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INTRODUCTION: COMIC COSTUME
IN ACTION

Aristophanic comedy is extraordinarily rich in costume effects, from fantastic animal costumes to the workaday tunic and shoes, from stolen cloaks to transvestite disguises. This book aims to examine comic costume in action, tracing the dynamics of costume within whole plays, the relationship of costume to theme, and the meanings of comic costume within its cultural and performance contexts. Imagine that one character wears another’s cloak. My interest lies not so much in the cloak’s color or size or material, but whether the cloak was given freely, exchanged, or stolen from someone’s body, what the recipient will do with it, and how that action fits into any patterns of dressing and stripping within the play. Costume is an underappreciated weapon in the comic poet’s arsenal, often deployed for specific theatrical and thematic purposes. Its use in comic performances also reflects cultural assumptions about power, the body, status, and mimesis, so these issues, too, are integral to the project.

INFLUENCES AND APPROACH

The starting point for any work on costume in Athenian Old Comedy is L. M. Stone’s *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy*, which has become the standard reference work on the topic. Stone’s careful collection and judicious interpretation of the evidence for comic costume has been supplemented by Alan Hughes’s article that reexamines the components of Old and Middle Comedy costume

with particular emphasis on the archaeological evidence.¹ Further isolated nuggets of information about costume can be found in many of the existing commentaries on Aristophanes. This book does not aim to function as a reference work, or to describe exactly what the costumes looked like at any given moment of every Aristophanes play, or to solve the many small problems of costume in individual scenes. Rather, I hope to incorporate important developments in performance studies, gender studies, and iconographic evidence for Greek comedy into an interpretation of the functions of costume within whole plays of Aristophanes and within Greek culture.

This study takes much of its inspiration from the developments in performance studies over the past several decades. Scholars such as Oliver Taplin, David Wiles, C. W. Marshall, Niall Slater, Rush Rehm, Martin Revermann, and Alan Hughes have raised our consciousness of the performative aspects of ancient drama, which was meant to be experienced as live theater, not printed words on a page.² Thanks to their efforts, such aspects of ancient Greek theatrical performance as entrances and exits, blocking, stage space, mask, and gesture have been examined. Studies of the actor in antiquity have helped us to understand the place of actors and acting styles within ancient Greek society.³ Within performance-based studies on Greek comedy, though, costume has received only spotty treatment. Two recent books on the performance of Old Comedy, those by Revermann and Hughes, do address some issues of costuming, but each devotes only a small proportion of his book to the workings of costume.⁴ Where costume has been discussed at greater length has been in connection with disguise and the “metatheatrical” plays-within-plays that Aristophanes sometimes offers his audience.⁵ Yet disguises are but a fraction of the costume activity that occurs in a typical play by Aristophanes. One of the goals of this book is to reconceive disguise as the top layer in a whole set of garments worn by the actor and to examine its workings as part of that multilayered system.

A second set of influences in this book is the scholarship on the visual aspects of Greek drama, particularly as evidenced in material remains such as vase painting and terracotta figurines. Study of archaeological evidence for drama has been conducted for more than a century and was used to good effect in Stone’s book on comic costume.⁶ Yet recent finds and fresh analyses by such scholars as J. R. Green, Oliver Taplin, Margot Schmidt, Helene Foley, Eric Csapo, and Alan Hughes have reopened exciting connections between ancient drama and the visual arts.⁷ To study the costuming of Old Comedy now requires a careful consideration of fourth-century vase paintings that originate in southern Italy, as well as earlier Attic vases and terracotta figurines.⁸ While the existing visual evidence rarely answers specific questions about the exact staging of a comic scene (nor should it be asked to do so), it offers valuable insight as to how comic performances, including costumes, were seen by a member of an ancient

audience (the painter or coroplast) and then in turn represented to his own audience. Studies of dress and the body in classical Greek art can also inform our discussion of the visual aspects of comic costume.⁹

Much about comic costume implicates the body and the construction of gender, so I am heavily indebted to the work on gender and sexuality that began in the 1980s with groundbreaking studies on gender in Greek drama by Froma Zeitlin, Helene Foley, and John Winkler and has continued in analyses by Lauren Taaffe, Karen Bassi, Laura McClure, Eva Stehle, and Sarah Culpepper Stroup.¹⁰ This work is not yet complete. On the one hand, too much of Aristophanic scholarship has continued to proceed as though the masculine viewpoint from which and to which Old Comedy spoke is simply a given of the genre, requiring no further examination. On the other hand, some of the orthodoxies of feminist scholarship deserve to be reevaluated. For example, it is one of the central arguments of this book that disguise, deceit, and artificiality itself are not consistently gendered as female in Greek comedy, despite the generalizations still frequently made to that effect about ancient Greek culture.¹¹ We need to give Odysseus, male master of disguise and lies, his rightful place as a mythical paradigm for the manipulation of costume, next to the oft-cited Pandora with her feminine trappings of deceit. And, indeed, many of the costume dynamics that we encounter in Aristophanes have parallels in that most masculine of epics, the *Iliad*, where great significance is laid on the manipulation of armor as it is put on, stripped, and exchanged.

Finally, my interpretation of the dynamics of costume in Aristophanes relies on an understanding of Old Comedy as fundamentally competitive. The agonistic nature of comedy is manifest in its festival setting (dramatic competitions), its very structure (an *agon* at the heart of the play), its attitude toward rival comic poets (fiercely antagonistic), and its appropriation of rival genres (voraciously competitive).¹² For the protagonist and for the playwright, it is all about winning, and the competition takes place on many fronts. I suggest that costume, too, is profitably viewed through this lens: not as mere decoration, not only as a convenient means of conveying a character's class or ethnic origin, comic costume, in action, is also a way to demonstrate who is winning.

METHODOLOGY AND EVIDENCE

The limits of our sources for fifth-century comic performances are well known to classicists but bear repeating for those readers who may be more familiar with later periods of drama and more modern performance media. Of course, we have no photographs, audio, or video of these performances. We have no “making of” additional bonus material, no interviews with the director and cast, no performance reviews, no correspondence between major players. No costumes survive, nor do we have descriptions of them written by people who

saw them in person; we cannot visit the Old Comedy Hall of Fame and see the outfit worn by so-and-so at that famous performance. Our surviving texts contain no stage directions. Sometimes we are not even sure which character is speaking which lines. For the hundreds of plays that survive only in fragments, we have even less context, making anything but a speculative reconstruction of those lost plays' staging nearly impossible.¹³

Given these limitations, there are many perplexing questions about fifth-century comic costume that will probably never find a definitive answer. What did the *Frogs* chorus(es) look like? How on earth was the Eye of the King in *Acharnians* costumed? Were the Megarian's daughters in *Acharnians* actually human actors outfitted as pigs, and if so, how could they have been carried in a sack? How true to life were the portrait masks of well-known public figures like Euripides or Socrates? What did Tereus's plumage look like in *Birds*, and how closely was it modeled on a visual effect from Sophocles' *Tereus*? How was Comedy herself costumed in Cratinus's *Wineflask*? How about the chorus of demes in Eupolis's *Demes*? Was every single female character in Old Comedy played by a man in drag, or were the mute females played by real women? The number of unanswerable questions can be rather discouraging; but, on the other hand, the very existence of these questions points to the imaginative variety and indeed importance of Old Comedy's visual spectacle.

One approach to this problem is to forgo pursuit of the original performance conditions in order to examine more recent revivals of the plays or their potential as scripts. Indeed, specialists in theater studies and reception studies suggest that we are asking the wrong questions when we fixate on the exact conditions of that original performance. Meaning is created anew in each performance, and as Revermann puts it, "only a classicist" would privilege the original performance as the only "authentic" one.¹⁴ The proliferation of reception-focused studies of Greek drama, spearheaded by scholars such as Marianne McDonald, Gonda Van Steen, and Edith Hall, demonstrates how much we can learn from studying reperformances in other eras and in other cultures.¹⁵ Certainly a study of any performance illuminates the possibilities inherent in casting, costuming, and staging decisions.¹⁶ But I remain unrepentantly interested in performance within a fifth- and fourth-century B.C.E. Greek milieu (which includes Greek cities in southern Italy) not because these are the only performances that matter but because there is still much yet to be discerned about the function and meaning of comic costume within the culture in which Old Comedy flourished. I want to know, or approximate as closely as possible, what the costume patterns embedded in these plays meant to that audience, at that time, in that cultural context. And despite the challenges posed by our fragmentary evidence, all is not lost. Two complementary types of evidence form the basis for this study: the archaeological record and the texts of the plays themselves.

The archaeological record – terracotta figurines of comic actors, vase paintings of comic scenes, and other archaeological remains – offers substantial evidence for the standard components of the comic costume of the fifth and fourth centuries. Of course, the visual evidence must be treated with caution. One must be attentive to the effect of a particular medium on the way costume is depicted. For example, the clay material and three-dimensional shape of terracotta figurines are not well suited to easily broken protrusions like the long staff that is commonly held by comic males in vase painting; coroplasts usually omit the staff.¹⁷ Because extant comic vase painting is largely monochrome, it can tell us little about the use of color in costume; for that, we rely primarily on small traces of paint left on some terracotta figurines. Regional and chronological variations in the material evidence also make generalizations hazardous.¹⁸ And although comic vase paintings, unlike terracotta figurines, often depict whole scenes, specialists in iconography remind us emphatically that these scenes cannot be taken at face value as snapshots of comic performances.¹⁹ Vase paintings, even those most directly connected to comic performances, operate within their own iconographic traditions, which are often not primarily concerned with verisimilitude. Also, because the proportions of a vase create a more compressed space than would have been typical for actual theaters, the painter may omit persons or objects that would have been present at the performance (e.g., a full chorus, stage hands, or non-essential props). Furthermore, most of the archaeological evidence postdates Aristophanic comedy by about a half century; originates in southern Italy, not Athens; and focuses exclusively on the actors, with little sign of the chorus that was so important in fifth-century drama.²⁰ Another complicating factor is that, of the more than two hundred surviving vase paintings depicting comic scenes or actors, only a few can be connected to a known Attic comedy; the rest are, in a sense, another set of comic fragments with problems of interpretation equaling those of our textual fragments.²¹

Despite these caveats, the importance of the archaeological record for understanding comic performances should not be underestimated. Indeed, the publication and identification by Kossatz-Deissmann, Csapo, and Taplin of a fourth-century Apulian bell-krater (Figure 13) as a scene from Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria* was one of the most exciting developments in the study of Greek drama in the late twentieth century.²² Two factors work in our favor as we try to make use of visual evidence. First, the vase painters, sculptors, and coroplasts who depicted comic characters or scenes chose to make the infrastructure of the performance – costumes, masks, stage – explicit. Each depiction goes out of its way to show that this is a costumed actor, not just some fat guy doing something silly. Second, the main components of comic costume evidenced in the archaeological record are remarkably consistent from the late fifth century through the middle of the fourth century (when

they begin to lose their grotesque elements) and across different regions of Greece and Magna Graecia.²³ This consistency makes it possible to describe with quite a bit of confidence what the standard male comic costume looks like: a grotesque, bearded mask with attached wig; a well-padded bodysuit; on top of that, a short tunic that leaves the outsized artificial phallus visible; and, sometimes, also a *himation* (cloak) and shoes.

The texts of our plays, the second major source of evidence, confirm the basic elements of comic costume with many passing references to clothes, headgear, shoes, and the like. Indeed, much of Stone's compendium on costume results from a careful extraction of this kind of information from the texts paired with the archaeological record. One important way in which the texts complement, rather than simply corroborate, the archaeological evidence is by providing information about anomalous costumes, which are usually mentioned at their first appearance. For example, in *Birds*, the beak of Tereus's servant, the strange spectacle of Tereus himself, the costumes of the bird chorus, the appearance of Procne, and the protagonists' newly winged outfits all receive comment from other characters. Likewise, the costume of the Persian ambassadors or the Eye of the King in *Acharnians* (64, 94–7), Agathon's effeminate appearance in *Women at the Thesmophoria* (134–43), and Blepyrus's cross-dressed trip to the outhouse in *Assemblywomen* (327–30) all prompt a strong verbal response from the onstage viewers. "Wowee-zowee! Ecbatana, what a getup!" says Dicaeopolis in the first of these examples.²⁴ While these references can be exasperatingly cryptic and never amount to a detailed description of the costume, they do serve to highlight its anomalous status. On the basis of passages like these, I take it as a premise that a significantly unusual costume will not go unmentioned; therefore, silence about costume implies a normal comic costume on the character. This eliminates the possibility that, for example, the Athenian Dicaeopolis is wearing a Persian or Spartan outfit throughout *Acharnians* (a costume that would radically undermine his persona as average Athenian), but no one in the play ever mentions it. I emphasize this somewhat obvious point because this is precisely an area where ancient drama is profoundly different from modern performance, particularly revivals, where some of the performance's meaning can arise from an unspoken contrast between text and (anachronistic) costume.

Perhaps most importantly for this study, the texts of Old Comedy offer a plethora of information about comic costume in action, that is, as it is being put to use by characters on the stage. Every play is filled with dozens of verbal references to costume: "Take this veil from me and put it on your head" (*Lys.* 532–3); "I'm being stripped in broad daylight!" (*Wealth* 930); "Let's take off our cloaks and start on the anapests" (*Ach.* 627); "Take off those damn shoes, and hurry up and put on these Laconian boots" (*Wasps* 1157–8); "Hitch up your tunics and put on your Laconian boots pronto, as you've seen your

husbands do” (*Ass.* 268–70). While these words do not tell us everything there is to know about the costume’s appearance (*Lysistrata* does not say, “Take this purple-dyed wool veil and put it on your head, which is covered with Mask Type X”), remember that our primary focus is on the costume in action. I take it as another given that lines like these have a straightforward relationship to what is happening onstage. That is, “take this veil from me” indicates that the speaker is actually wearing a veil (not, say, a helmet), and, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it indicates that the speaker does in fact remove the veil and give it to the addressee.²⁵

Such verbal references do not mark every single costume-related action in Old Comedy, but those costume actions that are verbalized are precisely the ones that the playwright most wants his audience to notice. My position with regard to the relationship between comic texts and stage action (and here I focus on costume-related action in particular) is thus a modified form of the “significant action hypothesis,” which posits that significant stage activity is always marked with words.²⁶ To be sure, plenty of unremarked action, much more so than in tragedy, clearly must occur within an Aristophanic production. Thus the most extreme construal of this principle, namely that nothing happens unless it is mentioned in the text, is clearly inappropriate for comedy. It would be nearly impossible during the frenetic course of a comedy for each and every action to be verbalized. Minor characters arrive and depart the stage, props are brought on and off, and characters sometimes change costumes without mention.²⁷ As Joe Park Poe has elucidated, one difference between tragic and comic action is that tragic action is consequential, that is to say, part of a tightly constructed logic in which emotions, gestures, entrances, and exits have meaning and consequence.²⁸ Old Comedy’s more “open” plots, in contrast, by their discontinuous and disjunctive nature, leave room for action that is inconsequential to the point of absurdity, such as the scurrying back and forth of stagehands or unmotivated entrances and exits.

To acknowledge that much comic action is meaningless and goes unremarked, or even that very funny sequences in Aristophanes depend almost completely on visual humor not captured by words, is not at all to say that the verbal remarks that we do have are unhelpful for the interpretation of stage action. Far from it. Indeed, in the hyperactive world of comedy, verbal reference is all the more necessary in order to call attention to the actions that do in fact have consequence. To take just two examples, our texts pay great attention to the donning of Dicaeopolis’s Telephus disguise in *Acharnians*, but they never indicate when he takes it off; likewise, we hear a lot about the stripping of the chorus in *Lysistrata*, but with regard to the old women’s semi-chorus, there is no explicit verbal reference to the moment when the stage-naked old women put their clothes back on. We have already observed the pattern in which costumes that deviate from the norm (here, beggar disguise and the nudity of

citizen women) are emphasized by being verbalized; they are, in other words, significant. Return to the status quo, on the other hand (abandonment of beggar disguise and reclothing of women), is less remarkable and thus goes unremarked.²⁹ The case of the two semi-choruses in *Lysistrata* shows the playwright differentiating between significant and insignificant costume action. While the women's redressing passes unmentioned, the more significant reclothing of the male semi-chorus by the women, a gesture of reconciliation that is a turning point in the play's development, is duly noted with words (1019–21).

Let me sum up, then, the way I see the relationship between text and costume-related action. First, I assume that actions that are indicated in the text do in fact occur and that physical objects onstage, including costumes, are what characters say they are. Second, verbalization of action functions as a kind of spotlight, directing the audience's attention to particular movements or visual cues and thereby marking those as important.³⁰ Stage action is not, however, limited to those actions that are explicitly mentioned in the text.

This brings us to one final thought about the nature of our evidence for comic costume. Paradoxically, comic costume sometimes confounds us with too much uncontrollable material. This is to be expected. In contrast with tragedy, its sister and rival genre, fifth-century comedy offers both a richer use of costume and greater challenges in making sense of it all. Tragic deployment of costume, like much else about that genre, is highly stylized and concentrated. Imagine that symbolically laden crimson cloth in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, with its sparing but effective recurrence throughout the trilogy.³¹ Old Comedy, by contrast, is busier, messier, more mundane, more protean, more resistant to neat categorization, more inclined to treat its material as a theme with many variations.³² A single play of Aristophanes can offer dozens of handlings of costume – just counting those that are explicitly mentioned in the text. For that reason, there will inevitably be some loose ends, strands of costume that the playwright has not bothered to weave closely into the fabric of the play or that I have not been able to tuck up under the hems of my analysis. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to discern some patterns in a genre characterized by disorder and variation.

FOUR BASIC TYPES OF COSTUME MANIPULATION

In the competitive world of Aristophanic comedy, control over costume is a sign of mastery that marks one character as dominant over another. This dynamic finds strong parallels with the control of armor in the equally agonistic world of the *Iliad*.³³ Just as bodily integrity is central to an epic warrior's very survival in combat, so it has also been argued that in fifth-century Athens, to maintain one's body free from violation by another is the hallmark of the citizen male. John Winkler has stated, "To put your hand on a citizen's body

is to insult him profoundly, implying that he is a social inferior.”³⁴ Control over clothing is closely linked with control over the body itself: to have one’s cloak forcibly removed is one small step away from being physically beaten. In comic performances, this contiguity between body and clothing is particularly strong, since the body itself is a set of garments worn by the actor. On top of that foundational layer, the body, lies the clothing *per se*; sometimes a character adds a third layer, such as a disguise. The same Greek noun, σκευή (which includes accessories) can be used to refer to any of these three layers, and when characters speak of dressing themselves or another in some kind of disguise, they use the related verb (ἐν)σκευάζω.³⁵ I will argue for the continuity of a fundamentally agonistic dynamic throughout the various layers of costume worn by a comic actor.

The workings of costume in Aristophanes are best examined within the context of each individual comedy, where patterns or themes particular to that play can have significant effect on our interpretation of costume activity. But before we embark on that project, it will be helpful to consider briefly four basic types of costume manipulation that recur in multiple plays. I signal at many points that a particular issue will be treated at greater length in subsequent chapters, where the secondary literature will be more extensively engaged. The comparisons that I draw with epic are intended, on the one hand, to establish basic elements in Greek thought about costume and equipment across genres and also, on the other hand, to highlight by contrast complications and issues specific to the comic genre.³⁶

1. Voluntary Stripping. The practice of voluntarily removing part of one’s own costume to reveal something underneath is quite rare in Aristophanes, with two major exceptions.

The first exception is removal of some part of the costume by members of the chorus.³⁷ This is sometimes called “parabolic” stripping, since in two plays it occurs immediately before the parabasis, but it also occurs in other parts of a play and is therefore not so easily categorized. Choral disrobing seems a rather *sui generis* convention, stemming from the somewhat autonomous practices surrounding choral costume that we will consider further in Chapter 5. Nevertheless, the removal of the chorus’s costume can be incorporated thematically into a play, as we will see in *Lysistrata*.

Other instances of voluntary stripping in Aristophanes’ plays are restricted almost entirely to *Lysistrata*.³⁸ In that play, the elaborate choral stripping mentioned earlier is followed by the striptease performed by the character Myrrhine in the presence of her sexually desperate husband. As we will see in Chapter 2, disrobing recurs in several other iterations throughout *Lysistrata*, making it a play uniquely concerned with revealing the comic body. This focus on the body has an obvious correlation with the sexual theme of *Lysistrata*. Yet

even among Greek seduction scenes, such voluntary disrobing by the woman is unprecedented, and the women's manipulation of both body and costume in *Lysistrata* should be seen as anomalous.³⁹

Voluntary stripping, unlike the other dynamics we will encounter, finds no comfortable parallels on the battlefield, where such action would be suicidal. Recall Hector's deliberation in *Iliad* 22.111–30, when he considers putting aside his weapons and meeting Achilles for negotiations. Quickly he realizes that he would be slaughtered: "He would kill me, nude, like a woman, since I stripped away my weapons."⁴⁰ This image of the nakedly vulnerable, feminized Hector, which foreshadows his own death and the despoliation of his corpse, illustrates why no one would choose to remove his own armor in such a situation.⁴¹ Something of the same connection of exposure with vulnerability, defeat, and sexual submission may partly explain why comic protagonists are more interested in exposing others than in revealing themselves. Aside from choral stripping and the instances in *Lysistrata*, the only other voluntary disrobing in Aristophanes occurs in *Clouds*, where the Stronger Logos drops his cloak at the end of the *agon* in an explicit gesture of defeat: "I'm beaten. Buggers, take my cloak, by the gods; I'm deserting to your side" (*Clouds* 1101–4).⁴²

2. Involuntary Stripping. When one comic character strips another, by either physical force or verbal commands, the stripped character is marked as having lower status. The *locus classicus* for this action is Thersites' treatment by Odysseus at *Iliad* 2.259–64, where Odysseus threatens that if he catches Thersites acting up again, "May Odysseus's head no longer remain on his shoulders, nor may I any longer be called father of Telemachus, unless I take you and strip off your dear clothes, both *chlaina* and *chiton*, which cover your genitals, and send you wailing off to the swift ships, striking you from the agora with unseemly blows."⁴³ The dominance expressed in such stripping is found repeatedly in the pervasive practice of stripping armor off a defeated foe. In Aristophanes, the action of physically removing another character's costume is quite common and tends to be inflicted on unlikable characters who earn a dressing-down at the hands of the protagonist. The best example of this is the informer (a sort of Old Comic version of Thersites, representing everything the protagonist hates), who at *Wealth* 930 has his cloak and shoes removed by Cario and the just man: "I'm being stripped in broad daylight!" he cries, and before his departure he explicitly admits his defeat (944–5): "I'm leaving, since I recognize that I'm much weaker than you."⁴⁴

Often a protagonist is able to effect this stripping simply by ordering it to happen. For example, Dicaeopolis disarms Lamachus by commanding him to put down his shield and remove a plume from his crest (with which Dicaeopolis pretends to induce vomiting into the shield) at *Acharnians* 581–6.