CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ARISTOPHANES

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Order

Because so many of the embedded narratives in Aristophanes are used to set the scene for the audience, most notably in prologues, it is inevitable that most of them will be external retrospective narratives. They may describe a situation that continues to exist at the start of the play, but the events themselves are almost always in the past. Because of the need for clarity, the order of events is simply chronological; the same is true of Euripides (→), who regularly begins his tragedies with prologue speeches. For the same reasons, the principal mode is ‘summary’: the speakers do not linger over the details, but move quickly through them to maintain the comic momentum. Similarly, these passages tend to be quite densely packed, as the speaker crams in as many amusing examples of the character of a Paphlagon or a Philocleon as he can. This is especially true of the prologues of the early plays, *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Wasps* and *Peace*, but can also be found elsewhere.

A straightforward example of an external retrospective narrative is to be found in *Peace*, after the goddess has been pulled from the ground and the cities have begun to fraternise with each other (605–705). This is in fact one of the longest retrospective passages in Aristophanes. In it, Hermes relays to Trygaeus and so to the audience the reasons for Peace’s absence from the world in recent years.¹ The passage is in fact a condensed, often imagistic and indeed fanciful history of the Archidamian War. It begins with the accusations against Pheidias of embezzling moneys intended for Athena’s chryselephantine statue, and Pericles’ fears that he would be implicated, which are said to have led to

¹ On this speech see the analysis of Cassio 1985: 87–95.

the Megarian Decrees, and then moves through the allies' supposed dealings with the Spartans and internal dissensions in Athens to Spartan attempts to make peace after Pylos. The chronology is roughly that of the actual events before and during the war, though the amount of detail is slight, given the period covered, and the history tendentious at times. It is nonetheless an effective passage: peace has been made and this review of the war, laying blame on both sides, though more so on Athens, allows the audience to contrast the disagreeable picture of the past conduct of the war with the cheerful unity that is about to be achieved.

Though we do not find great complexity in Aristophanic narratives, no dense play of levels of narration or of secondary, tertiary, etc. narrators, no striking games with frequency of narration for instance,² there are however subtle variations in the manner of the narration of these retrospective narratives. To take a simple example, in the scene between Blepyrus and the Man near the start of *Ecclesiazusae*, the situation is described by the parallel narratives of the two men's inability to find their clothes which have been stolen by the women (311–371). The strangeness of the story is added to by the double narration, whereby we see that Blepyrus' experience is shared with another, and not a matter of mere chance.

The Ambassador who comes to the Assembly at the start of *Acharnians* gives a straightforward account of their embassy to the Persian King (65–92). However, the scandalous nature of their behaviour is neatly conveyed by the considerable gap between the lengthy time covered by the actual events and the small amount of text required to narrate them. The ambassadors set out 'in the archonship of Euthymenes' (67), that is in 437/436; they crossed the Caÿstrian plains in a leisurely manner and reached the King's palace in the fourth year, but he was absent for eight months, before he returned to entertain them. The time taken is twelve years,³ but the narrative of these years occupies merely nineteen and a half lines (in 65–92; the other lines are Dicaeopolis' bomolochic interventions); the ambassadors filled these twelve years with idleness, so there is nothing to relate. The contrast between the threadbare narrative of idle self-indulgence and the great swathe of time consumed justly draws Dicaeopolis' scorn.

² Iterative narration is not of course absent; cf. e.g. *Eg.* 1337–1355; *V.* 85–130.

³ Delays on such embassies were not unusual, but the extent of the delay here is remarkable; cf. M.C. Miller 1997: 114–117.

In a number of retrospective narratives, Aristophanes experiments with the blending of subsequent and simultaneous narration of the current situation, sometimes adding bits of stage-action to complement and complete the narrative. The sense that the retrospective narrative is just a necessary setting of the scene is thus mitigated, as past and present are intertwined. For instance, at the start of *Clouds*, Strepsiades' narration of his past troubles with his son and his debts is intercut with 'present' embodiments of those problems, in Pheidippides' cries as he dreams of horse-racing, and in the account-book that is brought to Strepsiades and reveals the nature of the trouble he is in with his debts.⁴ Subsequent narration mutates from time to time into simultaneous narration: Pheidippides cries out 'Pheidon, you're cheating! Keep to your own lane!', which prompts Strepsiades' reply 'That's the problem that's destroying me: even when he's asleep he dreams of horse-racing!' (25–26).

In *Peace*, we have a slightly more complex version of this, whereby one of the two Slaves⁵ begins to recount the past actions of his master in his response to the incessant war (50–59). He tells how Trygaeus began by raving at Zeus for causing the war (56–60), and immediately Trygaeus, offstage, echoes his words. He then tells of Trygaeus' failed attempt to climb a ladder to heaven and how he subsequently bought a huge beetle to fly there. Again, he quotes Trygaeus' words to the beetle, before he looks inside the house and sees Trygaeus rising up on his beetle, which he then describes simultaneously with its happening: 'Oh god! Neighbours! Come here: my master is rising up on high into the air on his beetle as if it were a horse!' (79–81). After this, the pair are actually made manifest onstage to the audience, with Trygaeus warning his 'horse' to be careful. Here then we oscillate between subsequent and simultaneous narration with the addition at the end of a technique whereby narrative becomes stage-action. The Slave's description moves from the past, to the present behind the stage, before giving way to the actual representation of things before the audience's eyes. As we shall see elsewhere, narration of the past is thus so constructed that it leads naturally back to the present of the play, and the action ensues.

⁴ Dover 1968: 91 notes how in this prologue 'the transition from emotional reaction to pure narrative is effected subtly', but the narrative is more varied than he allows.

⁵ On the question of the exact attribution of the lines between the Slaves in this prologue, cf. Olson 1998: 67.

In many prologues, we are dealing with what one might call ‘imaginary recollection’, that is the ‘recollection’ of fictitious events, where the relationship between story and fabula is hypothetical and unrecoverable, because the speaker is not concerned with the chronological relationship between the elements in the narrative, but with creating a climax or other effects. This type of achronical narrative contrasts with the generally straightforwardly chronological narrative of most prologues discussed at the start of this chapter. An example of this is Dicaeopolis’ prologue in *Acharnians*, in which he catalogues the pleasures and pains he has suffered. Here we have temporal markers, such as ‘then’, ‘now’ (9, 15, 19), and several of the examples are introduced by ‘when’, but there is no suggestion of a chronological order: rather there is an alternation in the form of pleasure—pain—pleasure—pain—greatest pain, building to the climax of the scandal of the current situation. Matters are of course complicated by the fact that these events may have been real ones, albeit on various stages, and some in the audience may have been able to put them in order, but from a narratological point of view this is unimportant. Chronology is not at stake here, so much as rhetorical ordering for effect.⁶

There is something similar in the prologue of *Wasps*. Xanthias’ account of the manifestations of Philocleon’s jury-mania has no chronological structure (87–135): he talks—in the form of iterative narration—about what Paphlagon does at night, about what he does when he sees ‘Demos is beautiful’ on a wall, what he does in the evening, the state of his nails and his possession of a beach for pebbles. However, when he gets to Bdelycleon’s attempts to cure his father, temporal markers are much in use: ‘first of all’ he used persuasion (115); ‘then’ he tried purification (118); ‘after this’ he tried the Corybantes (119); ‘when however’ that didn’t work (121), he took him to Aegina; ‘then’ he put him in Asclepius’ shrine (122), which also failed; ‘from that time’ they have not let him out (125). The chronology is clearly set out, but the order of events is less important than the sense of increasingly despairing and extreme expedients that Bdelycleon tries: we move from persuasion to simple acts of purification to resort to orgiastic cults, and finally to trips over the sea to a famous shrine. The end of this list leads back to the

⁶ One could include here as parallels passages such as the speeches in *Thesmophoriazousae*, where two women narrate the effect of Euripides on household and economy, and Mnesilochus gives his fictitious account of his extra-marital escapades (443–519).

present and Philocleon's recent attempts to escape allow Xanthias to explain why the stage is set up as it is, with blocked chimneys and nets strewn around the courtyard.

We find this technique of mixing passages of clear chronology with others where the chronology is unclear or irrelevant elsewhere. We looked earlier at the first part of Strepsiades' account of his problems. There follows an account of his marriage to his luxurious wife, the birth of their son and its aftermath in their discussions of a suitable name for him (*Nu.* 41–74). The earlier part of the account was chronologically imprecise and even random, but, after an exchange with Pheidippides, Strepsiades suddenly turns in line 42 to curse the match-maker who brokered the marriage to his wife. This introduces the story of that marriage. Here, in an expository passage, the sequence is carefully marked: he describes his earlier life; 'then' he married; 'when' he did, they were a pair with very different odours. A brief exchange with the slave about the wick interrupts, before Strepsiades continues the story about their dispute over a name for their son with 'after this'. 'At first', they disagreed; 'then' they compromised. The same pattern that we can see elsewhere appears here: one part of the narrative is told without a chronological structure, in Strepsiades' comically random description of his present troubles, which is in part embodied onstage; then the second part, where the audience needs to catch important basic information, is told with attention to clear temporal marking.

There is a variation on this in *Knights*, where there is a chronological framework, but its chronological aspect is again not the most important. In the prologue, the slave 'Demosthenes' recounts the experience of the members of Demos' household since the arrival of the Paphlagonian (40–79). It begins with the purchase of the Paphlagonian, which is given a precise date (itself unusual in Aristophanes generally), 'the previous new moon' (43). The various antics of the new slave do not have any necessary chronological relationship with each other, in that they are simply examples of his intolerable behaviour: they could be in any order and they could be repeated acts. None the less, Aristophanes does give them a temporal framework, but for a purpose other than the purely chronological. The slave is bought at the new moon, flatters the master and steals the gifts the other slaves intended for him (43–54). The narrative is of the past, but it is given in a mixture of past and present tenses, indicating that it also describes the present situation: Aristophanes does not repeat descriptions of actions, but often allows a single description to stand for repeated performance of that action.

Demosthenes then gives the example of Paphlagon's theft of his own Pylian cake, which is dated to *proēn* (54), either 'recently' or even 'the day before yesterday'. Further examples follow, and the list ends with his threat that 'if you don't obey me, you die today' (68). 'Today' in its context of Paphlagon's threat is a general remark, but it also brings us back to the present of the play's action, which is emphasised by Demosthenes' concluding 'so now'. Here then, as in *Peace* above, the temporal markers do not so much order the events according to their actual chronology, but are imposed on the narrative in order to bring us back to the action, by the suggestion of an order: 'new moon—recently—today—now', and the action ensues.⁷

The need for clarity of exposition is often the cause of clearly articulated narratives. For instance, Dicaeopolis' speech to the Assembly (*Ach.* 497–556) is tackling the difficult task of justifying the actions of the Spartans to the Athenians, in war-time. Thus, clarity of exposition is needed, not just to save Dicaeopolis' skin, but in order that the audience may enjoy the humour of the tight-rope walking. The context, a formal speech before the Assembly, also demands rhetorical clarity. Dicaeopolis takes his audiences through the stages of the events in a clearly marked manner. The first two elements—the Megarian Decrees and the theft of Simaetha from Megara—are linked merely by the dismissal of the former as 'a little local difficulty' (523).⁸ The third—the Megarians' reciprocal theft—is introduced by 'and then' (526) and, as matters get more complex and exaggerated, the temporal relations are very carefully indicated: 'next' introduces each of the next four stages—the start of the war, Pericles' reaction, the Megarian request to Sparta and Athenian refusal, and the 'rattling of shields'. In contrast to this careful chronology, the description in the last part of the speech of the belligerent preparations the Athenians would have made had a Spartan declared a Seriphian puppy contraband, abandons chronology completely in favour of the piling up of 32 genitives, the apparently random and turbulent expressions mirroring the mad-cap and chaotic nature of

⁷ For this linking of a retrospective narrative and the present of the play's action see Euripides' (→) prologues.

⁸ On the problems of the actual timing of the events mentioned here and the difficulty of relating together in a historical pattern the features Dicaeopolis mentions, cf. Olson 2002: 205; these uncertainties do not affect the above analysis however.

the Athenians' reaction.⁹ Chronology thus complements clarity and lays the ground-work of the argument, but is abandoned when a more boisterous form of expression is required to drive home the point Dicaeopolis is making and to prevent the speech from becoming too solemn an imitation of contemporary rhetoric. The extraordinarily increased density of events in this last part makes a potent conclusion, and is not matched for density by anything else in this author.

It is only at the end of Aristophanes' career that we find him using a straightforwardly chronological style of narration, with the temporal relations clearly expressed; nothing quite like this is found earlier. In the lengthy internally retrospective narrative of Plutus' visit to Asclepius' shrine (*Pl.* 649–747), the narrative, lightly interrupted by bomolochic remarks by the Woman, proceeds in an entirely chronological fashion, just as Carion promises at the very start: 'I shall recount everything to you from toe to head' (*ek tōn podōn es tēn kephalēn*, 650). The mode is essentially summary, but there are vignettes where it comes close to scene, such as in the description of the priest's stealing of the offerings (676–681), or of Carion's treatment of the Old Woman, whose soup he had his eyes on (685–695). The narrative is clearly articulated by temporal markers: 'as soon as'... 'first'... 'then'... 'when'... 'then'... 'then'... 'when'... 'then'... 'after this'... 'after that'... 'then', and so on. Here there is no attempt to introduce variety or especially notable rhetorical climaxes of the kind that we have seen in the earlier plays. The contrast with these can be seen in *Knights* 624–682, where the Sausage-Seller's account of the debate in the Boule largely eschews such rigorous temporal marking. It is not absent, in that he uses expressions such as 'when I realised' (632, 658), 'then' (640, 647, 665, 675, 678), but in general the connections between the sentences are made for instance through particles: the conjunctions become more common only towards the end. The sober (though not humourless) account of the visit to the god's shrine in *Wealth* thus relies on a clear temporal structure, whereas this more excitable and triumphalist account runs more smoothly from episode to episode.

A final case which we need to consider is the narration of a story, not in one place by one or more characters, but in the course of a play; the technique of the 'piecemeal distribution' such as found in Homer (→

⁹ Olson 2002: 215 notes how 'the pace of the description gradually accelerates, from two items per line (546–548), to three (549–550), to four (551)'.

and Sophocles (→). The most notable example of this is in *Lysistrata*. Running through that play is the history of events subsequent to the murder of Hipparchus, the brother of the tyrant Hippias.¹⁰ The main aspects of the story are there, but they are not related in chronological order nor indeed are the episodes juxtaposed for the most part. This story, which resulted in the establishment of a democratic system in Athens under Cleisthenes, becomes the filter through which the Old Men in the play try to construct an identity for themselves and a justification for their opposition to the women's attempts to make peace. The women are thus characterised as tyrannical figures opposed to the democracy (though they have other filters, largely religious, which tell a different story). There are five episodes scattered through the play, which have the following chronological order: (A) the murder of Hippias' brother (630–634); (B) the defeat of the Alcmaeonids at Leipsydrium (664–670); (C) the bringing of Spartan aid to the Alcmaeonids (619–625); (D) the siege of the Peisistratids by Cleomenes (1150–1153); (E) the besieging of Cleomenes in the Acropolis and his expulsion (273–280). These appear in the play in the order E–C–A–B–D. The Old Men announce this theme in their part of the *parodos*, when they say that the women will not make fun of men who besieged Cleomenes in the Acropolis, when he came to offer support to Cleisthenes' oligarchic rival, Isagoras (E). Their siege of the Acropolis is thus placed under the sign of the final triumph of the democratic politicians in 508, when Cleomenes, the Spartan king, was driven out in short time. They return to it at the start of the first part of the *agon*, which is another scene where the two semi-choruses confront each other and their values. They 'smell' the tyranny of Hippias in the women's actions and recall, in parodic form, help given to the Alcmaeonids by the Spartans after they had been defeated at Leipsydrium (C). This is then combined with their determination to imitate the tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, murderers of Hipparchus (A). The story of Leipsydrium starts the second part of the *agon* (B). Finally, this sequence of events is given a more positive moral aspect, when Lysistrata takes it up from the men in her attempts to persuade the Athenians to accept the peace. She recalls the help that the Spartans gave in the besieging and expulsion of the tyrants from the Acropolis, which enabled Cleisthenes to introduce democratic rule (D). The events which the

¹⁰ Cf. further A.M. Bowie 1993: 195–199.

men had arrogated to themselves in a distorted way to explain their actions thus finally become one of the arguments that bring about peace.

In this example, the narrative is fragmented, both chronologically, spatially and in terms of its narrators, which are first the men and then the heroine. Elements of it are introduced at places in the action of the play where they have particular significance. The actual order in the fabula is not necessary to the understanding of the function of this story, which works by the repeated evocation of a democratic myth at important moments when the narrators wish to claim a certain meaning for their acts.¹¹

We have so far looked at retrospective narratives: prospective ones are very much less common. There are of course a number of mentions of oracles, especially in the competition between Sausage-Seller and Paphlagon in *Knights*, but there the point of the scene is not really to tell of the future as to persuade Demos to choose one of them as his defendant. The external prospective narratives at the end of the play concerning the future nature of Athens, now that Demos has been rejuvenated by boiling and the Sausage-Seller has gained an identity, are employed to bring the play to its splendid conclusion. This technique is a common feature of Euripidean (→) *exodoi*: nine of his tragedies end with a *deus ex machina* who recounts the future events that await the characters. Aristophanic comedies regularly look forward to a brave new world, though they do not always go into very much detail about it and the prospective elements tend not to be formally set out as with a *deus*, but to be woven into the action. In *Acharnians*, *Lysistrata* and *Peace*, for instance, there are various hints at the future, but they come in the course of the action and in choral songs, rather than in a formal statement at the end of the play. As variants on this, we have those places where suggestions about the future suggest less unalloyed pleasure. The beatings which Pheidippides will administer to his father and mother (*Nu.* 1443) contrast with celebratory burning of the Phrontisterion. More vividly, there are many indications of the

¹¹ Reference to the battles of the Persian Wars works in a similar, though rather more reduced fashion: Marathon (285) and Salamis (675) are mentioned by the men as emblems of their opposition to the women (Hippias in fact came with Darius' generals on the campaign that ended at Marathon); and then Artemisium and Thermopylae are evoked by the Spartans when they and the Athenians celebrate the peace at the end of the play (1247–1270).

thoroughly disagreeable nature of the new world created by the women in *Ecclesiazusae*: again, the contrast complicates our response to the achievements of the play's action.

The oath sworn by the women in *Lysistrata* not to yield to their husbands does look forward to the successful sex-strike, but their promises, to sit around seductively teasing their husbands but never performing what are presumed to be their usual sexual acts, are not in fact truly prospective, since they go into the Acropolis and refuse to go home. It is however a seed for one of the more hilarious scenes in the second part, when Myrrhine titillates but ultimately abandons her frustrated husband Cinesias.

There is nonetheless a good example of an internal prospective narrative in *Frogs*. When he visits Heracles, Dionysus asks him for advice on and recommendations for the journey to Hades. After jokes about how to get there by self-destruction, Dionysus asks him to describe the route he took himself, which he does: 'You will immediately come to a great lake without bottom ... an old man in a boat this size will take you across for two obols ... you will see snakes and all manner of terrible beasts ... the sound of *auloi* will reach you, and you will see a most beautiful light, as we have here on earth, and groves of myrtle and blessed bands of men and women ... the initiates ...' (137–164). Prospection and retrospection are here interestingly combined: the passage gives a retrospective account of his own earlier journey, but it is done in a prospective manner as an account of what Dionysus will encounter. This is an unusual passage for Aristophanes, not just in its prospective quality, but also for the way that, in contrast to the *Lysistrata* passage just discussed, it describes things some of which will be actually be seen onstage later in the play.

Rhythm

In these embedded narratives, to maintain the comic momentum, Aristophanes varies the length of time spent on each episode. We have already seen something of this technique in the account of the visit to the shrine of Asclepius in *Wealth* 649–747. In some cases, there is symmetry. In Dicaeopolis' opening speech, for instance, the first pleasure and pain each get four lines, the next pair only two, before he launches into his complaint about the behaviour in political life in Athens. Similarly, in *Clouds*, Strepsiades' two sections on the history of

his marriage, in terms of their different backgrounds on their wedding-day and their discussions of a name for their son, are of equal length (fifteen lines). In the prologue of *Knights*, there is greater variety. There is a lengthy description of the purchase of the slave and his immediate take-over of Demos (43–57): this establishes the character of the man immediately. There are then short passages of three and a half and two and a half lines, on his keeping other slaves away and his use of oracles, before another longish section (seven and a half lines) about his tyrannical behaviour towards his fellow slaves rounds the speech off. Although this speech is essentially a retrospective narrative, it has also something of a prospective nature, as it prepares us for Paphlagon's behaving in just the manner described; and, in its generalising nature, it is to some extent iterative: Paphlagon did not do all of this just once. The main charges against him are given the main emphasis, with two other apparently less important charges there for variety and change of pace. The reference to Paphlagon's use of oracles is however a seed; it may appear unimportant here, but he will ultimately be undone by the competition in presenting oracles to Demos.

Simultaneous narration

We have seen above cases where simultaneous narration comes into a retrospective prologue or other past-seeking narration. Such narration is also found in a small number of cases on its own. One could start here with the parodies of Euripides' *Telephus*, *Helen*, *Andromache* in *Thesmophoriazusae*. At the same time as the plays are acted out, the characters provide a commentary on what is happening: 'he has grabbed my child from my breast', cries the mother of the wine-skin child, and 'struck by this knife its bloody vein will stain the altar', replies Mnesilochus (*Th.* 690–695). This is not an unusual technique, indeed it is a common one for giving instructions to the actors and information on staging to readers, but it becomes more relevant to our subject when, having told the child that he holds its mother responsible for its death, Mnesilochus cries: 'What's this? The little girl has become a skin full of wine—with Persian slippers on!' (733–734). The humour arises from the contrast between on the one hand the farcical comic action and its simultaneous narration, and on the other the tragic narrative that structures it. Here the simultaneous narration is, as is usual in Aristophanes, of events onstage. There is a single example of extended narrative of

offstage events in the prologue of *Peace* discussed above, where the narrative is given first by a slave who comes onstage to inform his fellow slave and then by a slave who looks offstage and describes what he sees.

Audiences can also be involved in simultaneous narration in comedy. In *Wasps*, the slaves describe (or rather make up) the reactions of the audience to the invitation to guess what mania Philocleon is suffering from: ‘Amynias son of Pronapes here says he is keen on dicing ...’ and so on (74–75). There is however one case where this technique is used to notable rhetorical effect. As the farmers begin to try to drag Peace from her prison, Trygaeus and Hermes make sense of what is going on for the audience. Actions are attributed to individuals and peoples, so that the no doubt rather chaotic scene onstage takes on meaning. It enables Aristophanes to make fun of these people for their unwillingness or inability to contribute to the freeing of Peace. Lamachus is accused of getting in the way of the operation; the Argives are standing around laughing at others’ misfortunes; the Spartans—at least those imprisoned after Sphacteria—are pulling hard; the Megarians are too weak from hunger to achieve anything, and so on (470–519). The jokes are quite harsh, but in the new atmosphere of peace they belong in the past: in fact, ultimately everyone does their bit. After Peace has been freed from the ground, Hermes delightedly describes the scene onstage in which the various previously warring cities have begun to fraternise, despite their black-eyes (538–542). In a world where a peace-treaty was about to come into force, this must have been an affecting moment for the audience. Trygaeus then moves the narration onto the reactions of the audience, and he and the god divine the trades of the members of the audience by their reactions to what is happening onstage: ‘Can’t you see that crest-maker tearing his hair out?’—‘And that pitchfork-maker has farted in the face of the sword-smith!’ (545–547). Simultaneous narration therefore allows the playwright to draw the audience into the action, which is especially appropriate in *Peace*, a play which is precisely about the unification of everyone in the newly peaceful world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if Aristophanes does not make extensive use of radical disjunctions of time, he nonetheless makes very subtle use of such play with time as he does employ. Most narratives are external retrospective

ones, but he varies considerably the manner in which time is employed, in order to maintain comic momentum, provide a dramatic climax, or involve the audience. The rhythm is again varied for comic purposes, and simultaneous narration provides a number of comic scenes. The delicacy and economy on display throughout is notable.