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ART. III.—ARISTOPHANES.

(*Concluded from page* 144.)

WE have dwelt most fully on the two dramas of our poet, which, though of very unequal merit, illustrate most pertinently, the one, the greatest external effort put forth by Athens in her pride of power—the Sicilian expedition—the miscarriage of which brought her to the edge of the precipice on which she struggled till engulfed at Ægospotami; the other, the internal force which did most to disintegrate her patriotism, and force her children into antagonistic ranks. These have an interest, therefore, which outruns their artistic or literary merit, and touches a chord of experience reverberating through all ages. As an instance of how greatly the political lottery influenced the immediate success of the poet's work, we have seen how the "Birds," supreme in power and finish, failed of the first prize. Similar was the fate of the "Wasps." But there remains always, in estimating such a problem, the unknown quantity of the merits of the rival play which succeeded. We can only appeal to the fact that the verdict of posterity, when the political accidents, so powerful at the moment, had died out, has, by preserving so many specimens of his work, established decisively the superior merit of Aristophanes.

Of the remaining extant plays, the briefest description must suffice; although the grave moral issues connected with one of these, the "Clouds," may call for some notice of one profoundly interesting question which it suggests. In the "Acharnians," a clever citizen, weary of the war, makes a private peace for himself with the Spartans and their allies, opens a market for all, and drives a roaring trade under the very noses of the sycophants or public informers who seek to interrupt it. The sufferings caused by war are personified on the other hand by Lamachus, the general, introduced as frost-bitten and wounded, and exposed to all the hardships of camp-fare, while his peace-making rival is feasting lusciously. In the "Knights," the Sovereign people itself, as aforesaid, is the butt of its own ridicule as "Demos."[1] Kleon the demagogue, his confidential upper servant, who kicks and bullies the rest of the household, is conspired against by two underlings, Nikias and Demosthenes, who, aided by the knights, produce a formidable rival—in effect the most thorough-paced knave and brazen-faced ruffian they can catch from the public streets—one Agorakritus (pick-of-the-market), a sausage-seller. Before his unscrupulous

[1] See page 133.

use of his superior gifts of cringing and fawning, lying and stealing, blustering and bullying, Kleon's "genius stands rebuked," like "Mark Antony's by Cæsar's." The sausage-seller and Kleon then change places and trades. The former becomes, by sudden conversion, like that of old Philokleon above, in the "Wasps,"[1] a standard statesman and model first citizen; and Demos, the state personified, under his auspices renews his golden age of youth, and, purged of dotage and corruption, rises to the highest level of the heroic past. The "Clouds" ridicules the Sophists of the day, and takes for their type Sokrates the philosopher. A spendthrift son of a bankrupt father, put to school with that sage, learns not only how to bilk his creditors but to defy parental authority too, and proves, "in good set terms" of popular rhetoric, his right to beat father and mother both. Of this play the poet issued, as stated above,[2] a later recension, which is the one we possess.

Between the "Wasps" and the "Birds" appeared the "Peace," designed, as its name declares, to array before the popular eye the charms of a return to tranquillity. The war-god is represented as pounding the chief states of Greece in a mortar. Trygæus, the husbandman, weary of the war, soars on a gigantic dung-beetle up to Olympus, in travesty of Bellerophon, or Ganymedes, and is directed to exhume the image of the Peace-goddess from the cavern in which she was buried; which done, he marries one of her attendant nymphs, and the drama closes to the tune of "Hymen, O Hymenæe." The "Peace of Nikias," made the same year, was a hollow truce soon evaded, and ending in open rupture after the Sicilian expedition. Thus the next play on the list, the "Lysistratè," renews the tale of the miseries of war. A civil war between the sexes is supposed to result from them, in which "the grey mare proves the better horse," and by her superior influence cements a treaty. The "Thesmophoriazusæ" is again a ladies' play in the main, introducing the Athenian matrons in their yearly solemnity dedicated to Demeter (the Greek Ceres); but is made really a vehicle for an attack on Euripides the poet, whom, as a leader, with Sokrates, of "new thought," Aristophanes detested. The "Plutus" (god of wealth) has a purely ethical character, with perhaps a secondary motive of ridiculing then fashionable Lakonism. This god, blind by Zeus' decree, is restored to sight by the god of health, Asklepius, and begins distributing his favours to the worthy alone, instead of promiscuously as before. The Sycophant, favourite *bête-noire* of our poet, now finds his trade gone. The god Hermes is starved out, and comes on earth to look out for a situation as lacquey. The priest of

[1] See page 142.

[2] See page 143 note.

Zeus Soter (saviour) shuts up shop in despair, as all sacrifices are withheld, and the play closes with a festive procession, conducting Plutus to his proper shrine. In this play the vein of "new comedy" is broached on which the whole modern school of comedians have built their system.

Next to the "Plutus" comes the last of the grander dramas, the "Frogs." The god Dionysus descends to Hades in search of a model tragic poet. Æschylus and Euripides contest the palm in his presence, and he selects the former to the discomfiture of the latter. Sophokles probably died as the play was in progress, having survived both his senior and his junior in the great trio of whom he is the middle term. Hence the scanty allusions to him in the play. There was apparently just time for the poet to insert a few lines here and there of honourable testimony to his merits, but the great bulk of it assumes that, being still on earth, he was for its purposes, out of the question. This play and the "Thesmophoriazusæ" are full of interesting scraps and parodies of dramas, especially of Euripides, otherwise lost. Besides their own sterling value they imbibed fragments from this other mint; nor are there any two products of the ancient stage which for the purpose of its history we could less afford to lose. The last extant play is the "Ekklesiazusæ" or Ladies' Parliament. Disguised as men the Athenian dames here take their places in the Ekklesia, and pass ordinances greatly to their own satisfaction, as to the equal rights of women to property and to intersexual arrangements. This play closes with the longest of the monstrous compound words ever framed by Aristophanes, containing eighty-two syllables!

The attack on Sokrates raises the most painful question in connection with the moral purpose of Aristophanes. The accusation which damaged Sokrates the most was probably that of his corrupting and perverting the young men of his day; urged with much specious appearance of truth in that superficial view which alone the public mind is capable of taking. For Sokrates addressed grown men. His first work was necessarily destructive. They were of the age when man grows fastest in experience, feels his growth most, and when self-conceit is most natural, especially to those of higher social rank. To take down that self-conceit, expose sciolism and shallowness, remove prejudice and clear away the idols of the cavern and the market-place alike, was his first work. Tradition was against Sokrates, and he had to fight it. Individual prepossession was against him, and he had to turn the man inside out, and elicit what was written on the heart within. But all this was a destructive process, and necessarily unpopular. Of Aristophanes' character the most intense part was his con-

servatism. His plays are nearly all didactic of this. He saw the age going from bad to worse in morals, and the gloomy fact forms a mournful refrain in every pause of Thucydides' great contemporary history. The poet, led by his imagination, which tends to integrate all conceptions and round them off into concrete wholes, saw therefore evil only in all elements of novelty. His ideal was in the past age. It threw its grand rebuking shadow for him over all the vile and petty squabbles of the present, and he condemned with the unsparing rigour of his own Dikast, Philokleon, all that moved in the line of present progress. As a necessary consequence he upheld the popular polytheism. That polytheism took man as he was, steeped in corruption, and saw the image of God, or rather of some god, in every part of his nature equally. It consecrated thus the vermin brood of pampered appetites, as much as the higher forms of moral life, righteousness, purity, and truth. This, of course, was a needful point of divergence between the poet and the philosopher. The former took over all his belief in the lump from his fathers; the latter found weak points and foul spots in much of it, and therefore sat loose to it as a whole. But the strong flood of novelty which the poet sought to stem was more largely intellectual than moral. Of this, the chief popular guides were the Sophists, who sought to prepare youthful ambition for public life mainly by training all faculties in the direction of public speaking. Other spheres of culture there were, but this was the sphere of greatest attraction, and in reference to which all others were measured. To sharpen and quicken mental analysis, and to find the orator in ready arguments at short notice, was nearly the sum of these experts' teaching. The argument *might* of course be a moral maxim, and therefore such were not wholly neglected; but it was in regard less to its moral source or weight, than to its intellectual use and argumentative cogency, that it formed part of the Sophist's system. In short, victory rather than truth was the object kept in view, and the goal conditioned every step of the race. The method of Sokrates was eminently intellectual, entangling an adversary in unguarded admissions and turning them against himself. And although truth and victory might in his case coincide, the latter outcome was more obvious to the hazy-minded popular audience than the former. Thus in the popular eye, and therefore for stage purposes, Sokrates must needs rank with the Sophists. It was, moreover, notorious, that whatever Sokrates' object might be, all, whether they shared it or not, might acquire his method. Many borrowed arrows from his quiver, but rubbed the poison of their own selfish ambition on the point, as Kritias and Alkibiades, both of evil fame in con-

temporary history. Judged therefore, whether by his method, his freethinking polytheistic views, or his pupils, it was almost impossible that there should not be in the poet's eye a strong *primâ facie* case against Sokrates, and equally certain that, once ranked with the Sophists, his indefatigability, his universal accessibility, his ubiquitous presence and strongly marked individuality would stamp him on the popular mind as the typical professor of novelties, the arch-sophist of all. But to Aristophanes novelties were of themselves hateful, and the popular view was his view. And here we have a tolerably adequate account of the character and attitude of Sokrates in the "Clouds."

Notwithstanding his reverence for his national polytheism, or perhaps because of it, Aristophanes spares no deity from the wide-sweeping lash of his satire. Polytheism is so far like polygamy, that it necessarily degrades its object. Possibly a remnant of the fetish-feeling is inseparable from it, which leads the votary to worship and beat his fetish by turns. A mere personification of power commands no essential reverence, and nine-tenths of Greek polytheism was nothing else. But when to power is added passion, and many of the baser human feelings drape the conception of a being nominally higher, absolute reverence becomes impossible. The feeling which took such a sharp edge of scoffing satire in Lucian, and of which we have a sample more genially tempered in Aristophanes, is as old as Homer. In the "Iliad," both Ares and Aphroditè are contemptible: their origin, though concealed by the poet, barbarian and probably recent; their sympathies non-Hellenic; while Dionysus and Herakles have at that time not even fully established their claim to deity. In the "Odyssey," Ares and Aphrodite are made the public laughing-stock of Olympus. Indeed, save Pallas and Apollo, there is hardly a deity who is not made at some point or other of one of the two poems the dupe or the victim of some other deity, or even mortal. As are Ares and Aphroditè in Homer, so are Dionysus and Herakles in Aristophanes. There was, perhaps, in either case a consciousness that they were mere *parvenus* of Olympus —the last to rise to honour, the first to pay tribute to satire. This is most nakedly exhibited in the "Frogs," where the cowardice of the one and the gluttony of the other are turned to full account for the broadest purposes of comedy. Nor is the license of unsparing satire limited by any means to these two. In the "Birds," as we have seen, the gods in a body are blockaded and their dues intercepted. Similar is the tone of "Plutus," (1115-7), where, on the god Hermes complaining, "Neither victim nor anything else does any one any longer sacrifice to us gods," the slave replies, "Of course not, and

won't either, because all the while you used to take such bad care of us."

In the "Peace," Trygæus exchanges chaff with Hermes, who "answers the door" of Olympus; and on the former inquiring for Zeus and the gods, he is told, "Ha, ha, ha!—just missed them—gone out of town only yesterday!" and the celestial lacquey adds, that he is left to look after the furniture, premises, and personal effects in their absence. Here we have in effect the perfect germ of Lucian's later causticity—just as in the visit of Dionysus to the Shades we have the germ of the "Dialogues of the Dead."

And the same cause touches another effect—the utterly abandoned licentiousness of comedy. It sat heavily on a few forms of vice selected for effect, but it stimulated more evil than it sought to remedy. The gods took in all humanity, clean and unclean alike. Old comedy follows their lead, and has no reserve, no innuendo. It dealt point-blank and stark-naked with its subject, All that is coarsest and foulest in the sexual relation as degraded in human practice, finds as natural expression in the comic stage as the valour of Miltiades or the politic wisdom of Themistokles. Born of the festive Dionysiac license and the free vituperation of the vintage season, the Comic Muse came foul with orgy, and reeking with lees of wine, to don her mask and leer from behind it on ranks of sympathetic votaries. Aristophanes, as suggested above, had a soul of higher mould; but the laws of dramatic ambition warped his practical standard, and the social custom of contemporary Athens dragged that standard down. His worst faults were the innate abominations of heathenism, the results of an incarnation of impurity.

It should be noticed that Aristophanes was by no means the only comic poet who attacked Sokrates on the stage. His contemporaries, Ameipsias and Eupolis, each directed their batteries of satire against that philosopher. The former of these two rivalled, and, in Athenian contemporary judgment, surpassed Aristophanes on this very ground in 423 B.C., when he produced his "Konnus," gaining the second prize, whereas Aristophanes with his "Clouds" came only third. In both these plays Sokrates was made to appear on the scene as a butt of derision. The chorus of this "Konnus" were named the "Phrontistæ," or "Thinkers," for which "Freethinkers" would be the probable modern equivalent, and with which we may compare the "Phrontisterion" or "School-of-free-thought," the supposed domicile of Sokratic activity in the "Clouds." In short, "Freethought" was so prominent on the surface of Athenian society, and Sokrates such an irrepressible representative of it, and so far ready-made by Nature's

hand for the caricaturist's purpose by his Silenus-face, snub-nose, and massive head, that it would have been well-nigh impossible for the manufacturers of contemporary *pour-rire* to miss him. Those whose prime object is to hit off striking superficial resemblances merely, can never afford to look below the surface. Contemptuous indifference suits their purpose better than judicial discrimination. Sokrates was "lumped" with the Sophists, just as five centuries later, by Roman historians and satirists, Christianity was confused with Judaism.

The most painful and, to the Christian moralist, most instructive fact which arrests attention on a review of this entire passage of the most brilliantly illuminated period of Athenian intellect is its moral declension and decay. The moral grandeur of Sokrates' personal character, even backed eventually, but too late, by sympathy for his unjust condemnation, did literally nothing to arrest that decline. His philosophic method and its intellectual results remain like a rock planted high above the waves; his example was hardly more than an eddy on their surface. As the most gifted race of men went on gathering the fruits of intellectual effort in every department, save physical science, which then or since the human mind has mastered, their average morality went on declining, until the shifty, supple, needy Greekling, ready to go anywhere and do any job at his patron's bidding, meets us as the typical character in the *Græculus esuriens* of Juvenal. Individual noble specimens of heroic type are indeed found, as, for instance, Epaminondas and Philopœmen—nobler than any since the period of Marathon and Salamis, but on the whole only illustrating the hopelessness of the task to breathe a new spirit into the moral decay of their times. This decay it was which Aristophanes sought for a long while, but in vain, to arrest. He had no effectual fulcrum, any more than Roman moralists in the time of Seneca or of Marcus Aurelius, on which to plant his lever. The engrained corruption of human nature drags down every moral standard in turn which philosophy sets up. Before the virtuous energies have been able to mature and fix themselves by habits in the individual character, the bribe of pleasure corrupts, and the stress of passion perverts, the moral instincts. Poetry, illustrating humanity at all its emotional points, is the surest witness of its moral progress; and Greek poetry attests the fact that that moral progress was downwards. Pure in the Homeric period, at any rate by comparison, as morals were, we find in Æschylus that a fatal tarnish had been incurred; although Æschylus, save for that one plague-spot to which he witnesses, is as pure as he is grand. To Aristophanes he personified the higher standard of the simpler olden time. The Areopagus, of which

he was the poetic champion, was the platform of sacred justice on which heaven and earth and the Dread Avengers of the Under-world met and were reconciled. It was once the shrine of the public conscience of the State, but had been shorn of its political influence; and in its stead reigned these Dikasteries, popular and profligate, debasing the grand ideal of divine justice with the palterings of human sycophancy. Then came in the philosophic solvent of Free-thought on the old-world *credenda*, and left, for what had been gods, on one side mere golden shadows of humanity; on the other, the reeking dregs of sensuous mythology. Sokrates, by his intense personal faith in the unseen, could keep his soul from the blight of his own method; but with other leading thinkers it was not so, and intellect became conscious of its divorce from faith. Aristophanes hugged the old beliefs fondly still. Up to his time, all that was human had found its counterpart in the current notions of the divine, including even

> Mirth, that wrinkled Care derides,
> And Laughter holding both his sides;

but henceforth it could not be so. The age was growing reflective, and those who must needs think could no longer glow with reverence for what they learned from him to deride. For, while he hugged the old beliefs fondly, the sensuous myths as fondly as any, he bantered them all outrageously, as we have seen. Possessed firmly by the instinct that morals could no more stand without faith, than laws could avail without morals, he yet laughed away the true foundation of both. Freethinkers thought to make morals self-supporting—a dream which they are reviving in spite of the protests of history. Aristophanes knew better, and yet by shocks of revelry and shafts of satire his suicidal genius unconsciously helped forward that advance, which, in its serious Euripidean form, he so heartily detested. Thus, from his time forward Greek morals lost more and more the support of religious belief, a state of things which Positivists and Agnostics are unconsciously, let us hope, doing their best to reproduce at this time in the old age of the world; until at the end of four centuries and a half Epicureans and Stoics were found by the Apostle of the Gentiles serenely disputing the theory of virtue still "on Mars' Hill," with the world stagnating in moral corruption around them.

HENRY HAYMAN, D.D.