CHAPTER 12

Comedy and Tragedy in Agon(y): The 1902 Comedy
Panathenaia of Andreas Nikolaras

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Introduction: Competition is Key

"Ὅσοι ἐπιθυμεῖτε νὰ φθάσητε μέχρι τῆς ἀρχαιότητος καὶ νὰ ἴδητε δι’ ἀσθενοῦς μὲν φακοῦ ἀλλὰ συγχρόνως καὶ μεθ’ ἐλληνικῆς ὑπερηφανείας τὴν μεγάλην τῆς ἀρχαιότητος εὐκλείαν καὶ τὴν χάριν τῶν μεταξὺ τοῦ θείου καὶ τῆς ἀνθρωπότητος αἰσθημάτων ἀναγνώσατε τὴν παροῦσαν κωμῳδίαν. Θὰ γελάσητε εὐγενῆ καὶ εὐφρόσυνον γέλωτα, πλὴν συγχρόνως καὶ σκεπτικοὶ θὰ φιλοσοφήσητε ἐπὶ τοῦ συγχρόνου βίου.

All of you, read the present comedy, you who desire to reach into antiquity and to see antiquity’s great glory, [be it] through a weak lens but at the same time also with Greek pride; you who long to see the delightful sentiments of divine and human interaction. You will break into a polite and prudent laughter, except that, because you are also skeptical, you will at the same time reflect on contemporary life.2

These words preface the 1902 comedy Panathenaia written by the playwright and poet Andreas D. Nikolaras, about whom very little is known. Theater historian Giannes Sideres mentioned this modern Greek comedy only ever so briefly in his History of Modern Greek Theater, 1794–1944.3 Nikolaras’ earliest extant publications date to the 1870s and 1880s: his one-act comedy entitled Τυφλομυία

1 I thank Arete Vasileiou for her assistance in locating a copy of Nikolaras’ comedy at the University of Crete, and I am grateful to Philip Walsh for his careful work editing and enriching this paper. Patrick Hadley contributed useful comments and suggestions as well. My readings of the ancient Greek texts of Aristophanes are based on the editions by Jeffrey Henderson (1998–2007) and Nigel Wilson (2007b). All translations from ancient Greek are from Henderson’s five-volume Loeb edition (with occasional slight modifications). All translations from modern Greek are my own, but I acknowledge the generous contributions of Eleni Bozia. I have preserved the polytonic accent system of the modern Greek of the early twentieth century (and a few particularities of Nikolaras’ text).

2 Nikolaras (1902) 5.

Blind Man’s Bluff) was published in Athens in 1877, and his comic idyll (Η χαϊδεμένη (The Favorite)) was issued in 1885. The year 1890 saw the publication of Nikolaras’ comedy on a popular theme: O προικοθήρας (The Dowry Hunter), about the phenomenon of gold-digger grooms. The title of Nikolaras’ 1902 play Panathenaia conjured up the atmosphere of the Panathenaic Festival of classical Athens, which celebrated the birthday of Athena, the city’s patron goddess, and featured poetry and musical competitions as well as athletic games. But this title bore early twentieth-century connotations as well. A Greek journal by the name of Panathenaia was issued from 1900 through 1915. A few years after the publication date of Nikolaras’ comedy, the name Panathenaia became synonymous with a popular tradition of epitheoreseis, that is, annual revue shows. These Panathenaia shows (1907–23) set the tone of urban Greek theatrical and musical life for more than fifteen years. The genre was known to comment on current affairs, albeit mostly in a lighter vein. The 1913 epitheorese, for instance, went by the title of Πολεμικά Παναθήναια (Wartime Panathenaia) and referred to the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, in which the dispute over Macedonia drove the Greek state to reassert its nationalist interests. This revue was written by Bambes Anninos, Georgios Tsokopoulos, and Polyvios Demetrakopoulos. Demetrakopoulos, who also went by the French-sounding pseudonym of Paul Arcas, was one of Greece’s most prolific early twentieth-century authors and free-spirited translators of Aristophanes. This same trio put Aristophanes’ Lysistrata to comic use at the onset of the First World War, in the Panathenaia of 1915. They boldly called their work the International Panathenaia of 1915, and it starred versatile female characters resembling Aristophanic heroines. The fictional women of 1915 who call for worldwide peace resort to Lysistrata’s old weapon of a sex strike. They ignore the war’s real drama and abuse the crisis

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4 Chatzepantazes and Maraka (1981) offer an insightful introduction to the modern Greek folk idyll (in the so-called ethographic tradition).

5 The collective volume edited by Neils (1996) discusses the ancient Panathenaia from various religious, historical, and archaeological angles, whereas Nagy (2002b) sheds further light on the festival’s components of poetry, music, and song. See also Shear (2001); and Sourvinou-Inwood (2011) 263–311.

6 Chatzepantazes and Maraka (1977) study and illustrate this popular urban genre, which intersected with the Greek reception history of Aristophanes. See Van Steen (2000) 108.

7 Lila Maraka (2000) edited and published the script of the 1913 Wartime Panathenaia in the second volume of her collection of texts representative of the Athenian epitheorese.
