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A kinesiological approach to the role of the Chorus in Aristophanes' *Plutus*

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ABSTRACT: The article attempts to present basic elements of political ideology that can be found on the choral performances of the Aristophanes' comedy named "Plutus", which is his last surviving work. The comedy was presented to the Athenian audience in 388 BC to glorify and demonstrate the unfair distribution of wealth and the social inequalities, while highlighting the decline of human values. In spite of the fact that in this work the Chorus has a diminished role nevertheless refers to the unjust distribution of wealth and the explosion of corruption with an interesting kinesiological approach.

KEY-WORDS: Ancient comedy, Chorus, Plutus

Aristophanes was an Athenian satirist poet of the 5th century. He lived (from 445 BC until 386 BC) and grew up in Athens, in the years that "The Comedy", as Aristotle writes, "was initiated by the top of the Fallicans, who even today [in the 4th

century BC. Century] have been left and celebrated in many cities"¹. The “phallics” were customary songs sung by groups of celebrities at Dionysus' agricultural feasts, featuring dummies of the male genitalia, the phallus. Their comic, often life-styled, disguises, immeasurable gall, bold personal teasing, and coarse, improvised satirical scenes. Phallic songs emerged from Dithyrambus a kind of Bacchic poetry and were full of ribaldry and personal ridicule² that that the dancers were singing in honor of Dionysus³

Contemporary to the Peloponnesian War (431-404), which marked the fall of the Athenian Republic, Aristophanes top comedian of antiquity deals with the deterioration and the decline of values. The central position in his 11 surviving works - Alexandrians attributed a total of 40 - holds his fierce criticism of the political, social, moral and economic crisis during the attenuating Athenian democracy. Aristophanes is considered not only as a jokester, but also as a patriot, a teacher and pacifist⁴ who lives all the changes of the Athenian mob that he wants to criticize. In his forties, Aristophanes lived the abolition and later on the restoration of democracy in Athens, which would no longer be able to regain its old radiation and power. Such events and changes had an impact on the intellectual movement and the literary production. In the following years, Aristophanes continued to write, and with his works opened new ways to allow the comedy adapt the new conditions and survive while making an extensive use of irony as a comical medium⁵. Furthermore his plays contain serious messages regarding human conduct and political views that have been widely examined⁶.

Plutus was presented in 388 BC, at the end of the Corinthian War. Athens was hoping to regain its glory - but in vain, since the cultural crisis was profound, the deduction of morals brutally damaged public and private life, the economy collapsed allowing the prevalence of petitions, with the tolerance of corrupt political and religious power. Aristophanes also intervenes here. He strips his leaders and brings back his demand for a fair state, developing a reflection on the unfair distribution of wealth and social inequalities, while impressing the decline of human values.

¹ Aristoteles (1965) 1449a

² Campbell (1826) 79

³ Lesky (1987) 48-49

⁴ Walsh (2009)

⁵ Barkhuizen, (1981) 73-86

⁶ Casement (1986) 64-79

Chremylus, -the basic hero of the comedy is inspired by this mentality, to gain more and more wealth that is lacking⁷ - together with his four-eyed servant Carion, treats the blind, punished by god Zeus Plutus, to avoid the righteous, the wise and the honest: *Therefore I came to consult the oracle of the god, not on my own account, for my unfortunate life is nearing its end, but for my only son; I wanted to ask Apollo if it was necessary for him to become a thorough knave and renounce his virtuous principles, since that seemed to me to be the only way to succeed in life*⁸. God Wealth, therefore, regains his light, after the healing offered by Chremylus and his servant. He offers his riches to the virtuous citizens, and makes poor the dishonest ones. In this comedy, the poet does not ridicule certain persons, but addresses the individuals, as in the "Ecclesiazouses". That is why with these two comedies Aristophanes makes a passage from the Ancient to the Middle Comedy. By overturning the status quo, he depicts on stage a mosaic of his contemporary society, the thirst of which for wealth resembles ours. The basic opposition on which the work is based is projected by the struggle between Chremylus and Penia, with the latter one embodying the need that leads citizens to their daily work of survival, mourning the poverty of Aristophanes' days.

The role of chorus in ancient Greek drama was decisive as it played an essential role in the development of the play, which is particularly evident in tragedy⁹. Aristotle in his *Poetics* supports the view that the Chorus should be regarded as one of the actors with the various chants contributing to the myth they are dealing with in spite of the fact that in many cases the chants refer to other plays¹⁰. In *Plutus* the Chorus consists of poor villagers who in their words become agents of political ideology. Specifically it is argued that the Chorus *sings the glory of need as the spur to all that is good in human actions, as it mocks wealth as a standard of human worth*¹¹.

On the other hand it is argued that the role of the Chorus is diminished in *Plutus*, nevertheless his words are always of considerable importance¹². Even in this way, Chorus is a carrier of political ideology, as it also refers to key elements of

⁷ Freyberg (2009)

⁸ Aristophanes (1930) 35-38 trans. by E. O'Neill.

⁹ Weiner (1980)

¹⁰ Aristotle (1965) 1456 a 27-31

¹¹ Freyberg (2009)

¹² Barkhuizen (1981)

Greek political thought such as dialogue and debates “*To beat her in this debate, you must call upon all your wits. Make no allowances and show no weakness!*”¹³

Apart from political ideology of Chorus in *Plutus* there is an interesting kinesiological approach which is profound when the Leader of the Chorus presents themselves. The movements are not sophisticated, they do not have a delicate texture, and they highlight the tough and uncompromising attitude imposed by the needs and the instinct of survivors of the unsuspecting people who are bustling with vitality but lacking bodily and movement plasticity and harmony: “*Why, don't you see we are speeding as fast as men can, who are already enfeebled by age? But do you deem it fitting to make us run like this before ever telling us why your master has called us?*”¹⁴. In this case the Chorus expresses the anxiety of everyday living through a rough character, sharp and intense movements showing the fear of the peasants of rural people. It also argued that *Plutus* as he is presented by Aristophanes is not correlated with economic or social issues but with magic, fantasy and the supernatural¹⁵. Moreover we are corporeal beings for whom touch is our greatest form of intimacy. We are moving beings that are at home running, jumping, catching, throwing, and kicking. We are embodied beings who dance, play and compete and also social, temporal, and communal beings that are born, grow, inherit and belong¹⁶.

The performance is expanded by the collectivity of the twelve "dancers" who form one body of great importance, since they act as the dialectic essence of speech (Logos). Movement magnetizes viewers in an artistic and historical past. Theatrical play is still up to date. Dance plays a leading role in the comedy, group action, group stance, group cry, group silence, theatrical face and theatrical relationship, the search for effective expression where it is not easy to refer in a current experience.

Aristophanes' ingenious and unique concept is expressed by originality and ingenuity in the plot of the work, along with the choral events. Scenery and costumes serve and emphasize the timelessness and timeliness emerging effortlessly from the text. In the process of preparing the performance in choral events, creative techniques and methods are applied, aiming at the theatrical and pedagogical approach and raising awareness. The contemporary viewer experiences an unforgettable theatrical and musical experience.

¹³ Aristophanes (1930) 487 trans. by E. O'Neill.

¹⁴ Aristophanes (1930) 258-260 trans. by E. O'Neill.

¹⁵ Dover (1981) 289

¹⁶ Twietmeyer, (2012) 4-23

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