewpoint, since no single play is aimed at only one group of people who share the same interests.

At this point it would be useful to turn to a point made by Devitt on how genre works socially and culturally. She stated that “[a] genre reflects, constructs, and reinforces the values, epistemology, and power relationships of the group from which it developed and for which it functions […].” 233 Since the group that developed and used old comedy is so vast, ranging from the Athenian society to the more or less Panhellenic depending on when and where a play was staged, the spectrum of especially the power relationships, but also the values and epistemology, in the audience must have been immense.

To begin with epistemology, and taking that to represent the knowledge that the genre users shared amongst themselves, it is difficult to imagine how a foreign trader visiting Athens during the City Dionysia would get much enjoyment out of a political play that poked fun at local politicians such as Cleon. Of course, during the Peloponnesian War the situation would have been different, as the access to Attica would have been restricted to citizens of allied states, who would probably recognise at least the most prominent Athenian citizens. In the case of Aristophanes and his preserved plays, the majority of his most overt political attacks take place in wartime plays, such as *Acharnians* and *Knights*, both of which were staged at the Lenaea where they would have resonated with the Athenian citizens whose political system relied on attacks and accusations against citizens who had a lot of political power.

How the epistemology and values differed between the Athenians and other Greeks is difficult to assess without proper evidence of e.g. political philosophical

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233 Devitt, *Writing Genres*, p. 63.
discourse that is not influenced by Athenian thought or that has not been described from an Athenian perspective or has not been adopted into Athenian discourse. What is certain is that the Athenian political system (that is so well expressed in old comedy) was rare, and therefore probably seen as a curiosity.

The power differences between the Athenians was vast in financial terms, although they would have been quite egalitarian in a political sense (of course excluding women, slaves, and metics). In relation to visiting foreigners the Athenians were dominant during the 5th century, at least in relation to their allies in the Delian League, since the Athenians held the greatest military power. As has been stated above, the Athenians used the City Dionysia as a stage to assert its power over their allies; after the communal treasury of the Delian League had been moved from Delos to Athens, the Athenians used the festival to showcase the tribute payed by the allied states. But during the course of the Peloponnesian war Athens position within the Greek world would change.

Returning to the relationship between the citizens of Athens, it is noteworthy that although Plato acknowledges that he and his peers were affected by the emotion-evoking nature of drama, he still considered it a base form of cultural expression, aimed at pleasing the simple tastes of the Athenian mob. In Symposium the tragedian Agathon, who had the day before won first prize at the Lenaea, hesitates to speak in front of the party guests because they are intellectuals and therefore of a different calibre than the moronic plebs at the theatre. Socrates replies that because everybody in the room were at the theatre too the other day, Agathon should not worry. On this Finkelberg comments:

The ‘intellectuals’ (sophoi) and the ‘crowd’ (hoi polloi) are the two key-words not only in this specific discussion but also in Plato’s general attitude to Attic drama. If even a mere visit to the theatre of Dionysus caused the members of the intellectual elite to be contaminated by the inferiority of the crowd’s favourite spectacle, what may we expect of the uneducated crowd itself, easily lured as it is by artistic illusion?

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That the drama is so effective in stirring up emotions in the audience that wise men and the multitude alike are affected, seems to be the lesson Plato teaches us. He praises drama for its ability to make the audience identify with the characters and their experiences in the plays. It is dangerous that the mob engages in it, however, because it might give them revolutionary ideas (at least that appears to be what Finkelberg is pointing to). Perhaps the danger, for Plato, lies in the equalizing qualities of drama. The mob and the elite experience the same emotions and from that learn the same lessons, regardless of education or wealth. The theatre is truly democratic and for an aristocrat such as Plato that must seem to be a threat to the status quo. It has, however, been pointed out that Plato mistook the frighteningly strong emotions that he felt for something universal, that had to affect all people the same way.237

Finkelberg raises the question of the possibility that Plato considered the mob to become so excited from what they saw on stage that they would rise up and demand equality. To Plato most art was banal and harmful, as long as it was aimed (in his view) at pleasing the multitude. Truly good art was for him abstract geometrical forms and colours, art that in his mind was aimed at the pleasing the educated and wise men.238 Finkelberg points out that Aristotle shows an equally elitist view on the theatre goers in Poetics, and she quotes an interesting passage that I will expand upon a bit:239

Δευτέρα δ’ ἡ πρώτη λεγομένη ὑπὸ τινῶν ἐστὶν σύστασις, ἢ διπλὴν τε τὴν σύστασιν ἐχοῦσα καθάπερ ἡ Ὀδύσσεια καὶ τελευτῶσα ἐξ ἐναντίας τοῖς βελτίοσι καὶ χείροσιν. δοκεῖ δὲ εἶναι πρῶτη διὰ τὴν τῶν θεάτρων ἀσθένειαν ἀκολουθοῦσι γὰρ οἱ ποιηταὶ κατ’ εὐχὴν ποιοῦντες τοῖς θεαταῖς, ἐστὶν δὲ σοῦ αὐτὴ ἀπὸ τραγῳδίας ἣδονὴ ἄλλα μᾶλλον τῆς κωμῳδίας οἰκεία· ἐκεί γὰρ οἱ ἄν ἐξῆστοι ὃς ἐν τῷ μύθῳ, ὡς ὂν Ὁρέστης καὶ Αἴγισθος, φίλοι γενόμενοι ἐπὶ τελευτής ἐξέρχονται, καὶ ἀποθνήσκει οὐδεὶς ὑπ’ οὖθενός.240

Secondly there is the composition that is said by some to be the superior, that has a twofold composition like the Odyssey and brings an end for good and bad from opposition. It appears to be superior due to the weakness of the spectators, for the creators follow the spectators and they create according to their wish. But this is no pleasure [derived] from tragedy but rather from comedy’s domain, where indeed those who are the most hateful enemies in the story, like Orestes and

239 Finkelberg, “The City Dionysia and the Social Space of Attic Tragedy,” p. 25.
240 Aristotle, Ars Poetica, 1453a30.
Aegisthus, become friends at the end and march out, and no-one is killed by anyone.

This is a clear example of Aristotle’s distaste for the mob that visits the theatre in general, but once again he shows his specific distaste for comedy. It is important to keep in mind that the Aristotelian style makes it easy to mistake his own opinions for fact. That the theatre audience is weak because they like a certain trope that Aristotle dislikes, tells us more about his elitist views than it does about the actual knowledge and ability of the general theatregoer to appreciate a well written play. Interesting, though, is Aristotle’s mention of the interplay between the audience and the playwrights. In fact, he sows the seed of genre as action that takes place between multiple people. In the vast eclectic group that is the ancient theatre audience there appears to have existed some form of common denominator that became evident in their preference of some styles over others. But Aristotle did not only show distaste for the theatrical audiences, in all fairness he also claimed that the multitude were better critics of music and theatre than one man. In a group of people one person can observe one part that someone else overlooks and another one may see something that the first person missed, and so on.²⁴¹

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4. Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to investigate and define from a genre perspective how cultural, social and situational factors interacted in old comedy between 425 and 388 BCE. I have employed ideas mostly deriving from rhetorical genre theory to achieve that goal, so let me briefly remind you of the basics of rhetorical genre theory:

Genres are not mere labels that the critic, bookseller, reader, etc. can stick onto an artefact in order to delimit its contents. Neither is it prescriptive in the sense that it governs what an artefact can contain in order to be considered part of a certain genre. Instead, genre is action. It is a response to a recurring situation set up by the users of the genre – whether they are writers and readers, performers and audience, etc. – and it is defined by the interactions between multiple people and the ways that they use the genre. Cultural factors, i.e. the broader context that overarch the individual genres and the groups that use them, are also important. This is because genres and their users do not act in solitude, removed from the world around them, and culture and genres have an impact on one another. At the centre of it all lies exigence, without which genres become mere formal entities, devoid of meaning. Due to this, genres are firmly connected to certain points in space and time determined by their users.

The action based rhetorical genre perspective has some advantages over the traditional genre definitions, defining genres as a set of labels that can be put on literary works. With rhetorical genre theory, genres can be defined by how they are used by their users and by their definitions of the genre they use. Genre is not a constraint to be broken free from by ingenious writers, it is a form of interaction between a multitude of people, from creators to recipients, who engage in various discourses connected to genres.

One of the reasons why I chose to base the theoretical background on rhetorical genre theory was that it promised a logically stringent dynamic system of classification that would not distort the studied artefacts in the manner of prescriptive genre definitions. In hindsight I am not convinced that my theoretical framework can completely fulfil that promise. While the change in focus from literary labels to the
actions of genre users opens up interesting new ways of looking at genre, it does not mend the problem of readings that reduce texts to easily compartmentalizable entities. It could be argued that placing old comedy in certain cultural and situational contexts distorts it as much as defining it with a few thematic labels. Theory can offer guidelines and provide the scholar with useful premises by which to delimit the scope of an inquiry, but in the end it is up to the scholar to make judgements.

There are many problems associated with research into old comedy. First of all there is the lack of comprehensible historical data, i.e. the source material is less than well-preserved. Most of the primary data (the plays) is fragmentary, and that is problematic because it has been ripped out of its larger context. A fragment may appear to tell one thing, e.g. the apparent eulogy to Sophocles in Phrynichus’ *Musae*, but the surrounding text, that is now lost, may have made it clear that the remaining passage was not supposed to be understood the way that it now appears. Old comedy is an especially difficult genre to interpret even in non-fragmentary form. It relies heavily on irony and characters habitually break out into different personas and registers, changing their vocabulary and manners in the process. Clear arguments for one thing may be made at the beginning of a play, but at the end the complete opposite may be the case; take, for instance, Aristophanes’ *Frogs* where in the beginning Euripides is supposed to be brought back to the world of the living, but at the end it is instead Aeschylus and Euripides is instead ridiculed and stripped of all his honours. When it comes to secondary data, i.e. mentions of comedians and plays by other authors, the great majority is far removed in time and place from the genre’s original setting. Aristotle’s views on the dramatic art that preceded him by almost a hundred years has arguably been more influential than any other, e.g. visible in Segal’s article “The Φύσις of Comedy,” where he, like Aristotle before him, considers the old comedy to be crude and unfinished. Many commentators, such as Plutarch, reference works that are now lost, often being our only witnesses, but due to their being alive hundreds of years after these plays were put up and the impossibility to corroborate their testimonies, I have elected to disregard them to the furthest extent possible.

The fact that only eleven plays by one single comedian remain complete to this day poses a great problem. These eleven plays have been instrument in defining the genre of old comedy. There are many questions in regard to this fact, e.g. if
Aristophanes was a typical playwright or if these plays are representative of the genre or even if they are representative of Aristophanes’ own production. When comparing some of Aristophanes’ plays chronologically (to the extent that it is possible) to fragments of other plays from that same time, it becomes evident that he was influenced by or influenced his fellow comedians, and shared certain themes when writing plays. It is also not a bold suggestion that the comedians were influenced by what was going on in the polis or by “the talk of the town” at any given time.

Old comedy is the sister genre of the tragedy of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and it shares many characteristics with it. Tragedies and comedies where performed in the same theatres during the same religious festivals. While tragedy did not mention comedy, comedy often referenced tragedy: tragedians such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Agathon, and Euripides are mentioned in comedies and even turned into comic characters in their own right. Euripides especially is often featured in comedies by Aristophanes, but it is rather an exaggerated version of himself, based in essence on his writing style and plots from his plays that the audience was presented with. An opposite depiction is that of Sophocles in both Frogs and Musae at the Lenaea in 405, the year after both Sophocles and Euripides had passed away. Euripides is portrayed in his usual knavish garments in Aristophanes’ play, but Sophocles is described as a happy man, content with his situation in both Aristophanes’ and Phrynichus’, suggesting that they described him as they saw the actual man. This further emphasizes how vague and difficult to interpret comedy can be.

In comparison to tragedy, comedy inhabited a different emotional realm. While tragedy stirred emotions of sympathy and recognition and made the audience identify with the events that the characters in the plays went through and the emotions they felt while doing so, comedy had a direct exchange with the audience, at times almost turning the audience into an agent in the drama. This put the tragedians in a difficult spot, because if they hit too close to home, as it were, the effects could be quite the opposite of the intended, evident from the Athenians reaction to Phrynichus the tragedian’s play mentioned by Herodotus. Comedy on the other hand constantly jabbed at the things that concerned the Athenians the most, and often in a way that challenged the public, like Dicaeopolis defence of treason in Acharnians. One of my main arguments is that the comedians could do this while the tragedians could not, because
comedy played in a different emotional register than tragedy. While tragedy can arouse feelings of passion, sadness, and anger, comedy primarily cause laughter in the audience, and in such a circumstance inconvenient truths can be told with relative impunity. The uncertainties regarding the seriousness of statements made in comedies allowed Aristophanes to constantly ridicule, e.g., Euripides and turn him into a comical figure of his own, based on themes in his tragedies as well as his style as a writer.

One occasion where that was not the case is mentioned in Acharnians: when Cleon accused Aristophanes in court because of his comedy. I argue that this section in Acharnians is mainly an attempt by Aristophanes to change the acceptance among the genre users for the types of strategies a dramatist may use to respond to the urgency of the recurring comical situation, from a comedy that did not make political statements to a comedy that could.

Looking at the two main theatrical festivals in Athens, the City Dionysia and the Lenaea it becomes clear that old comedy was framed in two quite different settings, that ranged politically from the lavish and international at the City Dionysia to the local and more familiar setting of the Lenaea. While there is proof that the difference in setting was known by at least Aristophanes, as evident in Acharnians, the importance of the dramatic competitions was equal, suggesting to some extent that the dramatic art stood on its own outside the Realpolitik of the Athenian state and was judged by its own merits.²⁴²

Old Comedy is more complex than it has been given credit for. It is not a genre that can easily be described in a single sentence using a few thematic labels. Perhaps the chronological scope of old comedy should also be expanded to include the new comedy of Menander. One of the greatest benefits of adopting a genre definition based on action, i.e. expectations from the audience met with fitting responses from the dramatist, is that it allows the yoke of generic constraints to be lifted off. If we look back to Frow’s criticism of post-romantic genre concepts, we see that such a view has resulted in a dichotomy between bad generic literature and good literature that breaks free from its generic constraints. That view reduces genres to simple tools for ranking literary

²⁴² Aristophanes, Acharnenses, 504–6.
works. By adopting a theoretical framework where genre is viewed as action and interaction, that problem is avoided.

One of the most fruitful implementations of that idea in this thesis is the discussion on the *Plutus* and how it fits in with the other surviving Aristophanes plays. Here, Aristophanes does not immediately satisfy the audience’s generic expectations in order to grab their attention. He utilises a register at the beginning of the play that is connected more with tragedy than comedy in a rather plain manner, that does not immediately joke about anything. Judging from his other plays, the audience would have been expecting a joke right from the start, but in *Plutus* it is delayed. This is not an example of an aesthetic development away from a lower form of the genre into a higher, better one, which was the view of Segal as discussed above. It is simply a reaction to the expectations associated with it. To exemplify, one can play with the contrafactual situation that the “domestic” plot of *Plutus* had been the norm. Then, a play like *Frogs*, with its metatheatrical jokes, would have been a challenge of that norm. Nevertheless, Aristophanes does not break any generic constraints, because both the cultural and situational context of old comedy remain intact and it is against those that his plays have to respond.
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