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The Diminishing Role of Stage Properties in Aristophanic Comedy

Aristophanes employed stage objects to achieve a wide range of effects from routinely enhancing the natural course of stage business to illustrating his most abstract arguments in a manner so vivid that even the average audience member could easily grasp his social and political criticisms. The abundance of stage properties in the early plays and the type of scenes in which they functioned as the sole focal point seem to indicate that the strategic use of objects was a major component in securing victory at the dramatic competitions. However, as time progressed and public funds diminished, Aristophanes began to rely less heavily on his use of physical objects.

In this paper, I will present a brief overview of the various ways in which Aristophanes incorporated these objects into his comedies. From this overview, I will suggest that success for comic playwrights at the dramatic festivals of Athens rested not only on their ability to create poetic verse, to conceptualize witty social satire, and to make the best use of a talented chorus and set of primary actors, but also on their capability to amass the funds needed to support the visual aspects of their performances. In Aristophanes' early plays, when optimism for Athenian triumph in the Peloponnesian War soared, physical objects abound. However, as the war progresses, we see a steady decrease not only in the number of stage properties but also in their inherent value. Although the number of physical objects diminishes, or in some cases disappears, Aristophanes verbally maintains their presence. He describes what he can no longer afford to present. Thus, we see a change in dramatic convention: visual spectacle no longer dominates the production; verbal word-play rises to the forefront. In part, as a direct result of this shift, Middle Comedy emerges with its apparent emphasis on characterization and dramatic monologues.